

1993

Alston's Parity Thesis

Mark S. McLeod

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/rationality>

 Part of the [Epistemology Commons](#), and the [Religious Thought, Theology and Philosophy of Religion Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

McLeod, Mark S., "Alston's Parity Thesis" (1993). *Rationality and Theistic Belief: An Essay on Reformed Epistemology*. Paper 5.
<http://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/rationality/5>

This Chapter is brought to you for free and open access by the College of Christian Studies at Digital Commons @ George Fox University. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Rationality and Theistic Belief: An Essay on Reformed Epistemology* by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ George Fox University.

Alston's Parity Thesis

A version of the parity thesis is clearly seen in Alston's work. His strategy in some seminal essays is to embed the justification of beliefs in the rationality of what he calls "epistemic (or doxastic) practices."¹ He then argues that the kind of justification available for the practice that provides us with beliefs about the physical world is the same kind of justification available for the practice that generates beliefs about God. He further argues that the level or strength of justification is the same. My goal in the present chapter is twofold. First, I lay out the central tenets of Alston's argument in "Christian Experience and Christian Belief," supplementing them with some claims made in two other essays and in *Perceiving God*. Second, I provide the outline of a challenge to Alston's position. Although a fuller and more developed account of this challenge is defended in Chapter 3, I suggest here that if the challenge is successful, it calls for some distinctions within Alston's account of epistemic justification. These distinctions raise some questions about Alston's version of the parity thesis.

1. See Alston, "Christian Experience and Christian Belief," and "Religious Experience and Religious Belief," *Nous* 16 (1982): 3-14. Of the two listed here, I concentrate mostly on the first.

1. Epistemic Practices and Beliefs

In "Christian Experience and Christian Belief" Alston introduces the notion of an epistemic practice. An epistemic practice, he says, is "a more-or-less regular and fixed procedure of forming beliefs under certain conditions, where the content of the belief is some more-or-less determinate function of the conditions."² The notion of a practice is more basic than the notion of a belief insofar as one considers epistemic status. If one can show that a practice is justified (or that one's engaging in a practice is justified), then (typically) by extension its deliverances are justified. So Alston's central concern is whether we are epistemically justified in engaging in certain epistemic practices.

He has two practices in mind. The first provides us with (many of our) beliefs about the physical world; Alston calls this "perceptual practice" (PP) or "sense perceptual practice" (SPP or SP).³ The second provides (some of) us with beliefs about God; he calls it "Christian practice" (CP) and later introduces the notions of "mystical practice" (MP) and "Christian mystical practice" (CMP).⁴

2. Epistemic Justification

Alston claims that CP and PP have the same kind of epistemic justification. What kind of epistemic justification do they have? He distinguishes two. There is an evaluative sense of justification, J_e . Here the concern is that one's holding of a belief be legitimate vis-à-vis the concern for attaining truth and avoiding falsity; the concerns are those of what Alston calls the epistemic point of view. If

2. Alston, "Christian Experience and Christian Belief," p. 110. I use "epistemic practice" and "doxastic practice" interchangeably.

3. He uses PP, SPP, and SP to refer to this practice. I prefer the first, but I use the other abbreviations when they are more natural in quoting certain essays. The reason for Alston's shift from PP to SPP or SP is that he later develops arguments to the conclusion that one can perceive God, or at least that there is no reason to think one cannot. Once having broadened the category of perception to include access to God, Alston needed a more specific terminology by which to pick out the perception of physical objects. The fullest treatment of the possibility of the perception of God is in *Perceiving God*.

4. Again the shift in terminology is at least partly because of Alston's need for further specificity. The later two terms are introduced in *Perceiving God*. I use CP unless another term is needed for ease of exposition.

one is justified in holding a belief in this sense, then the circumstances in which the belief are held are such that the belief is at least likely to be true. Alston admits that there is much work to be done in discovering what the various conditions for J_e are. But when that work is done, he says, what J_e boils down to is a kind of reliabilist understanding of rationality: a belief is J_e when it was formed or is sustained by an epistemic practice that can be generally relied on to produce true rather than false beliefs.⁵

J_e is to be contrasted with a normative understanding of justification, J_n , which is normative in that it deals with how well a person does in light of the norms required of us simply in virtue of being cognitive beings. We have, in short, some obligations and duties with respect to belief and belief formation because of the fact that we are seekers of truth. J_n and J_e can be contrasted in this way.

Consider a naive member of an isolated primitive tribe who, along with his fellows, unhesitatingly accepts the traditions of the tribe. That is, he believes that p wherever the traditions of the tribe, as recited by the elders, include the assertion that p . He is J_n in doing so, for he has no reason whatsoever to doubt these traditions. Everyone he knows accepts them without question, and they do not conflict with anything else he believes. And yet, let us suppose, this is not a reliable procedure of belief formation; and so he is not J_e in engaging in it. Conversely, a procedure may be in fact reliable, though I have strong reasons for regarding it as unreliable and so would not be J_n in engaging in it; to do so would be to ignore those reasons and so would be a violation of an intellectual obligation.⁶

There is, then, a clear difference between J_n and J_e .

A further distinction within the normative concept of justification runs roughly parallel to the two positions taken in the William James–W. K. Clifford debate on the ethics of belief. Since our goal as epistemic beings is to seek the truth, Clifford demands that one ought not hold a belief unless one has adequate reasons for so doing. James denies this claim, suggesting that one can hold a belief

5. A fuller account of evaluative justification is available in Alston, "Concepts of Epistemic Justification," and "An Internalist Externalism," in *Epistemic Justification* (the latter originally in *Synthese* 74 [1988]: 265–83). I return to these essays in Chapter 4.

6. Alston, "Christian Experience and Christian Belief," p. 115.

unless one has some reason not to hold it. In effect, Clifford demands that we avoid as much error as possible, whereas James affirms the search for as much truth as possible. These parallel a strong version (J_{ns}) and a weak version (J_{nw}) of normative justification. The strong version has it that one is justified in engaging in a practice if and only if one has reasons for thinking the practice reliable. On the weak version, one is justified in engaging in a practice when there are no reasons for regarding the practice as unreliable. Some important relationships hold among J_e , J_{ns} , and J_{nw} . Perhaps the most important of these is that if one sets out to discover whether a belief or practice is J_e then one is setting out to discover whether one could be J_{ns} in holding that belief or engaging in that practice.

