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The Role of Background Beliefs

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The Role of Background Beliefs

The background belief challenge to PT_A is that, whereas CP involves an epistemically important position for background beliefs, PP does not, and therefore PT_A is false. I have two goals for this chapter. The first is to explore the role of background beliefs in PP and CP and, by doing so, to defend the background belief challenge. Second, I consider two possible rejoinders Alston might make to the challenge and argue that neither is successful.

I. Alston on Background Beliefs in Perceptual Practice

Is the working assumption of the last section in Chapter 2 correct; do PP and CP differ on whether background beliefs enter into the generation and justification of beliefs? It would be neat and tidy if one could simply say that CP does involve background beliefs whereas PP does not. But philosophy is rarely neat and tidy.

In *Perceiving God*, Alston's central thesis is that "putative direct awareness of God can provide justification for certain kinds of beliefs about God."¹ One might thus surmise that Alston defends a parity thesis in this work. He does not, however, but not for the

1. Alston, *Perceiving God*, p. 9.

kinds of reasons I have been suggesting. Alston argues there that background beliefs sometimes enter into sense perceptual belief formation, and that they do in several different ways. The same is true, he says, for CP (or, as he names it there, mystical perception). He suggests that one belief can be partly mediately based and partly immediately based. He raises the question whether any belief is ever strictly immediately based, that is, justified on the basis of experience alone. His reply is affirmative, but he does recognize that sometimes, at least, background beliefs also have a function. He considers three different kinds of beliefs that might play a role and suggests several ways their functions differ from one another. Overall, however, he wants to suggest that, although background beliefs may play a role, it happens far less frequently than is sometimes thought and, most important for the thesis that one can perceive God, background beliefs need not have a place at all. If Alston is right, then as far as PT_A is concerned the background belief challenge fails. But I believe the challenge does not fail, so I also believe that Alston is not right about the significance of background beliefs in CP and PP.

I noted above that Alston does not defend a parity thesis in *Perceiving God*. He does not do so, for he now thinks that PP and CP differ because CP runs into problems with religious plurality (as well as a lesser problem with checking procedures). I return to Alston's discussion of these in Chapter 8. Our immediate concern is background beliefs. Nevertheless, if it turns out that Alston is wrong about the function of background beliefs in CP, that is, if it turns out that there is a special role for background beliefs in CP which is absent in PP, then he has one more reason to reject a parity thesis between PP and CP.

Is there, then, a special role for background beliefs in CP? To answer this question, we need to consider Alston's position on background beliefs in PP. He quickly deals first with what he calls "perceptual cues." Psychology teaches us that several factors are involved in the way things appear to us. It is not implausible to suppose that our psyches take certain cues into account in the formation of perceptual beliefs. But it is equally obvious that most of us are completely, or almost completely, unaware of taking such factors into account. Still, it is sometimes suggested that, for

example, “perceptual beliefs (judgments) of distance are based on cognitions of factors of the sort just mentioned.”²

How do beliefs about these cues function in the formation and justification of perceptual beliefs? There are three positions taken on this. One is that an inference (albeit unconscious) takes place. A second suggests that the workings are completely causal and not doxastic. The third falls in between, with the suggestion that there is a kind of “subdoxastic” taking account of the cues. Alston simply notes, and rightly so I think, that if there are beliefs involved in such cases they are involved in “a maximally hidden way.” It is, therefore, difficult to find sufficient reasons to suppose that such background information is epistemically important.

Alston’s second suggestion deals with what he calls “adequacy assumptions.” His concern is the attribution of nonsimple sensory predicates to external objects. We make such attributions on the basis of sense experience, and when we do we are assuming that a certain pattern of sensory qualities (difficult to describe in detail) is a reliable indicator of the predicate’s applicability. Alston calls such assumptions “adequacy assumptions (or beliefs).” He writes:

When I take it that X is a house, or your house, or a chair, or the chair we just bought, or a copy of *Process and Reality*, or a wave, or Coit Tower, or my wife, or a primrose, I am, in effect, supposing that the particular pattern of sensory qualia X is presenting to me at that moment is, at least in those circumstances, a reliable indication of X’s being a house, or your house, or a chair. That being the case, am I not basing my belief not just on the sensory appearance of X but also on my belief that a sensory appearance of that sort is a reliable indication that what is appearing is a house. . . ? Isn’t every case of nonsimple sensory-predicate attribution subject to evaluation, at least in part, in terms of mediate justification?³

Furthermore, although our paradigm case of a belief being based on another is the conscious inference, we must, says Alston, recognize other cases in which no conscious inference is involved. For example, one’s belief that Frank is out of town might be based on one’s being told that he is, even though one never infers the former

2. Ibid., p. 83.

3. Ibid., p. 84.

from the latter. Given this broader understanding of the “based on” relationship, could it be that all our attributions of nonsimple sensory predicates rely, although not consciously so, on adequacy assumptions? Even if there are unconscious bases for beliefs, says Alston, the following two observations still carry a strong negative presumption against adequacy assumptions being part of the basis. The first is that perceivers are typically not aware of adequacy assumptions being part of the basis for perceptual beliefs. The second is that in many cases they are not the sorts of things to which one has access.

