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ALSTON, William Payne (1921-)

William P. Alston was born in Shreveport, Louisiana on 29 November 1921 to Eunice Schoolfield and William Alston. After graduating from high school at the age of fifteen, he studied music at Centenary College, majoring in piano. During the Second World War, he was stationed in Northern California (1942-46), playing clarinet and bass drum in an army band and piano in a dance band. It was during those years that he discovered his vocation, inspired by Somerset Maugham's, *The Razor's Edge*. Unlike the hero of that novel, Alston had no guru to guide him in his quest for spiritual enlightenment; moreover, he was of a decidedly intellectual bent. It is little wonder, then, that the nature of his quest found him at the Berkeley library, where he happened upon a book entitled, *Introduction to Philosophy*. Upon ingesting it, he instantly became a Thomist—the author was Jacques Maritain. According to Maritain, logic was the first part of philosophy and metaphysics a close second; and, according to Mortimer J. Adler, in *How to Read a Book*, which deeply impressed Alston, serious study should begin with the original sources. So Alston successively devoured, on his own, Aristotle's logical treatises, Bacon's *Novum Organum*, Mill's *System of Logic*, Aristotle's *Metaphysics*, several of Plato's dialogues, Descartes's *Meditations* and *Discourse on Method*, Spinoza's *Ethics*, and Locke's *Essay*. Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* curbed his appetite. Toward the end of the War, Alston so impressed Charner Perry, the chair of the Philosophy Department at the University of Chicago, that he was permitted to enter the PhD program—without ever having taken a class in philosophy.

Alston's self-education continued at Chicago, mainly aided by Richard McKeon and Charles Harthshorne. He defended a dissertation on the metaphysics of Alfred North Whitehead; he received his PhD in 1951. His first appointment was at the University of Michigan (1949-71). There his eyes were opened to contemporary English analytic philosophy and he underwent a fundamental shift, accelerated by trying to teach Hegel. He later held appointments at Rutgers University (1971-76), the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign (1976-80), and Syracuse University (1980-92). During his career, Alston was President of the Western (now 'Central') Division of the American Philosophical Association, of the Society for Philosophy and Psychology, and of the Society of Christian Philosophers. He is founding editor of *Faith and Philosophy*, the journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers (which he co-founded), the *Journal of Philosophical Research*, and Cornell Studies in the Philosophy of Religion. A recipient of numerous honors and fellowships, Alston is a Fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences. Since 1992, he has been Professor Emeritus at Syracuse University, where he nevertheless continued to teach until 2000. Alston is best known for his work in philosophy of language, metaphysics, epistemology, philosophy of religion, and philosophical theology.

Early in his career, Alston was one of several philosophers who helped to break the strangle-hold of the (then prevalent) Verifiability Criterion of Meaning. But his most significant work in the philosophy of language focuses on what it is for a sentence to have a certain linguistic meaning. Two themes dominate his answer: illocutionary acts

and the relation of meaning to use and rule-governance. An illocutionary act is uttering a sentence with a certain content. To illustrate: if I were to command my son under typical circumstances, “Please pick up your toys,” one would correctly report that the illocutionary act I performed was *commanding my son to pick up his toys*. Now, when I command my son to pick up his toys I thereby *take responsibility* for certain conditions being satisfied (e.g. that he has some toys, that he is able to pick them up, and that I want them to be picked up), and I open myself to sanctions if these conditions are not satisfied. In general, performing an illocutionary act by uttering a sentence consists in subjecting one’s utterance to an *illocutionary rule*, a rule that implies that it is permissible for one to perform that act only if certain conditions are satisfied. Alston groups illocutionary acts into five categories: assertives, directives, commissives, expressives, and exercitives. For each category, and for many types within each category, Alston specifies those conditions a speaker takes responsibility for in uttering a sentence of that category and type.

Now, the key to understanding the meaning of a sentence is recognizing its relation to use and rule-governance; illocutionary acts turn the key. First of all, a sentence’s having a certain meaning consists in its being usable to play a certain role in communication, and the best candidate for the relevant communicative role is the performance of illocutionary acts. Thus, (1) a sentence’s having a certain meaning consists in its being *usable* to perform illocutionary acts of a certain type. Secondly, as noted above, a sentence’s being usable to perform an illocutionary act of a certain type consists in its being subject to a certain illocutionary rule; thus, (2) a sentence’s having a certain meaning consists in its being subject to a certain illocutionary *rule*. Illocutionary acts unite meaning with use and rule-governance; (1) and (2) are simply different ways of saying the same thing. Alston’s development of his theory spans nearly fifty years, culminating in *Illocutionary Acts and Sentence Meaning* (2000).