Alston makes two central claims. First, one is never J_{ns} in engaging in either PP or CP because one cannot have adequate reasons for supposing either practice to be J_e . (It does not follow that one or the other cannot be J_e but only that one has no adequate reasons to think it is.) Second, both PP and CP can be J_{nw} for a person. The answer to the question with which this section began—what kind of epistemic justification do PP and CP share?—is, then, that CP and PP share J_{nw} . Alston's version of the parity thesis might thus be described:

Parity Thesis_{Alston} (PT_A): Under appropriate conditions, both S 's engaging in CP and S 's engaging in PP are J_{nw} .

There is a natural extension to beliefs:

Under appropriate conditions, both S 's belief that p , where p is a theistic belief, and S 's belief that p^* , where p^* is a perceptual belief, are J_{nw} .⁷

7. This extension, although tacit in Alston's suggestions in "Christian Experience and Christian Belief," is perhaps incautious. Alston argues elsewhere that one must be careful not to confuse levels when dealing with epistemological concerns; what applies at one level may not at another. Although he writes in his earlier essays that a belief is justified if and only if the practice that generates it is, as his ideas develop it becomes clear that, although it may be rational for someone to engage in a practice, that in itself does not entail that the beliefs generated by the practice are justified. Rationality entails neither justification nor reliability. Alston

Alston does not intend his claims to be weak-kneed. First, PP and CP have the same level (weak) and kind (normative) of justification, and although either CP or PP may be J_e one cannot have adequate reasons to think either is.⁸ Second, he aims his sights higher than simple epistemic neutrality for PP and CP. His general goal is to consider the "possibility that one's experience can provide justification sufficient for rational acceptance." Thus, although both PP and CP are epistemically *permissible* practices, this kind of justification is intended to be understood as sufficient for some sort of positive epistemic status. Epistemic permission to engage in a practice and, by extension, to hold beliefs thereby delivered is sufficient for epistemic acceptance of the delivered beliefs, even though one has no adequate reasons to take the practice to be J_e .

3. The Justification of Perceptual Practice

Alston describes the basic accounts philosophers have given in trying to show that PP is J_e . He does not discuss any of these in detail but notes their general failure to win the philosophical day.¹⁰ Thus, the prospect of PP being J_{ns} is not good. Furthermore, he

argues, in a later essay I discuss in Chapter 4, that if one practice can be shown to be reliable they all can. Justification is easily had for just about any practice and hence just about any belief. Alston therefore shifts the question he asks about practices away from the issue of justification to the issue of their rationality. This shift allows him to evaluate the relative strength of our doxastic practices. It turns out, then, that engaging in an epistemic practice should be evaluated in terms of rationality and not justification, and thus some important questions need to be raised about the "natural" extension suggested above or, perhaps better, about PT_A itself. To begin with, is it appropriate or worthwhile to speak of the justification of practices (as opposed to beliefs)? Should we not rather speak of the rationality of practices? And what does this mean for beliefs?

8. Perhaps PT_A should include a clause noting that CP and PP share *at least* J_{nw} in order to recognize that they both might be J_e . But Alston seems to suggest in "Christian Experience and Christian Belief" that our knowledge that an epistemic practice is J_e is limited and therefore that the strongest *claim* we can legitimately make is that CP and PP are J_{nw} . See Chapter 4 for an explanation of Alston's apparent change of mind on this matter.

9. Alston, "Christian Experience and Christian Belief," p. 111.

10. There is a fuller discussion in *Perceiving God* and an even fuller discussion in Alston's forthcoming book on general epistemology (the latter of which is noted in *Perceiving God*).

suggests that as far as he knows no one has come up with any good reasons to think PP is unreliable. There being, apparently, no good reasons, PP is J_{nw} .

At this point Alston refers the reader to Thomas Reid's work. Reid suggests that the Creator endows human beings with a strong tendency to trust their belief-forming practices, noting that no practice can be provided *noncircular* reasons for accepting it as reliable. 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."¹¹ Furthermore, any appeal to one or another of those practices as more basic than the others, with the goal in mind of justifying the less basic by the more basic, is illegitimate. We have no reason to single out, for example, the practice delivering self-evident beliefs as providing more accurate access to truth than PP. Descartes's strategy of picking out one practice and using it to justify others is arbitrary.¹² PP is J_{nw} and this, Alston claims, gives us at least some chance at knowledge about the physical world.

4. The Justification of Christian Practice

Does CP have the same kind of justification as PP? Is CP J_{nw} ? By the nature of the case, one need not produce some set of reasons to show that CP is J_{nw} . Nevertheless, CP is often not accepted as J_{nw} , so some kind of account can be helpful. The best that can be done is to present PP, which we accept as J_{nw} , alongside CP in order to compare the two. If there are no differences significant vis-à-vis epistemic justification, then if one accepts PP as J_{nw} one can accept CP as J_{nw} .¹³ Alston argues that there are no such differences and in effect, therefore, argues for the truth of PT_A .

11. Alston, "Christian Experience and Christian Belief," p. 119.

12. Alston does not wish to suggest that one cannot check what might be called "subpractices" by a larger practice in which a subpractice is embedded. One might, for example, check the reliability of a thermometer by the larger perceptual practice.

13. One might think there is some sort of argument from analogy here, but I do not think this is the case. Alston's comparison is merely a comparison; it is not intended as an argument from the justification of one practice to the justification of another.

Epistemic situations are often analyzed in the following way. Instead of having empirical information plain and simple, it appears that what we have is, on the one hand, a datum such as "I am being appeared to in a computerish way" or "I seem to see a computer" or "A computerish sense datum is in my visual field" and, on the other hand, beliefs such as that there is a computer in front of me. How does one legitimately move from the content of one's mental life to a claim about the (independently) existing physical reality? Supposedly, the (independently existing) computer generates the datum via some psychophysical process. Thus the empirical claim, "There is a computer in front of me," is a hybrid resulting from the datum and an explanation (via the mysterious psychophysical process). But now we are in the difficult position with PP of having a bifurcation between experience and explanation. Similarly with CP, the suggestion goes. One has certain kinds of experience, such as it seeming to one that God cares for us, and theological explanations, such as that God does care for us. How is one to overcome either of these bifurcations?