The stronger case against adequacy assumptions being part of the basis is that there is a level confusion lurking in the neighborhood. To be justified in an attribution of nonsimple sensory predicates one need not be justified in believing the adequacy assumptions that support the predication. The assumption need only be true.⁴ It is simply not true that “what it takes for a condition, C, to be sufficient for P (call this ‘what it takes’ ‘A’) must itself be part of any sufficient condition for P. The fallacy is immediately evident once we see that if A is satisfied, then, by the very terms of the example, C is sufficient for P by itself, and A need not be added to it to get sufficiency.”⁵ Alston’s point is not that adequacy beliefs never play a role in the justification of perceptual beliefs but simply that they need not do so.

The third kind of belief that can be relevant in perceptual belief formation Alston calls “contextual beliefs.” There are three types of contextual beliefs: beliefs about the setting, beliefs about position, and beliefs about normality. The first of these deals with spatiotemporal issues. Many houses look alike, and my knowing I am on Elm Street, rather than some other, may be a factor in my identifying the house that is the object of my experience. Beliefs about position are concerned with angle of view, distance from the observer, and state of the medium. Finally, Alston explains beliefs about normality by example. Suppose that I thought people, trees, dogs, and tables were constantly annihilated but replaced with exact replicas. This would lead me to form somewhat different be-

4. There is much to be said about and for Alston’s concern with level confusions. I return to this theme in the next chapter.

5. Alston, *Perceiving God*, p. 86.

liefs on the basis of the sensory array that meets me each day. Do I thus have, contrary to the supposition, an assumption about the relative constancy and permanence of physical substances as part of the basis for my normal perceptual beliefs? Such an assumption Alston calls a “normality assumption.”

In the position and normality cases, says Alston, we are not aware of background beliefs, if we have them, at least in the majority of cases. And if such beliefs do play a role it is not required that they be part of the basis but only that they be true, just as with adequacy assumptions. But Alston admits that the case for situational beliefs being part of the basis for perceptual beliefs is stronger. In many cases one’s location does seem important. For example, in identifying the large body of water to the west as the Pacific Ocean, one’s being in California seems to be significant. But Alston thinks this is not the normal case. “Even if just after forming the belief [“Those buildings are the World Trade Center”], I reflect that if I hadn’t known I was in New York City I wouldn’t have judged those buildings to be the World Trade Center, it doesn’t follow that being in New York City was part of my basis for the belief.”⁶ Other options are possible, including that the reflection in question calls attention to what would be required for the adequacy of the basis, rather than its being part of the basis itself. So, although situational beliefs may sometimes have a part in the justification of other beliefs, they need not do so in every case.

But the situation is different with contextual beliefs than with adequacy beliefs:

Here the adequacy assumption is not that the sensory pattern, *A*, is *generally* indicative of the presence of a \emptyset . It is rather that, given an underlying supposition that *A* is an adequate basis for an attribution of \emptyset only in certain circumstances rather than others, the belief in question is that the present circumstances are of the former sort. That gives the belief a greater claim to be considered part of the basis, for it does indicate something distinctive about this situation rather than just amounting to a blanket approval of the phenomenal-objective connection. But, by the same token, it offers us a different kind of alternative to holding that it must form part of the basis. Remember the point that the justification of perceptual beliefs is al-

6. *Ibid.*, p. 90.

ways *prima facie*, subject to being overridden by sufficient indications to the contrary. This gives us another way in which a belief can be relevant to the justification of another belief. It can be *negatively* relevant by constituting an (actual or possible) overrider or by ruling out such.⁷

Thus the suspicion that such background beliefs are relevant to the justification of other beliefs is explicable not in terms of their being required as part of the basis itself but as actually or possibly overriding the basis or by ruling out overriders.