Alston espouses versions of realism about truth and reality. In *A Realist Conception of Truth* (1996), he defends *alethic realism*, the twin thesis that the truth value of a proposition depends entirely on whether what it is about is as it says it is and that truth is an important property. The first thesis, the realist conception of truth, is about our ordinary *concept* of truth; it is not a thesis about the nature of the *property* of truth, although it does presuppose that truth is a property. Thus, Alston’s realist conception of truth contrasts sharply with deflationary theories of truth, according to which talk that appears to predicate a truth-value to propositions does not in fact do so, and epistemic conceptions of truth, according to which the truth value of a proposition (or belief or statement) depends entirely on whether, or the extent to which, it is justified, warranted, or rational. Alston’s realist conception of truth does not imply the correspondence theory of truth (although it is compatible with it), the view that a proposition is true because and only because it corresponds to the way the world is, and it is compatible with global metaphysical anti-realism, the view that *all* of reality is, at least in part, relative to our conceptual-theoretical choices (see Hilary Putnam).

Alston attempts to decide (some of) these metaphysical issues in *A Sensible Metaphysical Realism* (2001). If global metaphysical anti-realism (‘anti-realism’, for short) is to avoid absurdities, the sort of dependence posited between reality and conceptualization must be constitutive dependence, not causal dependence. To illustrate the difference: in a non-absolute space and time, how fast a train is moving is relative to one or another framework; the framework does not cause the motion of the train (the

engine does that) but rather constitutes what it is for it to be moving at such and such a speed. Now, one alternative to anti-realism is global metaphysical realism ('realism', for short), the view that *no* part of reality is in any way relative to conceptualization. Alston does not accept *this* version of realism but nevertheless regards it as a datum of commonsense that should be denied only for excellent reasons. There are such reasons, but there are equally excellent reasons to deny anti-realism. As for the latter, first, it implies that conceptual schemes themselves are relative, and thus that there are second-level schemes with respect to which first-level schemes are relative. Thus, by parity of reasoning, it implies an unacceptable infinite hierarchy of abstract conceptual schemes, or else an infinite hierarchy of subjects who employ them. Second, since conceptual schemes are incompatible with each other, they must be construals of the same entities, which presupposes a common object of conceptualization whose existence and at least some of whose features are not relative to any scheme. As for realism, Alston argues that there are *some* stretches of reality that are relative to conceptualization. Chief among these are metaphysical positions and systems. For example, according to the mereologist, for any *x* and *y*, there is another thing that is the composite of *x* and *y*. Thus, my office telephone, you, and the number 22 comprise a fourth object which has these and only these as its parts. Whether there is such a composite is not a fact that we are constrained to recognize whatever our preferences. Likewise, whether there are individuals that persist through change or not is not thrust on us regardless of our preferences, interests, and choices. The vast stretch of reality that is thus thrust on us, however—and hence not relative to conceptualization—is demarcated by its crucial role in our theoretical understanding of the world (e.g., the natural kinds of biology, chemistry, and physics) and its being shaped for some end (e.g., artifacts made for a well-defined purpose). Unfortunately, we can describe members of the non-relative class only by way of vocabulary that presupposes some metaphysics, which on Alston's accounting is relative. To avoid the difficulty, he distinguishes the metaphysical, relative aspects of the facts we describe from their non-metaphysical, non-relative aspects, by focusing on patterns of contrast. The ways in which a fact differs from other facts within the same scheme constitutes the non-metaphysical, non-relative aspects, while the ways in which a fact varies from other facts between schemes constitutes its metaphysical, relative aspects. So it is that Alston arrives at a *via media* between realism and anti-realism, a *sensible* metaphysical realism: vast stretches of reality are in no way relative to conceptualization, but some aspects of it are.