Alston registers his skepticism about the two standard ways by which philosophers attempt to overcome the bifurcation for PP. Some try to show that the existence of the physical world is the best explanation of the data we have. But, says Alston, it is unlikely that one can "specify the purely subjective experiential data to be explained without relying on the 'independent physical world' scheme in doing so," and thus the explanation route seems closed.¹⁴ Neither does the phenomenalist approach of taking physical object beliefs to be beliefs about actual and possible sense experience fare well, according to Alston. The best move is to reject the bifurcation altogether and seek to justify the claim that we are in direct contact with the objects of the physical world. He suggests a parallel strategy for CP:

The question concerns the justifiability of a certain *practice*—the practice of forming physical-object beliefs directly on the basis of perception rather than as an explanation of what is perceived or experienced. Another way of characterizing the practice in question is to say that it is a practice of using a certain conceptual scheme (the "independently existing physical object" conceptual scheme) to specify what it is we are experiencing in sense perception. If I may use

14. Alston, "Christian Experience and Christian Belief," p. 109.

the term "objectification" for "taking an experience to be an experience of something of a certain sort," then we may say that the practice in question is a certain kind of objectification of sense experience, an objectification in terms of independently existing physical objects. Let us use the term "perceptual practice" (PP) for our familiar way of objectifying sense experience. In parallel fashion I will . . . use the term "Christian practice" (CP) for the practice of objectifying certain ranges of experience in terms of Christian theology.¹⁵

In the case of PP, the experience is taken to be an experience of the object itself and not merely a psychological datum. Alston also says the believer *takes* himself to be directly aware of the object; he does not claim that the subject *is* directly aware. Further, Alston suggests that we should understand our formation of physical object beliefs simply by our "objectification" of a range of experience in terms of certain concepts. On his suggestion, the datum of the experience generating physical object beliefs is not explained by reference to objective entities but is simply understood as an experience of those entities.

A brief detour is necessary here. In "Christian Experience and Christian Belief" Alston uses the language of one's taking an experience to be an experience of a certain sort as opposed to the claim that one's experience is of a certain sort. In his more fully orbbed theory of perception, however, he makes the following claims:

As I see the matter, at the heart of perception (sensory and otherwise) is a phenomenon variously termed *presentation*, *appearance*, or *givenness*. Something is presented to one's experience (awareness) *as so-and-so*, as blue, as acrid, as a house, as Susie's house, or whatever. I take this phenomenon of *presentation* to be essentially independent of conceptualisation, belief, judgment, "taking," or any other cognitive activity involving concepts and propositions. It is possible, in principle, for this book to visually present itself to me as blue even if I do not take it to be blue, think of it as blue, conceptualise it as blue, judge it to be blue, or anything else of the sort.

Thus Alston distances his theory of perception from those in which the object of the experience is said itself to be constituted in part or in whole by the conceptual framework and beliefs of the perceiver.

15. Ibid.

Nevertheless, Alston's claims about presentation do not really affect his claims about PP and CP. In fact, Alston goes on to say: "No doubt, in mature human perception this element of presentation is intimately intertwined with conceptualisation and belief, but presentation does not consist in anything like that." So, although Alston holds that the object of perception is a given, one's conceptual scheme can nevertheless influence how one takes the given:

It is essential not to confuse what appears with what it appears *as*. My conceptualised knowledge and belief can affect the latter but not the former. If to perceive X is simply for X to appear to one in a certain way, and if the concept of appearance is unanalyzable, then it would appear that we can enunciate no further conceptually necessary conditions for perception. But that does not follow. In declaring the concept of appearance (presentation) to be unanalyzable I was merely denying that we can give a conceptually equivalent formulation in other terms; I was not denying that conceptually necessary conditions can be formulated in other terms.

Alston's realism about the given should not be confused with the suggestion that the given itself is all that is necessary for perceptual experience.¹⁶

Let us return now to consider PP. Alston's point is that the data of the experiences generating physical object beliefs are not explained by reference to objective entities but rather such experiences are simply understood as experiences of those entities. So it goes with CP as well. Alston is careful to distinguish between "experiences in which the subject takes himself to be directly aware of God" and other interesting cases in which someone is "simply . . . disposed to believe . . . that what is happening in his experience is to be explained by God's activity."¹⁷ How does the account of these experiences go? As we have learned, Alston uses the term "objectify" to stand for "taking a certain kind of experience as an experience of something of a certain sort." In the physical object case, we take sense experiences as experiences of physical objects (rather than psychological data). He suggests, then, that just as we form

16. Alston, "Experience of God: A Perceptual Model," paper delivered at the Wheaton Philosophy Conference, Wheaton, Illinois, October 1989, pp. 2-4. A fuller treatment of this topic is found in Alston, *Perceiving God*, chap. 1.

17. Alston, "Christian Experience and Christian Belief," p. 107.

physical object beliefs directly on the basis of perception so we form theistic beliefs directly on the basis of theistic experience. There is not to be, presumably, any inference from the one to the other; the formation of belief is immediate. Thus, whenever we have perceptual experiences, we take ourselves to be in contact with physical objects. Just so, whenever we have theistic experiences, we take ourselves to be in contact with God or at least his activities. But how are we to understand “theistic experience”?

Alston says that a certain range of experience is objectified in certain terms. What is this range of experience in the realm of theistic belief? He suggests that there are certain Christian or religious experiences that can be objectified. He delimits the experiences about which he is concerned by setting aside what are typically called mystical experiences—those experiences sometimes had by saints and ascetics. He is concerned more with experiences open to the typical, lay Christian.¹⁸ He also sets aside experiences that might be described as visions. He does not wish to set aside all sensory mediation—for example, seeing the glory of God in the mountains. Nevertheless, he limits his final concern to what we might call direct experiences of God. These experiences need not be in the forefront of one’s consciousness, but they are not experiences from which one *infers* the presence of God. God is somehow (to be taken as) directly present, just as the table to my left is (taken by me to be) directly present.

Given this range of experiences, and Alston’s accounts of PP and CP, how does the argument for PT_A go? Clearly, PP is J_{nw} . It is often suggested, however, that CP is significantly different from PP, and these differences show that CP and PP do not have the same kind of epistemic justification. Alston writes:

I believe that many people are inclined to take CP to be discredited by certain ways in which it differs from PP, by the lack of certain salient features of PP. These include the following:

1. Within PP there are standard ways of checking the accuracy of any particular perceptual belief. If, by looking at a cup, I form the

18. This remains true even in *Perceiving God*, where Alston uses the rubric “mystical practice” to name the subject of his concern, although at least some of his examples in this more recent work are from what is thought of more standardly as the mystical literature. Still, his concern is not experiences of unity with God but rather with experiences where God is taken to be present, in a sense Alston specifies, to the experiencer’s consciousness.

belief that there is coffee in it, I can check this belief for accuracy by smelling or tasting the contents; I can get other observers to look at it, smell it, or taste it; I can run chemical tests on it and get other people to do so.