Alston takes himself to have dealt with both the subject and predicate components of perceptual beliefs: "In both cases we have argued that the justification might be either purely immediate or partly mediate. As for the former, we have suggested that I might both be able to justifiably take the perceived object to be your house and be able to justifiably believe of it that it is shingled, just on the basis of the way it looks. In both cases background beliefs would normally be playing some role, even if they are not part of the basis." Alston goes on to suggest that there may be concern that object identification poses greater difficulty for immediate justification than does property attribution. He believes, however, that this concern is unfounded. Object identifications do not pose greater difficulty, since one can think of object identification in terms of identifying the subject as one that bears certain properties. Furthermore, any property that can figure in subject identification can also figure as a predicate. "Instead of forming the belief that your house needs painting, I could form the belief that *that* is your house, or that that building that needs painting is your house."⁸

There may, however, be a difference in degree in the possibility of purely immediate justification for subject and predicate attribution. "An indefinitely large plurality of unique individuals is out there to be recognized, whereas there are comparatively few properties we have any real need to distinguish. Hence it is more feasible for us to store relatively fixed ways of recognizing properties by their appearance than to build up comparably direct ways of recognizing individuals."⁹ This, Alston claims, suggests that in rec-

7. *Ibid.*

8. *Ibid.*, pp. 91–92.

9. *Ibid.*, p. 92.

ognizing individuals we usually store up ways of perceptually recognizing distinguishing properties of them and then use what we have stored to recognize the individuals. We typically do not do this in cases of property recognition. He says, however, that this is only a difference of degree. We can and do, he continues, identify individuals directly from their sensory appearance and sometimes do recognize properties on the basis of others.

Finally, there is a way in which beliefs attributing certain properties to a perceived object can play a role in the generation and justification of an identificatory belief but not be part of the basis of it. The belief that so-and-so is round-faced and slightly bent over may have as its basis a certain look, and that look may be sufficient not only for the property attribution but also for the subject identification. In fact, the look by which one identifies so-and-so may be sufficient for the subject identification only because it is also sufficient for the attribution of the property. But one need not have made the attribution in order to have made the identification.

Thus, concludes Alston, although background beliefs can and sometimes do function in the justification of PP-delivered beliefs, they need not do so. Furthermore, it happens less frequently than is sometimes thought. When it does happen, background beliefs typically function not as part of the basis itself but in such a way that their truth is either required for the adequacy of the justification or is negatively relevant, that is, as potential or actual overriders.

2. Christian Practice and Background Beliefs

Alston goes on to suggest that many of the roles background beliefs play in PP are alive in CP as well. Still, says Alston, it is important to be clear that, even though background beliefs are sometimes relevant in the justification of perceptually generated theistic beliefs, it remains possible that God appears to one as being \emptyset and, if he does, and that is the whole story, one is immediately justified in the belief that God is \emptyset . This point is essential for his thesis in *Perceiving God*—that direct awareness of God can provide justification for beliefs about God.

Beyond this, however, beliefs generated by CP may be partly mediately justified. Just as with PP, adequacy beliefs may be oper-

ating. In fact, in many accounts of mystical belief formation (that Alston cites), the predicates applied to God in perceptually generated beliefs go beyond what is explicitly given in the experience.¹⁰ Although positional and situational considerations have limited significance in CP, since God is not spatially located, normality assumptions can come in. One might suspect that one's supposed experience of God is being artificially induced, or the work of the devil, or caused by a nervous imbalance. But, on the other hand, there are some consequences of theistic experience that can indicate that the belief formation is a normal one. Spiritual and moral fruits, for example, might show the justificatory efficacy of theistic experience. Alston also admits that theological or metaphysical background beliefs can have parts in belief formation and justification. In none of these cases, however, as with PP and its background beliefs, do these background beliefs have to be part of the basis, even though they may play epistemically related roles of the kinds noted.

So, to answer the question with which this chapter began—do CP and PP differ on the role of background beliefs?—Alston gives a definite negative reply. Both PP and CP may sometimes have background beliefs as part of their bases, but they need not do so. If Alston is correct, then, as far as the argument of the previous chapter goes, even if there are background beliefs involved in CP, they are not epistemically important as far as distinguishing the deliverances of CP and PP are concerned. Since in neither case do background beliefs *need* to form part of the epistemic basis of the beliefs generated, it seems one cannot suggest that the deliverances of CP differ from those of PP in terms of the strength of their justification because of their background beliefs.

I find myself in disagreement with Alston on this point. Although I think a great deal of what he says about the function of background beliefs is correct, I believe he overlooks some important features of belief formations dealing with epistemically unique individuals.

To deal with the suggestion that it is not possible to recognize directly something one experiences as God, Alston writes:

10. *Ibid.*, pp. 12–20.

