

Ethics and a Pragmatic Ethics of Belief

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Introduction

Outside the world of philosophy journals and conferences, there can be little doubt that moral considerations comprise the most potent source of critique of religious practices. Nevertheless, within philosophy of religion, moral critique has played a remarkably modest role, and the Anglo-American mainstream of philosophy of religion has a rather awkward attitude towards moral critique, since its focus is almost exclusively on epistemic justification.

I think this awkwardness stems from a conception of religious practices which construes them as logically prior to moral reflection on these practices. Pragmatism, as I understand it, offers a more adequate articulation of the relation between ethics and religion, where religious practices are understood as responses to problematic situations that, to a significant extent, have moral implications. Hence, moral critique – I use moral and ethical as synonyms here – does not come into play only *after* these practices are formed; they are – or may be – important elements of the process through which they are constituted.

In order to bring out the difference this makes for philosophical reflection on religion, and why a reconstruction is called for, I will compare a currently prominent attempt to justify belief, William Alston’s, to a pragmatic approach, to show the advantages of a pragmatic approach.

Alston and the argument from religious experience

William Alston is one of the most prominent contemporary defenders of arguments from religious experience.¹ His psychology of belief is based on what Dewey once called a sensationalist form of empiricism: human beings are constantly bombarded with stimuli from sources that seem external to us, and we cannot help believing that they give a basically accurate picture of an external reality.² As we become more cognitively sophisticated, we learn to weed out some impressions as less trustworthy, but the only method available to us to compare impressions that we doubt to a solid background of experiences that we cannot help trusting.

Alston invites us to see the human cognitive landscape as individuated by different *doxastic practices* within which belief-formation and revision goes on. Besides the dominant doxastic practice, sense perception (henceforth SP), Alston also identifies a Christian doxastic practice he calls CMP (for Christian Mystical Perception). CMP is belief-formation based on alleged experiences of God, and its overrider system consists of orthodox doctrine and the Christian account of the fruits of the spirit.

Alston holds that from an epistemic point of view, established doxastic practices such as sense perceptual practices are in the same boat as CMP. They are socially established, the participants judge them to be well-functioning, and they all operate with an overrider system based on previous experience. In these senses, they are on a par, and we cannot justifiably rely on some of them and at the same time reject others.

A Pragmatic Ethics of Belief

I take one of pragmatism's most important contributions to epistemology to be its rejection of a sensationalism that equates 'what we cannot help believing' with 'what we immediately experience'. Pierce famously argued that the method of inquiry is a unique method of settling belief because it is the only one that we can *reflectively endorse* even when confronted with competing methods.³

¹ In this paper, I draw on the argument Alston presents in *Perceiving God: The Epistemology of Religious Experience* (Ithaca & London: Cornell University Press, 1991).

² Dewey, John: "An Empirical Survey of Empiricisms" in Jo Ann Boydston (ed.) *John Dewey: The Later Works Volume 11: 1935-1937* (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1987).

³ C. S. Peirce *Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce Volume V: Pragmatism and Pragmaticism* Edited by Charles Hartshorne and Paul Weiss (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1935).

Alston's appeal to pragmatic considerations conceals the fact that his view of epistemic justification is essentially authority-based. When determining whether to consider a particular religious experience veridical, we should, according to Alston, check whether it conforms to the religious experiences that we, in the past, have come to consider veridical, and the orthodox account of the Christian fruits of the spirit. These checks grant already from the outset that CMP cannot but confirm received religious views. In sense perceptual doxastic practices, you find no similar categorical prohibition against challenges.

Pragmatism's psychology of belief is rather different from sensationalist empiricism's: To have confidence in a belief has little to do with whether impressions force us to believe them, instead, it signals that *if* there is something wrong with this belief, this will show itself in the course of future interaction with the environment, and that we are capable of revising the problematic elements through inquiry. This explains how it is possible to be a fallibilist and have confidence in your beliefs at the same time.

A pragmatic ethics of belief thus requires a more flexible overrider system that avoids categorically privileging the past over the present; we need ways to adjust beliefs that improve future interaction with the environment. At first glance, this requirement puts all religious practices in a precarious position, but that is only necessary as long as we retain the view of religious practices as logically prior to moral concerns about these same practices. I think a pragmatic philosophical anthropology offers a more promising approach.

Life Orientations and a Pragmatic Philosophical Anthropology

One central feature of pragmatic thought is its view of the human being as engaged in a never-ending struggle to maintain a state of equilibrium with the environment. To that end human beings develop an immense number of habits and practices they draw upon. The human environment is not merely something physical; it contains aesthetic, moral and existential properties as well: it is beautiful or ugly, just or unjust, threatening or promising. As Dewey pointed out, these are not properties that we project onto an already existing reality, but integral parts of that reality itself.

In the absence of disturbances, interaction with the environment runs smoothly, and requires little attention. It is only once we run into problems that we become truly engaged in what is going on. This holds for situations of an existential and moral nature as well. Here, too, we

draw on systems of habits and meanings. I call this a *life orientation*. A life-orientation contains a conception of human flourishing, what human life is like at its best. It is important to note that we do not stand back from all life orientation and then choose one that is to our liking; we rather find ourselves embracing them, and they develop throughout life, as a rule in piecemeal, but sometimes in radical, fashion.