2. By engaging in PP we can discover regularities in the behavior of objects putatively observed, and on this basis we can, to a certain extent, effectively predict the course of events.

3. Capacity for PP, and practice of it, is found universally among normal adult human beings.

4. All normal adult human beings, whatever their culture, use basically the same conceptual scheme in objectifying their sense experience.¹⁹

Alston responds in both a negative and a positive way to these supposed disanalogies between PP and CP. Only the negative reply need concern us for the present.

The conclusion of the negative reply is that PP's possession of features 1–4 is best seen "as a rather special situation that pertains specifically to certain fundamental aspects of that particular practice in this particular historical-cultural situation rather than as an instance of what is to be expected of *any* reliable epistemic practice."²⁰ Alston's argument is roughly that although 1–4 are features that one might desire to have attached to an epistemic practice, it does not follow that a practice's failing to have them is a reason to reject the practice's claim to reliability. In fact, PP's possession of 1–4 does not give us a reason to take PP as reliable.

To simplify matters, let us consider features 1 and 2 together and then 3 and 4. Features 1 and 2 have the common focus of calling attention to predictability, whereas 3 and 4 have the common focus of calling attention to the universal human participation in the practice.²¹ So first, 1 and 2. PP is what Alston calls a "basic practice." It is a practice that "constitutes our basic access to its subject matter. We can learn about our physical environment only by perceiving it, by receiving reports of the perceptions of others, and by carrying out inferences from what we learn in these first two ways. We can not know anything a priori about these matters, nor do we

19. Alston, "Christian Experience and Christian Belief," p. 121.

20. *Ibid.*, p. 128.

21. This observation is made by Peter Van Inwagen in the abstract "Abnormal Experience and Abnormal Belief," *Nous* 15 (1981): 13–14.

have any other sort of experiential access to the physical world.” Thus, if one tries to take features 1 and 2 as reasons for judging PP to be reliable, one is involved in a “vicious circularity.”²² So no adequate reason can be given.

As an alternative, Alston suggests that, although 1 and 2 do not provide us with reasons for the reliability of PP, perhaps they be-token or manifest reliability. Thus, the first part of the anti-CP charge reduces to the claim that 1 and 2 manifest reliability but that CP lacks 1 and 2. Their absence is supposed to be a reason to reject the reliability of CP. But surely it is not. If 1 and 2 are not necessary conditions for reliability, as Alston argues, then the only alternative left for the anti-CP challenge is that 1 and 2 are general features of reliability, features such that the absence thereof provides at least *prima facie* reason to reject a practice as not reliable. In response, Alston offers one central reason why we should not think 1 and 2 are general features of reliable practices. This reason is hinted at by the practice of pure mathematics. The practice of pure mathematics does not allow for predictability precisely because it does not deal with changing objects. This example indicates that “whether a practice could be expected to yield prediction, if reliable, depends on the kind of subject matter with which it deals.”²³ He then suggests that it is only accidental and not necessary to PP that predictability is built into it.

As for features 3 and 4, not everyone engages in the practice of pure mathematics, so the claim that everyone engages in the same epistemic practices is not true; universal participation need not be a feature of a reliable practice. Also, it is not at all clear that all people of various cultures objectify experience in the way Western people do. Alston admits that this is a controversial area, but since the issue is unclear and, I might add, not even clearly decidable, perhaps it should not be pressed on either side.

Given these considerations, although the presence of features 1–4 may be cognitive desiderata, their absence does not give us a reason to reject the reliability of a practice failing to have them. PP and CP thus have, according to Alston, the same kind of epistemic

22. Alston, “Christian Experience and Christian Belief,” pp. 117, 124.

23. *Ibid.*, p. 127.

justification, J_{nw} . Just as we have no reason to reject the reliability of PP, so we have no reason to reject the reliability of CP.

5. Alstonian Theistic Experience

In the next section I introduce a challenge to PT_A which I draw from some recent philosophical work on the epistemic value of mystical experiences. To develop the challenge, however, I need a clearer explanation of Alston's account of experience. Experience, whether in PP or CP, is such that the object of one's experience is taken to be directly present. Alston resists any bifurcation of one's belief formation into parts, claiming that one simply takes one's experience to be of a certain object; one objectifies one's experience immediately into the categories appropriate to that experience. Sense experiences are objectified into physical object beliefs via the independently existing physical object scheme. Theistic experiences are objectified into theistic beliefs via the (Christian) theological object scheme. How should one understand the experiences that the theist objectifies into theistic belief?

Since the belief formation is noninferential, one expects the content of the experience to be relevant to the content of the belief. But what is the content of the experience? Here there appears to be a certain looseness in Alston's presentation in "Christian Experience and Christian Belief." Although he indicates early in his essay that he does not want to rule out experiences in which one might see the glory of God in majestic natural scenes or hear God speak in the words of a friend, he later specifies that he is restricting himself

to experiences in which the subject takes himself to be directly aware of God, rather than simply being disposed to believe, however firmly, that what is happening in his experience is to be explained by God's activity. Thus if after responding to the Gospel message, I find myself reacting to people in a different kind of way, I may firmly believe that this is due to the action of the Holy Spirit on my soul; but if I do not seem to myself to be directly experiencing the presence of the Holy Spirit, if I am not disposed to answer the question "Just what did you experience?" or "Just what were you aware of?" with something that begins "The Holy Spirit . . . ,"

then this experience does not fall within our purview. . . . No doubt, this is often a difficult distinction to make.²⁴

The first examples indicate a certain overlap in experience between theist and nontheist. For example, presumably both theist and nontheist (can) see the natural scene and both (can) hear the voice of the friend. In the remaining example, the nontheist presumably does not react to people in a way different than before hearing the gospel. This is an experience to which the nontheist has no access. The question is whether Alston can include both kinds of example—those in which there is an overlap of experience between theist and nontheist and those in which there is no overlap.