We should not suppose that in order to succeed in perceptually recognizing an object of perception as X (i.e., become perceptually justified in believing, or perceptually know, that the object is X), it is necessary that the object appears to one as \emptyset , where \emptyset is a property uniquely possessed by X. To perceptually recognize your house, it is not necessary that the object even display features that are *in fact* only possessed by your house, much less features that only your house *could* possess. It is enough that the object present to my experience features that, in this situation or in situations in which I generally find myself, are sufficiently indicative of (are a reliable guide to) the object's being your house. And so it is here. For me to recognize what I am aware of (X) as God, all that is necessary is that X present to me features that are in fact a reliable indication of their possessor's being God, at least in situations of the sort in which I typically find myself. It is, again, not required that these features attach only to God, still less that they be such that they can attach only to God. And it is a matter for detailed investigation what sorts of appearances satisfy that condition, just as in the case of sensorily perceived objects.¹¹

Alston takes these suggestions to reply to questions such as how could anything of which I am directly aware uniquely identify the creator of heaven and earth, an absolutely perfect being of infinite power and goodness. Such is the kind of question behind the background belief challenge to PT_A. The challenge's reply is that one cannot directly experience X as being God, since there are no properties that are both unique to God and capable of being experienced by us. The challenge's position explicitly denies the point Alston makes. Which is right?

I believe the challenge is closer to the truth. We can get at the issue here by considering a phrase in Alston's own denial, just quoted. "It is enough," says Alston, "that the object present to my experience features that, *in this situation or in situations in which I generally find myself*, are sufficiently indicative of . . . the object's being your house." Or, in the case of God, "all that is necessary is that X present to me features that are in fact a reliable indication of their possessor's being God, *at least in situations of the sort in which I typically find myself*." What are these situations? What are the features that can be sufficiently indicative of the object in question?

11. *Ibid.*, pp. 96–97.

And, furthermore, what connection is there between the situations and the features?

Let us take PP first. Earlier I suggested that PP gives us both epistemically unique individual beliefs and classificatory beliefs. But the two are not unrelated. The very means by which we classify or categorize things—their properties—are also the means by which we identify them. Alston suggests that there need not be a unique feature attached to an object by which the object can be identified. But he does not, I believe, distinguish carefully enough between what we can call kind features and unique features. Sure, Suzie's house may share kind features with other houses; they might have the same floor plan, be the same color, and have the windows placed in the same locations. But the use of the word "same" here is not, obviously, intended to pick out features at the numerically same position. The houses share the features "having such-and-such floor plan," "being pink," and "having windows in the living room, kitchen, and bedrooms." But the houses themselves occupy different spatial locations. What distinguishes the houses in fact are not the kind features—features many houses might share—but the unique features which, I suggest, turn out to be made up of a group of features best understood as a collection of kind features located at a specific spatiotemporal point. Suzie's house does have a unique property: the property of "being a pink, shuttered, . . . bungalow at Fourth and Main." Thus, not only do kind features distinguish houses from trees, rocks, and elephants, as well as one kind of house from another, but those very same features, located at a spatiotemporal point, are what make this house the unique one it is.

But Alston does not deny this. He only denies that it is necessary that the house *display* such a unique feature. Let us call the collection of kind features located at a spatiotemporal point the "collective feature." Now the question is, does one *experience* the collective feature that distinguishes Suzie's house from all others? Alston separates the situation or location information from what is experienced when perceiving Suzie's house. Perhaps this is right. Perhaps it is right because one cannot typically experience, on the basis of phenomena alone, being in New York or California.¹² But that

12. It may be possible to get this kind of belief out of experience alone. Perhaps

suggests that this information at best functions in the form of background beliefs; it is information brought to the experience and not given in it. But then Alston can admit this and say the role this information plays is that of the potential or actual overrider rather than part of the basis for the belief.

I believe, however, that it is a mistake to separate the situational information from the other features of the experience. It seems to me that the location information is not part of the belief system I have when I form the belief (on perception alone) that this is Suzie's house. Rather, it is part of the conceptual scheme I bring to the experience. I objectify the experience as Suzie's house—the pink, shuttered bungalow at Fourth and Main. At least this is true for what we might call “local situation information,” that is, spatial information that picks out where I am vis-à-vis the local geography (this neighborhood or that street) rather than the larger geography (such as New York City or California). That I am located in New York or California does seem to be part of my belief system, and when the generation of one of my beliefs requires that sort of information then clearly the belief generated is at least partly mediate. But that I am in one neighborhood rather than another, on one street rather than another, is given directly in experience and thus the identification of Suzie's house is read off the experience rather than into it via background beliefs. In the local cases no belief about neighborhoods is required, since that information is built into the conceptual scheme I bring to the experience.