It may be tempting to identify religious traditions *as* life orientations. I think this is right to the extent that it is reasonable to understand religious traditions as responses to existentially problematic situations we have encountered in the past. However, the identification becomes misleading if it conveys the impression that they are monolithic entities that we must take or leave as wholes. Sociological evidence shows that people in late modern societies increasingly pick elements from religious traditions which they find existentially adequate, but they refuse to accept 'the whole package'. Hence, I believe that is better that we say that religious practices can influence our life orientations to different degrees, and that it is in relation to such influence that talk of religious and non-religious life orientations makes sense.

Given the function of religious practices with regard to our life orientations, moral and existential considerations are constitutive elements of our reflection on religious practices. (I see no clear distinction between the existentially adequate and the morally adequate.) Both raise and respond to fundamental questions about the good life, for ourselves and others, given the existential potential and limitations we live under. The requirement that religious practices should offer useful insights into these processes, also open for critique in the cases where they fail to perform that function, or create obstacles for human flourishing.

Now, a devout believer may wonder why we should trust our life orientations rather than the religious practices we submit to criticism. Well, given the requirements of a pragmatic ethics of belief, which requires that we should be capable of detecting and responding to challenges, it will not do to simply declare some conception of human flourishing infallible, but neither will it do to simply make your current life orientation the ultimate arbiter. We simply have no other choice than to start digging where we stand, and besides, it is a mistake to think that critique only has bite if it is launched from some absolute standpoint. I think philosophers of religion should look to the increasingly popular method of moral inquiry known as *reflective equilibrium*.

Reflective equilibrium is a state of a whole (constituted by beliefs/convictions at different levels of generality) where the elements harmonize, and no element of the whole is immune to revision. In cases of conflicts among the elements, one or several elements are adjusted to restore the equilibrium. It makes sense, I believe, to think of the struggle to develop a well-functioning life orientation as a quest for a reflective equilibrium where our accounts of what it is to be human, and what human flourishing is, should harmonize with the experiences that we make in situations carrying moral and existential significance. In this process, we can submit religious practices and insights to critique, but they can, in turn, offer important insights that we can integrate into a conception of human flourishing, and throughout this process, mutual adjustments occur.

Let me take a rather simple illustration of what this mutual critical relation may amount to. In Christianity, meekness is considered a virtue. But there are certainly situations where we quite frankly experience meekness to be an inadequate response, like in unjust societies, where the exhortation of meekness often goes hand in hand with oppressive social relations. On the other hand, no one would reflectively hold that meekness is all bad, and most people would consider the contemporary absence of meekness in our societies a genuine loss. Hence, the Christian stress on meekness contains a genuine insight, but at the same time, that insight is not one that we can uncompromisingly adopt and/or recommend to others.

Note, then, that the process to establish a state of reflective equilibrium forces us to reflect on e.g. religious practices, and critique of those practices is a natural element of that ongoing reflection. As long as we retain the predominant view of religious practices as logically prior to and independent of moral considerations, it becomes exceedingly difficult to make sense of moral critique of religious practices.

I proposed at the outset that a pragmatic analysis of the relation between ethics and religion turns out to be more adequate than mainstream Anglo-American philosophy of religion's. But adequate in what sense? Well, not from the perspective of the normative self-understanding of religious traditions, which stress the infallible and static structure of religious practices. But I think that rather than succumbing to such self-understandings, we should expose them to critical examination. Historical studies reveal, for instance, that there is much more adjustment going on within religious practices than such self-understandings admit, especially if we study the way believers *act* rather than what they *say*. Besides, the influences of

religious conceptions of human flourishing are not limited to the very devout; they play significant roles in many people's lives, believers and non-believers alike, and here, it is natural to ask how we may retain important insights and still be able to reject the elements we find unacceptable.

I think an empirically more accurate account of religious traditions would be to say that they are constantly reconstructed and renegotiated in response to new situations and internal and external criticism, and in that process, there is no single centre of gravity that decides the outcome of these negotiations, not even in hierarchical religious institutions such as the Catholic Church. A philosophical articulation of this process is adequate, I would propose, if it (a) accounts for processes that are actually going on in relation to religious traditions, and (b) offer constructive proposals on how these processes may improve, so that we become better at handling intellectual and practical problems such as how to relate faith and reason, religion and science, religious plurality, and so on. 'Adequacy' here, then, amounts to something other than faithful description; adequacy-judgements are always, as Dewey pointed out, forward-looking in the sense that they involve considerations of the positive and negative consequences of adopting that account as a guide for conduct. It is in this forward-looking sense I consider a pragmatic account more adequate than those predominant in contemporary Anglo-American philosophy of religion.

Conclusion

I believe that one of the most promising aspects of a pragmatic philosophical anthropology thus is the way it enables us to articulate something we, in a sense, all know, namely, that ethics is perhaps the most potent source of critical reflection on religious practices today. One important element of that articulation is its ethics of belief, which requires ways of forming and revising beliefs that are responsive to problematic situations, something that distinguishes it from, for instance, Alston's authority-based ethics of belief.

In this way, pragmatism also tells us something about how religious practices may be reflectively endorsed, provided that they are open to criticism and revision in the light of moral considerations. At the same time, these practices, in turn, offer critical impulses to ours, so the relation of criticism here is mutual.

This approach lends, in my view, pragmatism an important advantage over the mainstream of Anglo-American philosophy of religion which has failed to adequately articulate the relation between ethics and religion. The result has been a rather awkward attitude towards moral critique of religion. Hence my conclusion: the pragmatic tradition offers important resources for a much needed reconstruction of contemporary philosophy of religion.