In the cases in which a theist and a nontheist appear to be having the same experience—viewing the beautiful mountains—but where only the theist forms the belief that God made them or that they reveal the glory of God, it may appear that there is an experiential overlap. But I think this is not the case. Insofar as Alston's suggestions go, it seems that there must be two separate experiential contents, for if the experiential contents were the same for both theist and nontheist then the difference in beliefs would need to be explained either by a difference in inference and explanation *added* to the experience or by the nontheist's failure to have a theistic conceptual or belief framework. An inferential addition is not allowed by Alston's own case; the objectification is to be immediate. And the failure of the nontheist to have the theistic conceptual or belief framework seems at best an unlikely explanation. Presumably both theist and nontheist take the mountains to be present in Alston's objectification sense. Furthermore, it is unlikely that the theist confuses the presence of mountains with the presence of God. Even if the theist has some theistic conceptual or belief framework the nontheist lacks, the theist needs some additional (and different) content in her experience to objectify it legitimately in theistic terms. It seems at least *prima facie* clear that the content of the experience should be related to the content of the belief generated. Just as I would deny, under normal circumstances, that there is a tree in front of me while I am in a room with no view of trees (i.e., while not having any experiences whose content in-

24. *Ibid.*, pp. 107–8.

cludes what I take to be a tree), so the theist should deny, under normal circumstances, that she is in direct contact with God while not having an experience the content of which she takes to be theistic. The mere presence of mountains and a theistic framework is not enough for the generation of a justified theistic belief.

Some comments from *Perceiving God* can help us here. Alston writes:

What distinguishes perception from abstract thought is that the object is *directly presented* or *immediately present* to the subject so that "indirect presentation" would be a contradiction in terms. To tease out a concept of directness that has an opposite within the category of presentation, let's go back to sense perception. . . . We can distinguish *directly* seeing someone from seeing her in a mirror or on television. We have *presentation* on both sides of this distinction. Even when I see someone in a mirror or on television, the person appears to me as such-and-such, as smiling, tall, or smartly dressed. That person can be identified with an item in my visual field. This contrasts with the case in which I take something as a sign or indication of X but do not see X itself (X does not appear anywhere within my visual field), as when I take a vapor trail across the sky as an indication that a jet plane has flown by. Here I don't see the plane at all; nothing in my visual field looks like a plane. Let's call this latter kind of case *indirect perceptual recognition*, and the former kind (seeing someone on television) *indirect perception*. We can then say that indirect is distinguished from direct perception of X by the fact that in the former, but not in the latter, we perceive X by virtue of perceiving something else, Y. In the indirect cases I see the person, T, by virtue of seeing a mirror or the television screen or whatever. On the other hand, when I see T face to face there is nothing else I perceive by virtue of perceiving which I see T.²⁵

Here Alston distinguishes between direct and indirect perception. How do the two kinds of examples I noted from "Christian Experience and Christian Belief" fit into the scheme from *Perceiving God*? Alston says in *Perceiving God* that he once thought cases of indirect perception and indirect perceptual recognition could not be distinguished, as far as the object of the perception (or recognition) was God. This indicates that when he wrote "Christian Experience and Christian Belief" he meant to focus only on direct experiences.

25. Alston, *Perceiving God*, pp. 20–21.

But Alston also tells us in the later work that some seminar students convinced him that, if God could appear to him as loving or powerful or glorious when he is not sensorily aware of a field of oats (or whatever), then God could appear to him as loving or powerful or glorious when that comes through his sense perception of the field of oats. Alston continues by noting that he has nothing to say against this possibility.²⁶

What is of importance here is that Alston now thinks that cases in which God appears through something else, rather than directly, can be classified as cases of indirect perception and need not be classified as cases of indirect perceptual recognition. Nevertheless, he makes it clear that his focus in *Perceiving God* is the possibility of direct perception of God rather than the more complicated indirect perception. His reason is that the former is a simpler phenomenon than the later. Given this historical information, I believe it is safe to suggest that Alston's examples of experiencing God when hearing a friend's voice or seeing a natural scene are best understood as cases of indirect perception and that we are therefore right here to understand Alston's main concern to be the direct type of experience of God. But we also learn that my way of passing over the more complex cases of indirect perception of God may be too easy. Perhaps there is something more going on in cases in which one experiences God through hearing a friend's voice or a beautiful scene than some kind of inference or explanation added to the experience.²⁷

One way of spelling out Alston's notion of direct experience is the following.²⁸ Suppose Alston is right and we do objectify

26. *Ibid.*, p. 28.

27. I have more to say on this in Chapters 6 and 7, for I take Plantinga's examples of experiencing God to be of this type, rather than the direct type. In short, I attempt later to do some of the work on the more complex cases of indirect perception which are not Alston's focus.

28. Alston goes into some detail in accounting for various levels of immediacy of perception in *Perceiving God*. He sums up his position by noting three grades of immediacy: "(A) Absolute immediacy. One is aware of X but not through anything else, even a state of consciousness. (B) Mediated immediacy (direct perception). One is aware of X through a state of consciousness that is distinguishable from X, and can be made an object of absolutely immediate awareness, but is not perceived. (C) Mediate perception. One is aware of X through the awareness of another object of perception" (pp. 21–22). (A) is exemplified by awareness of a

our experiences. He seems to have in mind a range of experience united by some commonality; for example, in the physical object case it is sensory experience that is common and, it seems, in the theistic case the commonality is a sort of "theistic sense." Although Alston does not explicitly take note of it in "Christian Experience and Christian Belief," on analysis it appears that there is a kind of link between sense perceptual experiences and physical object beliefs, for example, between "I am appeared to treely" and "I see a tree."²⁹ This link need not and perhaps cannot be one of belief, at least insofar as beliefs generate inferential beliefs, but there is a link of the following sort. No one forming the belief "I see a tree" would deny that she is being appeared to treely. The link is a sort of linguistic or conceptual one.

Now, according to Alston's claims in "Experience of God: A Perceptual Model" and in *Perceiving God*, the given in an experience is not dependent on the perceiver's concepts or beliefs. Thus caution is called for here. This linguistic-conceptual link to which I am calling attention need not imply an antirealist theory of perception or, for that matter, an antirealist metaphysic. Alston may be right that in principle a tree may be present to me even if I do not take it to be a tree, think of it as a tree, conceptualize it as a tree, judge it to be a tree, or anything else of the sort. Nevertheless, it seems true enough that, if I form the belief that I see a tree, *I will not deny that I am appeared to treely.*³⁰ Thus, in distinguishing between direct experiences and experiences of other kinds it is helpful

state of consciousness. (B) is exemplified by being aware of Reagan as he comes within one's perceptual range. (C) is exemplified by being aware of Reagan's image on the television screen. I believe that what I have to say in the main text provides one account of direct experience that could be spelled out in terms of mediated immediacy or direct perception.

29. He does note the difficulty in specifying purely subjective experiences without reference to "schemes" in doing so; see "Christian Experience and Christian Belief," p. 109.