Thus, as far as object identification within PP is concerned, PP can be a conceptual reading practice and Alston is correct. Although background beliefs do sometimes play a role in the generation of physical object beliefs, they need not do so. He is incorrect, however, in his claim that for one perceptually to recognize an epistemically unique object the object need not display a unique feature. It is not enough for the object to display features that, in the perceptually given situation in which I find myself, are suffi-

one sees a building or set of buildings, or certain geographic features that are unique to a certain city. But this would be the exception to the rule. You have to be in special, well-known geographic locations for this to happen—in Anaheim outside Disneyland, by the Hollywood sign, or at the Statue of Liberty, and the like. Being somewhere in a small California town or on a street in Brooklyn will not do it.

ciently indicative of the object's being the unique one I take it to be. The "perceptually given situation in which I find myself" is always a spatiotemporally unique one, and the features I perceive are sufficiently indicative of the object's being the unique one I take it to be only because I am in that spatiotemporally unique situation. But *being* in the location is not enough; that location must also be part of what is given in experience. The feature the object needs to display and, in fact, that only it can display, is the collective feature made up of certain kind features at a certain (local) spatiotemporal location. We objectify our experience in exactly these terms. PP is a conceptual-reading practice.

CP, in contrast, is arguably not a conceptual-reading practice. There is no spatiotemporally unique situation in which the believer finds herself as she experiences God. Nor, as has been argued, is there any feature of God that one can experience which could not also appear attached to other beings. Alston says that all that is necessary for one to recognize X as God is that X present to one features that are in fact a reliable indication of X's being God, at least in situations of the sort in which I typically find myself. But what might such features be that could not be duplicated by other supernatural beings? With PP, the spatiotemporal information allows for the possibility of a check against duplicability. With God, no such check exists, so the mere appearance of godlike features always leaves one with doubts, or at least with possible grounds for doubt, as to the identity of the object of the experience. PP takes care of those doubts with spatiotemporal information given in the experience.

Here we return to the difference between CP and PP noted earlier. With PP one can generate both classificatory beliefs (beliefs that result from sorting among kinds of things; see Chapter 2, Section 6) and epistemically unique individual beliefs. With CP no classificatory beliefs are generated within the practice. One need not sort out the focus of the practice from other things, since there is only one kind of thing with which the practice is concerned and only one member of the kind, God. One need not sort out God from among other things or kinds of things, since the practice has no other focus than God. And it is built into the practice itself that any features attributable to the objects of belief generated by the practice are features only that object can have. But this raises the

issue of religious plurality and the host of other practices parallel to CP, such as Jewish practice, Muslim practice, and the like. What is to keep one of these other gods from appearing to me with the same properties of the Christian god? There is no spatiotemporal grid that can help, and the background belief challenge seems to stand. There need to be unique properties that can be experienced, and there are none as far as God is concerned.

To generate the belief that the object of my experience is God, that is, the god of Christianity rather than one of the others, I must bring background information to the experience. But this, unlike local situation information, is not something that is read off the experience; it is not part of my conceptual scheme. It is, instead, substantive information I use to read the experience. Is it part of the basis of my belief? This is a difficult question. Let us answer an easier question first. Need the information be part of a conscious inference? No, and this is where noninferential mediated practices come in. We might have an experience to which we bring both our conceptual scheme and our substantive beliefs and yet objectify our experience directly into language contained in the combination of the two. A noninferential mediated practice is just what its name suggest, noninferential even though the justification is mediated through beliefs and not just conceptual schemes. Are beliefs delivered by CP, therefore, partly immediately based and partly mediated based? No, not if what is meant by the latter is that a conscious inference is involved. Are the beliefs part of the basis? No, not if what is meant is conscious inference; but yes, if what is meant is that, unless I hold the beliefs, the justification does not go through. And it will not do simply for the beliefs to be true. They must be part of my noetic framework. The reason is that the information in the beliefs is needed for the objectification to go through, and this is not just a matter of justification but of getting the belief itself generated.

There is more to be said about the position of background beliefs in CP and their epistemic importance. Nevertheless, enough has been said to begin to evaluate my tentative suggestion that CP has a special place for background beliefs that PP fails to have and thus that PT_A is not true. If I am right in the argument of this section, then CP and PP do differ on the function of background beliefs. And if this role is epistemically important, as I suggested in

Chapter 2, then PT_A is not true. But there are some potential responses and rejoinders to the account as presented thus far, and we can consider them now.

3. A Potential Response and Rejoinder

Perhaps Alston could attempt to circumvent this challenge by suggesting that in fact one need not use background *beliefs* in the formation and justification of theistic beliefs. Instead he might suggest an understanding of experience in which the needed interpretive structures and concepts are part of the experience itself. Such an approach to mystical experiences is uncovered and discussed by J. William Forgie.