To epistemology, Alston has contributed important work on knowledge and justification. Mere true belief is not knowledge. Traditionally, the difference is said to be justification; knowledge is justified true belief. While many reject the traditional view on the grounds that although justification is necessary to convert true belief into knowledge, it is not sufficient (see Edmund Gettier), Alston argues that it isn't even necessary. Still, justification is important in its own right. But what, exactly, is it? Alston distinguishes two families of concepts of justification, each of which has many members. According to the deontological conception, a person's belief is justified just in case she holds it without violating any duties or obligations vis-à-vis getting at the truth. According to the truth-conducive conception, a person's belief is justified just in case she holds it in on the basis of adequate grounds (and she is unaware of defeaters). Alston opts for the latter, arguing that the former presupposes that we have voluntary control over our believings, which we

don't. Furthermore, the adequacy of the grounds consists in its making the belief based on it very likely to be true; and, while the adequacy of the ground need not be internally accessible to the believer in order for her belief to be justified, the ground itself must be thus accessible.

Alston distinguishes direct justification from indirect justification. A belief is indirectly justified just in case it owes its justification to some other beliefs or their interrelations; a belief is directly justified just in case it is not indirectly justified. According to Alston, indirectly justified beliefs ultimately owe their justification to directly justified beliefs, and many of our mundane beliefs about the immediate environment are directly justified by way of experience. This is a version of foundationalism. Anti-foundationalists often assume that a person's belief cannot be justified unless she is justified in believing that it is justified, in which case directly justified beliefs are impossible. In response, Alston distinguishes lower-level beliefs, beliefs that are *not* about the justificatory status of another belief, and higher-level beliefs, those which are, and shows how a viable foundationalism can hold that lower-level beliefs can be justified even if their higher-level correlates are not. More frequently, anti-foundationalists assume that directly justified beliefs must be immune from doubt, error, and the like, in which case skepticism looms large. In response, Alston shows how a viable foundationalism need not require such immunities of its directly justified beliefs.

Alston's work in perception dovetails with his work in epistemology. In *The Reliability of Sense Perception*, he argues that there is no argument for the reliability of sense perception that does not run afoul of epistemic circularity, i.e., that does not involve the arguer assuming *in practice* the reliability of sense perception. This is a feature of every basic source of forming beliefs, including memory, reason, and introspection, among others. Nevertheless, he argues, it is rational for us to engage in the practice of forming beliefs on the basis of sense perceptual experience, and thus to regard it as reliable, since there is no practical alternative to doing so. As for the nature of perception itself, he is primarily concerned to characterize what is distinctive of perceptual experience, as opposed to other modes of cognition such as memory and reflection, and he aims to do so in such a way that best explains how such experience can be a source of justification and knowledge. Toward that end, he advocates the Theory of Appearing (TA), the view that what is most fundamental to perceptual experience of, e.g., physical objects is their appearing to the perceiver as thus-and-so. The view is best seen in contrast with its two main rivals. In contrast with the presently popular adverbial theory (e.g., Roderick Chisholm), which holds that perceptual experience is merely a way of being conscious, TA insists that perception is irreducibly relational; it consists, most fundamentally, in an object's appearing to the subject, or, equivalently, in an object's presenting itself to the subject. In contrast with the once popular sense-data theory (e.g., Frank Jackson), which holds that perceptual experience consists, most fundamentally, in internal mental objects appearing to the subject, TA insists that, in the typical case, it is physical objects themselves that appear to the subject. As for explaining how experience can directly justify belief, both adverbial and sense-data theories must forge a link external to experience itself in order to account for how it is that it justifies beliefs that are based on it whereas, according to TA, beliefs are directly justified just because they register what is presented within experience itself.

More recently, in “Epistemic Desiderata” and *Dimensions of Epistemic Evaluation* (forthcoming), Alston argues that there is no such thing as justification, no single commodity over which epistemologists differ. Rather, competing theories of justification express a disjoint array of good-making features that a belief might conceivably have. Exactly how much of Alston’s previous views can be retained in this new picture remains to be seen.

Alston is probably most widely known for his work in the philosophy of religion and philosophical theology. With respect to the latter, he has been at the forefront of the recent trend for Anglo-American Christian philosophers to take more seriously the Augustinian motto, faith seeking understanding. (He was raised a Methodist and, through various ups and downs and ins and outs, now finds himself an Episcopalian. See “A Philosopher’s Way Back to Faith” for details.) Living out that motto in his own case has resulted in work on the Trinity, the Resurrection, the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, prayer, biblical criticism, and the evidential value of the fulfillment of (alleged) divine promises for spiritual and moral development in the here and now.