30. A brief explanation of the terminology used in this context may be in order. In this case, the "adverbial" construction is intended to call attention to the linguistic nature of the link without committing me to any existence claims. In its broader use in epistemology, the point is to emphasize how I am *appeared* to rather than how *things* appear to me; see Roderick Chisholm, *Theory of Knowledge*, 2d ed. (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1977), pp. 29-30, for a more detailed explanation of this terminology.

to note that one can appeal to the language used to describe the content of direct experiences.³¹ It is a language relying on the physical object conceptual scheme itself. If I take myself to see a tree and go on to describe the experience underlying the formation of the corresponding belief (“I see a tree”), I use language such as “I am appeared to treely.” The description of the experience makes covert reference to the tree or, to make the point more general, to the physical object. Let us give this link the name “lingo-conceptual link.”

Now, one might suggest that there need not be a lingo-conceptual link. For example, the experience could be described in terms of patches of greenishness falling into certain patterns or having a certain shape. But this seems an unlikely account. Our experience is gestaltlike and does not seem reducible to the more basic components. At least, when asked why one thinks she sees a tree the reply is something like “I am appeared to treely” and the account is not typically given further analysis.

If there is a range of experiences picked out by the terms “theistic experience” or “Christian experience” (understood as direct experience), one might surmise that the existence of a similar link can be discovered in theistic belief formation. When the belief “God wants me to love people more fully” is formed, the description of the experience underlying it would, one might expect, make covert reference to theistic language—“being appeared to theistically.” Thus the range of experiences to which Alston can point, given the objectification scheme he describes, seems not to overlap in content with the experiences of the nontheist.³² Alston’s suggestions seem to rule out understanding his examples as allowing both theists and nontheists to have the same experiential content in their

31. This seems true enough for beliefs expressed by perceptual verbs. But what of straight physical object beliefs that might, as Alston suggests, be based on experience, for example, “Suzie’s house needs painting”? The link here is perhaps not as direct, but there still is one. If my belief that Suzie’s house needs painting is based in experience, I must be looking at (or have looked at) Suzie’s house. So “Suzie’s house needs painting” is linked to “I see (saw) Suzie’s house needing paint,” which in turn is linked to “I am (was) appeared to in a Suzie’s house-needing-paint-like manner.”

32. Whether it is best to describe such experiences as one experience with two contents or as two experiences, one of which occurs at the same time as the other, is not important here.

experiences. So the experiences objectified by theists into theistic belief are experiences only the theist has—or, at least if had by a nontheist, they are ignored, explained away, or otherwise not objectified.

6. A Challenge to the Alstonian Parity Thesis

Two sorts of questions can be distinguished in a consideration of perception-like theistic experiences. The first is whether the experience is veridical as opposed to hallucinatory. The second is what the experience (whether veridical or hallucinatory) is an experience of, what the object of the experience is. The second question is relevant here.

In an essay on mysticism, J. William Forgie isolates the phenomenological content of the experience from other background beliefs and “items of knowledge” which he calls the “epistemic base.” When seeking to identify a person one sees, he argues, one must make reference to the epistemic base. For example, to identify the young man next door when one knows that identical twins Tom and Tim Tibbetts both live there, one must rely on other background information such as the fact that Tom is out of town this week. Since experiences of both Tom and Tim Tibbetts are phenomenologically the same, knowing Tom is out of town allows one to identify this young man as Tim Tibbetts. Thus a purely phenomenological description of the experience could not take the form “It was an experience of Tim Tibbetts.” Such a description must rely on the epistemic base. There is nothing in the phenomenological experience that guarantees that this is an experience of Tim rather than Tom, “or for that matter any of a number of other things—a third ‘look-alike,’ an appropriately made-up dummy, or even a cleverly devised hologram—an accurate perception of which could be phenomenologically indistinguishable from the experience in question.”³³

To show that no experience can be phenomenologically an experience of God—that is, to show that “it’s of God” cannot be a true phenomenological description of any experience—Forgie employs

33. J. William Forgie, “Theistic Experience and the Doctrine of Unanimity,” *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 15 (1984): 13–30, quotation p. 14.

a “divide and conquer” strategy. “God” can be understood to be either a (disguised) definite description or a proper name:

If it is a proper name, then if an experience is to be phenomenologically of God, the content of the experience must guarantee that its object is a certain unique individual, the one named by “God,” and not any other. It must not be possible, that is, for the experience to constitute an accurate “perception” of some individual other than God. . . . On the other hand, if “God” is a description, meaning (let us suppose) “the all-powerful, all-knowing, all-good creator of the heavens and the earth,” then a theistic experience need only be phenomenologically of some individual or other—it doesn’t matter which one—who satisfies that description. In this case it is required only that it not be possible that the experience constitute an accurate perception of something that fails to satisfy the description.”

The first option, taking “God” to be a proper name, does not provide an account of how one could have a phenomenological experience that guarantees that it is an experience of God. For such a guarantee to be possible, one would have to identify the object of the experience as having what Forgie calls a “uniquely instantiable property [UIP].” The only likely candidates for such properties are those such as “being Socrates” or, in the theistic case, “being God.” But neither of these properties is given as part of a phenomenological experience itself, just as it is not given in the experience of the young man next door that he is Tim rather than Tom Tibbetts. Forgie says that the point about sense experience can be put in two ways:

(1) At best sense experiences are phenomenologically of things that appear in a certain way, but since properties of the form “being something that looks (sounds, feels, etc.)—or is capable of looking (etc.)—this way” are not UIPs, sense experiences are not phenomenologically of individuals.

(2) If a sense experience is to be phenomenologically of an individual, it is not enough that that individual have a UIP. It must have a UIP of the form “being something which appears—or which is capable of appearing—in a certain way.” It is because no object of sense experience seems to have a UIP of that form that no sense experience is phenomenologically of an individual.