After discussing several “hyper-Kantian” interpreters of mystical experience, Forgie writes:

The picture these writers present seems so far a familiar one. For Kant, experience is a compound, a product of sensory intuitions filtered, as it were, through *a priori* concepts. . . . But as we will see, this “rival” view is really [not just Kantian but] hyper-Kantian in at least two respects:

(1) First, for Kant the *a priori* concepts, the categories, are twelve in number and are shared by all mankind. And they are inescapable. Human beings must experience the world in terms of cause and effect, and substance and attribute, if they are to experience it at all. . . . But the rival view extends an experience-shaping role to concepts and beliefs which vary from one culture—more pertinently, one religious tradition—to another. Mystical or religious experiences are partially determined or shaped by concepts and beliefs that are peculiar to the particular religious tradition of the one having the experience. Let us call these elements which shape experience, but are not categories, “category-analogues.”

(2) Second, experience for Kant is, very roughly speaking, essentially judgemental; having experience is inseparable from making judgements about it. The categories “shape” experience by determining that those judgements will take certain forms. They do not contribute to the phenomenological content of the experiences they shape. . . . [However,] category-analogues shape experience by partially determining its phenomenological content.¹³

13. J. William Forgie, “Hyper-Kantianism in Recent Discussions of Mystical Experience,” *Religious Studies* 21 (1985): 205–18, quotation p. 208.

According to the hyper-Kantians, mystical experiences are a result of “category-analogues” and “experiential input” working together so that one cannot, legitimately, separate the two. The phenomenological content of an experience is a hybrid of category-analogues and other sensory (or sensory like) input. Further, unlike Kant’s understanding of experience, according to which all humans share the same categorical structure and hence have the same experience, mystical experiences are different from one another because our category-analogue structures are different.

Forgie goes on to argue that, if the hyper-Kantian understanding of mystical experience is plausible, it carries with it “sceptical implications about one sort of evidential value mystical experiences are sometimes thought to have.”¹⁴ He has in mind here the presumption of veridicality typically given to sensory experience and often extended to mystical experience, namely, that barring special circumstances, what one *seems* to experience *is* what one experiences—that one’s experiences are, barring special circumstances, accurate.

Although this presumption of veridicality seems to be true for ordinary sensory experiences, it is not true for hyper-Kantian experiences, whether sensory or mystical. Forgie suggests that the presumption of veridicality is not upset by the Kantian categories, but it is by the category-analogues. “Suppose I am in the presence of a supernatural being who acts on some appropriate ‘faculty’ of mine. During this encounter certain sensory or super-sensory input gets mixed with input from the category-analogues, with the result that I have an experience in which it appears that I am confronting a personal and loving being.”¹⁵ Now, further suppose that the sufficient cause of my experience of those characteristics is the category-analogues. After ruling out certain potential confusions about what this picture entails, Forgie goes on to argue that the hyper-Kantian explanation rules out the presumption of veridicality.

At least that is what we would say in a sense perceptual case. Suppose one sees the arches in a cathedral as Gothic because of a category-analogue, when the arches are actually Romanesque. Before discovering the existence of the category-analogue, one would follow our usual rule suggested by the presumption of veridicality:

14. *Ibid.*, p. 205.

15. *Ibid.*, p. 216.

what one sees is what is there to see. But once discovering the causal role of the category-analogues, the presumption of veridicality is no longer granted epistemic weight. In like manner, if we have an experience of a personal and loving being and the experience of the characteristics is caused by category-analogues and we know this, then the experience loses its presumption of veridicality—unless the category-analogues are epistemically justified. But how could they be? Our categories need no justification, at least not in a straightforwardly epistemic sense, since they are what make experience possible. Furthermore, the categories seem not to be the kind of thing that could be justified. Likewise, it seems, with category-analogues. With the latter, however, we do not need them for experience to be possible. So why trust them to give us veridical beliefs—unless the content of the category-analogues could be understood in some other way, perhaps as beliefs? But this is what Alston needs to avoid.

If this argument is correct, the hyper-Kantian understanding of theistic experience removes any presumption in favor of the experience's veridicality. We can therefore conclude that, insofar as Alston might attempt to use a hyper-Kantian approach to defend his objectification account of theistic experience, there is little if any presumption in favor of the veridicality of the resulting experience. Barring other special circumstances or conditions that make it reasonable to take the experience as veridical, theistic beliefs formed via hyper-Kantian experience do not have the same epistemic status as the deliverances of PP.¹⁶ Thus this potential rejoinder is not successful.