As for the more general concerns of philosophy of religion, Alston’s epistemology of religious experience has been extraordinarily influential, as have been his contributions to our understanding of religious discourse and other matters, e.g. whether broadly Freudian explanations of religious belief and the suffering in the world defeat whatever justification religious belief might otherwise have. It has been widely assumed that a religious belief can owe some of its justification to a religious experience (if at all) only indirectly, by way of figuring as a conclusion in an argument whose premises describe various facts about the experience. In contrast with this argumentative model and consonant with his moderate version of foundationalism, Alston develops a model according to which a person’s beliefs about the activities, intentions, and character of God can owe their justification, in no small part, directly to her own religious experience, in much the same way that hum-drum perceptual beliefs about our immediate environment can owe their justification directly to mundane perceptual experience and not to arguments. What’s distinctive about his model is the notion of a doxastic practice, a socially learned, monitored, and reinforced constellation of dispositions, habits, or mechanisms each of which yields a belief with a certain content from an input of a certain sort. Two aspects of doxastic practices are fundamental. First, some of them, the most “basic” ones, are the irreducible sole access to a certain stretch of reality, e.g. the practice of forming beliefs directly on the basis of sense perception provides our sole access to the physical environment. Second, basic doxastic practices contain an overrider system of beliefs and procedures that its adherents can use to check for reliability when the need arises in particular cases. Alston applies his doxastic practice epistemology to the practice of forming beliefs about a religiously conceived Ultimate Reality directly on the basis of (what its adherents take to be) experience of that Reality. While this characterization of his project emphasizes the first aspect mentioned above, it does so at the expense of the second. That’s because different religious traditions have, to varying degrees, divergent doctrinal beliefs about Ultimate Reality, and consequently checking procedures likewise vary; thus the overrider systems vary. Alston opts for more narrowly individuated doxastic practices, e.g. the Christian experiential doxastic practice. According to Alston, there is no good reason to think that the Christian practice is unreliable; most significantly, the plethora of religious doxastic practices provide no such reason.

Moreover, although, like any other basic doxastic practice, the Christian practice cannot be shown to be reliable in a noncircular fashion, it displays marks of significant self-support; consequently, those who engage in it can be practically rational in doing so.

Alston rejects the trend in academic theology to treat the entirety of what appears to be literal religious assertions as something else. Against theological anti-realists of various stripes, he argues that what look like determinate assertions in fact are what they seem, and that their truth or falsity is independent of our conceptual-theoretical choices. Against those who think that thought and talk about God is irreducibly symbolic or metaphorical, he argues that even though such thought and talk is derived from our thought and talk about creatures, and even though there is a vast gulf between the nature of God and that of creatures, it is nevertheless possible to speak of God literally; indeed, if we can metaphorically express a truth about God, then it is in principle possible to literally express the same truth about God. Alston is particularly concerned to defend the view that personal predicates—predicates that distinctively apply to persons, including predicates ascribing actions—can literally apply to an incorporeal being. Two possibilities emerge. First, even if a personal predicate can apply literally only to embodied persons (and we must not just assume that this is the case), that condition of application, if peripheral, can be lopped off, leaving intact a distinctive conceptual core that we can literally apply to disembodied persons; Alston argues that this is indeed the case with respect to most personal predicates ordinary believers apply to God, e.g. “making,” “commanding,” “guiding,” “forgiving,” and the like. Second, Alston uses a functionalist account of personal predicates to argue that divine perfection and atemporality pose no bar to their literal application.

It is my hope that the reader who has managed to arrive at this point has discerned, even if faintly, the extraordinary—even stunning—insight and scope of Alston’s philosophical achievements. What the reader will not have discerned, not even faintly, is the fact that these achievements pale in comparison with the warmth of his affection and concern, as countless students, colleagues, and friends can attest, and the illumination and inspiration that his life has provided for many of us who aim to seek the truth and to love the Lord, our God, with all our heart, soul, strength, and mind.

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Further Reading

Daniel Howard-Snyder, *William P. Alston: A Bibliography*, on-line at <http://www.cc.wvu.edu/~howardd/alston/biblio.pdf>.

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