Forge admits that if mystical (theistic) experiences are radically unlike perceptual experiences then perhaps his argument is not relevant. Nevertheless, insofar as the analogy is accurate his point seems to stand. Forge also admits that he cannot provide an argument to conclude that there are no UIPs of the sort in question. Nevertheless, it seems at least unlikely that such UIPs are in the offing given the following intuition: for any allegedly phenomenological experience of God, there is a possible world in which "the causal laws pertaining to the relations between possible objects of 'perception' and the 'perceivers' of those objects are such that some individual, not identical to God, is capable of appearing in just the way displayed in the experience in question." In short, if "God" is a proper name, then experiences that phenomenologically guarantee that their object is God are not possible.³⁵

The second possibility, taking "God" to be a disguised definite description, fares no better. What is needed here for a phenomenological experience to guarantee itself as an experience of God is not that it be an experience of an individual but only that it be of something having certain properties. In God's case the properties could be all-knowing, all-powerful, and so forth. Forge first makes the Humean observation that causation, whether of one event causing another or of some agent causing some event or some substance, is not phenomenologically *in* the experience. If this is true, then there are difficulties with the suggestion that anyone could recognize something as having certain properties having to do with powers or beliefs—all-powerful, all-knowing, and so forth. Whether the properties have to do with powers or belief, ultimately one's recognition of them depends on recognition of causal relations:

The best candidate for an experience which is phenomenologically of something having certain powers and beliefs is one which is phenomenologically of something manifesting those powers or expressing those beliefs. If there can be no experience which is phenomenologically of some power, or some belief, by itself, . . . perhaps an experience can be phenomenologically of something manifesting a power or expressing a belief. If so, then an experience itself could guarantee that its object is something manifesting, and hence pos-

35. *Ibid.*, p. 18.

sessing, that power, and also something expressing, and so having, that belief. But here is where the earlier point about causation is important. If causation is not phenomenologically presentable then neither is agency. If some agent is manifesting a power or expressing a belief, that agent is causing something to happen, producing some state of affairs. But if no experience is phenomenologically of someone's causing or producing a state of affairs (as opposed to that state of affairs simply co-existing with the agent or coming into existence while the agent is present), then no experience will be phenomenologically of someone manifesting a power or expressing a belief. So the best candidate for an experience which is phenomenologically of something having certain powers or beliefs turns out not to be up to the job.³⁶

The general point is that there is nothing in the phenomenological aspect of the experience alone that entitles the perceiver to claim that it is an experience of God, whether "God" is understood to be a disguised definite description or a proper name.

Based on the kinds of suggestions Forgie makes, I propose the following challenge to PT_A. PP and CP do not have the same strength of epistemic justification, since CP, unlike PP, requires a role for background beliefs for the generation and justification of its deliverances. This special role for CP's background beliefs weakens the level of strength of justification for CP-generated beliefs. This is not to say that beliefs delivered by CP are not justified, nor even that they are not J_n. Nevertheless, they are not as strongly justified as PP-delivered beliefs. Call this the "background belief challenge."

This challenge suggests that, insofar as Alston means for his account of belief formation to be an account of noninferential belief formation involving only an objectification of experience, then perhaps there is a need for more clarity about the notions of "non-inferential" and "objectification" to which Alston appeals. Theistic beliefs appear to depend in some way on a set of background *beliefs*. The background belief challenge suggests that any time one forms a (justified) belief about an individual qua epistemically identifiable individual (as well, I think, as about an individual's action qua uniquely attributable to that individual), the belief is inferential or interpretive; or at least, if noninferential, it relies in some epi-

36. *Ibid.*, pp. 20-21.

stemically significant way on background beliefs as opposed to relying merely on the application of a conceptual scheme.³⁷ I argue below that some of our doxastic practices do indeed involve an epistemically significant place for background beliefs, but where the background beliefs do not form an inferential basis for the belief generated.

A second issue arises in connection with the background belief challenge. Let us grant that CP does involve background beliefs. Is the same not true for the generation of PP beliefs? And if so, are not the teeth of the challenge removed? Alston himself presents several ways in which background beliefs may enter into PP. I argue in Chapter 3 that there is a special position for background beliefs in CP that PP does not require, thus defending the challenge. But first there are distinctions and observations to be made.

In most of our waking hours, we find ourselves engaged in PP. The beliefs it generates touch much of what we believe in general and virtually all we believe about the physical world and its furniture. PP delivers beliefs about all kinds of physical objects: houses, rocks, trees, elephants, cars, onions, computers, and sweet potatoes, to name only a minuscule number. It also delivers beliefs about particular houses, rocks, trees, elephants, cars, onions, and sweet potatoes. In many cases, the beliefs generated by PP come and go, and the objects we form beliefs about are not important enough for us to name or otherwise identify so as to be able to reidentify them. For example, if I am in a new city, being driven through its streets, PP may lead me to believe all sorts of things about the new physical environment in which I find myself. For the most part, however, I do not pay enough attention so that later I might be able to sort out one house from another, as far as my beliefs about them are concerned. Unless, in short, there is something spectacular about a given physical scene or unless I have some specific reason or need to remember information about a given bit of the physical environment, I simply do not form beliefs about objects which are focused on allowing me to reidentify the object. Still, I may be forming many beliefs via PP as I drive

37. Alston himself allows for the possibility of mediate or indirect justification of beliefs by their relation to other beliefs. And not all these need be inferential. See "Concepts of Epistemic Justification," p. 101.

around the city, and these beliefs classify the objects of my experience into kinds of things with certain properties not shared with any others.

What I wish to emphasize is not the classificatory type of belief just noted but what I call "epistemically unique individual beliefs" (where it is the object of the belief that is individual, not the beliefs). I mean by the term "epistemically unique individual" not simply one of a kind but one of a kind with certain unshared properties and identifiable and reidentifiable as such. CP delivers beliefs about such an object. The focus of CP is only one kind of thing, a divine entity. And CP delivers beliefs about the only member of its kind, God.³⁸ (Note the prominent place of discussion of proper names and definite descriptions in Forgie's argument.) The centrality in CP of a unique individual who is (taken to be) identifiable and reidentifiable is clear. But not only is he central, the entire epistemic practice is oriented toward forming beliefs about this single individual.³⁹

This is quite different from PP, where beliefs are generated willy-nilly about countless things (and even countless kinds of things), many of which we do not bother to identify as the unique individuals they are but rather only classify as members of a certain kind. Contrast "I see the white rock next to the oak in my front yard" with "I see a rock." The latter can be understood merely to classify the object of my experience as being a member of a certain kind or, in so doing, to attribute certain properties to the object. The former picks out the object of my experience as the individual rock it is—the white one beside the oak in my front yard. Presumably, beliefs generated by CP are closer to the latter than to the former, that is, closer to epistemically unique individual beliefs than to classificatory beliefs. One reason for this may simply be that there is only one divine individual, God.⁴⁰

38. God may not be the member of a kind; if he is not, then CP does not deliver beliefs about any *kind* of thing, but about a very special thing.

39. This is not to say that no other individual would ever play a role in CP. I might sense that God wants me to love my wife more, for example. The point is that God is the focal point of CP.

40. Even in classificatory beliefs one is classifying a unique individual as a rock, tree, or something else. But the point is the focus or emphasis of the belief's content, not simply the object of the belief.