4. A Second Response and Rejoinder

A second rejoinder to the background belief challenge can be found in Alston's own work. Alston argues that

16. One might suggest that this is merely another version of what Alston already rules out, namely, that challenge that calls attention to the lack of universal objectification of experience. Although nearly everyone uses PP, not everyone uses CP. But a moment's thought shows that the hyper-Kantian challenge rests on different grounds, grounds accepted by all in the case of PP. If we reject *instances* of the employment of PP because of hyper-Kantianism, we should surely reject *instances* of CP because of hyper-Kantianism—unless there are special reasons not to. But it is difficult to see what those reasons might be in this case.

even if an individual's account of the phenomenology of his/her own experience is not infallible, it must certainly be taken seriously. Who is in a better position to determine whether S [the person purporting to have theistic experiences] is having an experience as of something's presenting itself to S as \emptyset than S? Thus we would need strong reasons to override the subject's confident report of the character of her experience. And where could we find such reasons? I suspect that most people who put forward . . . alternative diagnoses do so because they have general philosophical reasons for supposing either that God does not exist or that no human being could perceive Him, and they fail to recognize the difference between a *phenomenological* account of object presentation, and the occurrence of veridical perception. In any event, once we get straight about all this, I can not see any reason for doubting the subjects' accounts of the character of their experiences, whatever reasons there may be for doubting that God Himself does in fact appear to them.¹⁷

I have been careful to distinguish between the question of veridicality and the question about the object of the experience. Furthermore, the point of my argument is to deny Alston's claim that there is no reason for doubting the subjects' accounts. On the phenomenological level, I have suggested, one does have at least some reason to be suspicious of the subjects' characterization of their experiences as being of God.

My argument is based on an analysis of what can be given phenomenologically in the experience. There is never a direct, conceptual-reading experience that is phenomenologically of God or any other epistemically unique person. Belief formations involving epistemically unique individuals always involve a role for background beliefs or for spatiotemporal information given in the experience. This is true whether the belief formation is inferential or not. But the only things we can experience as having the requisite kind of spatiotemporal location are physical objects, and those, for the most part, only of a certain class—those without intentionality and free will that gives them the ability to move around (i.e., any physical thing that is neither a human nor a nonhuman animal). Thus one cannot experience phenomenologically a uniquely instantiable property or any property that is guaranteed phenomenologically to identify an epistemically unique individual where

17. Alston, "Experience of God," p. 7.

that individual does not have what we can call "spatiotemporal rootedness."

Alston claims that the subjects' accounts do exactly what I have argued they cannot do legitimately:

If our cases are to conform to our account of perceptual consciousness, they must (phenomenologically) involve God's appearing to their awareness as being and/or doing so-and-so. And so our subjects do tell us. God is experienced as good, powerful, loving, compassionate, and as exhibiting "plentitude." He is experienced as speaking, forgiving, comforting, and strengthening. And yet how can these be ways in which God presents Himself to experience? Power and goodness are complex dispositional properties or bases thereof, dispositions to act in various ways in various situations. And to forgive or to strengthen someone is to carry out a certain intention. None of this can be read off the phenomenal surface of experience. This is quite different from something's presenting itself to one's sensory consciousness as red, round, sweet, loud, or pungent. Isn't it rather that the subject is *interpreting*, or *taking*, what she is aware of as being good or powerful, as forgiving or strengthening? But then what is God *experienced* as being or doing?¹⁸

Alston considers this issue in his "Perception of God,"¹⁹ but he summarizes his argument briefly in the essay just quoted:

The basic point is that we have different sorts of concepts for specifying how something looks, sounds, tastes, or otherwise perceptually appears. There are *phenomenal* concepts that specify the phenomenal qualia that objects present themselves as bearing—round, red, acrid, etc. But there are also *comparative* concepts that specify a mode of appearance in terms of the sort of objective thing, event, property or whatever, that typically (normally . . .) appears in that way. In reporting sensory appearances we typically use comparative concepts whenever the appearance involves something more complex than one or two basic phenomenal qualities. Thus we say, "She looks like Susie," "It tastes like a pineapple," "It sounds like Bach." There undoubtedly is in these cases some complex pattern of simple phenomenal qualia, but it is usually beyond our powers to analyze the appearance into its simple components. And so we are typically thrown back on the use of comparative concepts to report how

18. Ibid.

19. Alston, "The Perception of God," *Philosophical Topics* 16 (1988): 23–52.

something looks, tastes. . . . And so it is in our religious cases. Our subjects were telling us God presented Himself to their experience as a good, powerful, compassionate, forgiving being could be expected to appear. And so in reporting modes of appearance in the way they do they are proceeding just as we do in reporting modes of sensory appearance.²⁰