There is much more to say about this difference between PP and CP, but for now we can merely introduce the issues that are the focus not only of the discussion of PT_A but of the challenge to Reformed epistemology's emphasis on parity in general. The difference between CP and PP is that the former is solely oriented toward beliefs about an epistemically unique individual, the latter is not so oriented. This difference requires, in turn, a special epistemic role (yet to be fully specified) for background beliefs in the generation of CP's deliverances. This special place for background beliefs is absent in the generation of a good many, if not all, of PP's deliverances. Do background beliefs have a special position in CP that they do not have in PP, and if so, is this position epistemically important? I tackle these questions in reverse order, postponing a full inquiry into the former question until the next chapter. For now, let me assume an affirmative answer to the first question and go on to discuss an answer to the second.

Let us assume that PP and CP differ on the place of background beliefs in the generation of (justified) beliefs. As a preliminary run toward getting at the suspicion that the differing roles of background beliefs are epistemically important, let us distinguish between three kinds of belief formation. The first is that of Alston's objectification; these beliefs are the result of a lingo-conceptual scheme alone being applied noninferentially to experience. Let us call these "conceptual-reading beliefs" and their corresponding practices "conceptual-reading practices." The second kind are those beliefs formed inferentially; these beliefs are the result of conscious, discursive (deductive, inductive, or interpretive) reasoning. Let us call these "inferential beliefs" and their corresponding practices "inferential practices." The third kind is noninferential but where something more than concepts are applied to experience; concepts *and* substantive beliefs are applied, albeit noninferentially, to experience. One's epistemic base includes background information (in the form of beliefs) that is used, along with concepts, to generate beliefs. Let us call these "noninferential mediated beliefs" and the corresponding practices "noninferential mediated practices."

Although we can allow that all these modes of belief generation can provide us with justified beliefs, it might still be the case that conceptual-reading beliefs have a privileged position. We are, in fact, attracted to these noninferential, merely conceptually read be-

liefs. We give them a special place in our epistemic hierarchies. The reason for this is a kind of Cartesian worry about inferences or interpretations. Conceptual-reading beliefs simply have the least chance of going astray. In cases of inference, the longer and more complicated the reasoning, the more likely one is led down the epistemic garden path. One thus suspects that, even where the reasoning is not inferential or even conscious, the more complicated the intellectual moves, the more likely one is to go astray. Furthermore, the beliefs required for the inferences and interpretations often, perhaps always, themselves need justification. Should we not suspect that any beliefs required for Alston's CP objectifications also need to be justified (or have justification), whereas our basic conceptual schemes, as used in PP, do not? What then of the non-inferential mediated beliefs? I suspect that these are in a sort of halfway house between conceptual-reading and inferential beliefs. The epistemic justification for noninferential mediated beliefs, although not as strong as the justification for conceptual-reading beliefs, is not as weak as the justification for inferential beliefs. None of this is to say that any of these three kinds of belief is not justified; it is only to note a ranking of strengths of justification.

According to Alston, the objectification of perceptual experience via a conceptual scheme does not involve discursive reasoning, explanation, interpretation, or any appeal to background beliefs, at least in a large number of cases. In contrast to this, as I argue later (see Chapter 3, Section 2), forming beliefs about Tom and Tim Tibbetts or God always involves at least a noninferential role for background beliefs. The latter seem to be, once again (see Chapter 8, Section 1), at least slightly less high on the epistemic ladder than the former, and beliefs about epistemically unique individuals (at least where these do not derive from PP)⁴¹ therefore do not appear to have the same epistemic status as beliefs formed via Alston's objectification. According to PT_A the two kinds of beliefs (perceptual and theistic), given appropriate circumstances, not only have the same kind of epistemic justification but also the same level or strength of that kind. It seems that the justification attached to conceptual-reading beliefs may be (slightly) stronger than that attached

41. PP can give us beliefs about epistemically unique individuals, but these do not require background beliefs. At least that is what I argue in Chapter 3.

to noninferential mediated beliefs. But then, if PP provides a non-inferential conceptual reading of experience whereas CP does not, then CP and PP do not share the same epistemic level. And this is true even if they share the same kind of justification, namely, J_n .

Even granting this initial description of the two kinds of case, is this argument not just a quibble over matters of little significance? Perhaps beliefs delivered via noninferential mediated belief generation are, for all intents and purposes, J_{nw} . Since J_{nw} merely demands that there not be reasons to reject the epistemic practice as unreliable, discovering that a practice appeals to background beliefs does not show that the practice is not J_{nw} . The definition of J_{nw} simply makes no reference to how the practices work. Perhaps by the letter of the law Alston is correct and PT_A is true. Nevertheless, the distinctions noted here seem to indicate some need for a more finely tuned notion of J_{nw} and the parity thesis in which it is embedded. Are there not further gradations of justification within the weak version of J_n ? And do these not rely on the internal workings of the practices? Alston himself hints at such a possibility when he admits that features 1–4 (those attached to PP but not to CP) are “desiderata for an epistemic practice. If we were shaping the world to our heart’s desire, I dare say that we would arrange for our practices to exhibit these features. . . . Things go more smoothly, more satisfyingly, from a cognitive point of view where these features are exhibited. Since PP possesses these virtues and CP does not, the former is, to that extent and in that way, superior from a cognitive point of view.”⁴²

This cognitive superiority does not push PP beyond J_{nw} . Neither does CP’s lack of it keep CP from being J_{nw} . In fact, after this suggestion Alston goes on to argue that the features that generate or allow for this cognitive superiority are not necessary for reliability. But surely Alston’s comment indicates the possibility of some ranking within J_{nw} . Within this possibility it is natural to suggest that noninferential mediated practices do not share the same strength as conceptual-reading practices, at least, one can say, from a cognitive point of view. Thus, although PT_A is true as a general claim, further refinement indicates a ranking within J_{nw} by which CP turns out to be less attractive than PP. Is this lack of

42. Alston, “Christian Experience and Christian Belief,” pp. 123–24.

attractiveness more than a cognitive issue? Is it an epistemic one? I have suggested an intuitive case for its being epistemic but have not developed the idea fully. Let me simply state here that I believe the issue is an epistemic one because the background beliefs need justification.

The issue of whether background beliefs need justification is an important one, but I postpone a discussion of it, and some further refinements of the notions of conceptual-reading and noninferential mediated practices and beliefs, until Chapters 6 and 7. For now, assuming that that promissory note is successfully paid, and that PP and CP do in fact differ on the role of background beliefs, we can suggest that PT_A is, strictly speaking, false, for there are cognitive and epistemic rankings within J_{nw} that PT_A does not recognize. In the next chapter I argue that PP and CP do differ on the role of background beliefs.