One might attempt to use these claims in reply to the background belief challenge to PT_A . One might say, for example, that one has a complex concept of God, and that phenomenologically describing what one perceives when engaging in CP does not involve appeal to background information or beliefs but only to the concept. I believe, however, that Alston's suggestions cannot be used in response to the points of my analysis. Suppose that we grant Alston his distinction between phenomenal and comparative concepts and we further grant him the point that we use phenomenal concepts in cases of simple identifications and comparative concepts in cases of complex identifications—those cases in which there is a need for specifying a “mode of appearance in terms of the *sort* of objective thing.” But identifying a sort of thing—a house, car, person—is not the same as identifying an individual thing. In identifying Suzie's house, Tom versus Tim Tibbitts, and God, we are identifying what I have called epistemically unique individuals, not sorts. So, although we do make claims such as “It looks like Suzie's house” or “It looks like Tom,” these kinds of appeals are not, I suggest, comparing one's present experience to concepts of other houses or people but to one's memory of an earlier (or imagined) experience of the epistemically unique individual person or thing.

But there are two kinds of case with which we need to concern ourselves: cases where the object involved is spatiotemporally rooted and cases where the object is not. In both cases memory is important, since we must be “introduced” to the object. In the case of spatiotemporally rooted objects, the introduction can be done simply by our experiencing, for the first time, the object qua the object-at-this-location (or by “experiencing” the object in our mind's eye as someone describes the object-at-such-and-such-location). We then use the local situation information, now “locked

20. Alston, “Experience of God,” pp. 7–8.

into” our conceptual scheme, to form beliefs about the epistemically unique object when we reidentify it. Here memory functions only in the sense that the spatiotemporal information becomes part of our conceptual scheme.

In the other case, there is no information we can “lock in” that uniquely picks out, when taken together with the nonspatiotemporal features, the object in question. Thus there is always an appeal, conscious or not, back to our initial introduction, whether the introduction is a literal one—say, by the human person we are meeting or by a mutual acquaintance—or some other kind of introduction, such as when we meet an animal and give it a name or otherwise identify it.²¹ But, in these cases, when we reidentify the person or animal we must appeal to background beliefs, since there is not sufficient information in our conceptual schemes. And the phenomenological information given in our reidentificatory experiences is never enough to identify them, even when we do remember “what they look like.” The possibility of mistaken identity is a live one, since any feature this person has is a feature she may share with someone else, at least as far as experience alone goes.

Thus, in this second class of cases, to identify an epistemically unique spatiotemporally nonrooted individual, we must have background information of a substantial sort such as “Tim is out of town.” Unlike the concept of house or person—(comparative) sortal concepts—which can be applied successfully in totally new situations, concepts of epistemically unique individuals cannot be. The phenomena themselves, even when the perceiver has a fully developed conceptual framework, cannot do it. To identify an epistemically unique spatiotemporally nonrooted individual, in short, we must appeal to information other than mere concepts, even if they are comparative concepts. So there are three kinds of complex

21. There is, perhaps, a kind of continuum involved with spatiotemporal rootedness. A tree is more or less permanently fixed, a house likewise. But animals are not. Some of them, however, are caged, corraled, or otherwise fixed and thus have a somewhat stationary location. Other animals are not and are free to go where they please, barring physical obstacles. Humans, along with certain birds and sea creatures, are perhaps at the high end of this scale with the least fixed location, unless jailed, kept in zoos, or otherwise constrained. God, being nonspatial altogether, is the paradigm case of an object that is not spatiotemporally rooted.

identifications, one in which comparative concepts are used to identify a sort of thing, one in which local spatiotemporal concepts (initially created in the perceiver in his or her first real or imagined experience of the object) are used to identify an epistemically unique but spatiotemporally rooted individual, and one in which beliefs are used to identify and reidentify an epistemically unique but spatiotemporally nonrooted individual. Alston does not distinguish among these three.

Alston is right in calling attention to the distinction between simple and complex cases of perceptual identification, but this does nothing to explain how, in the cases of complex individual identification, we identify the object of the perception. Everything in my argument could be true even if Alston's basic distinction is a good one: totaling all the experienced qualia does not give us conclusive grounds for the individual identification, except in cases of spatiotemporally rooted individuals.

If the arguments of this and the preceding chapter are correct, some questions about PP and CP still need to be answered, along with questions about J_{nw} . Is Alston's notion of J_{nw} finely tuned enough? Is there not a difference between a practice that supplies us with conceptual-reading beliefs and one that provides us with non-inferential mediated beliefs? And does this difference not give us some cause for concern about whether CP, since it does appear to rely on background beliefs, is as epistemically secure as PP? Now, if this difference is a reason to question CP's epistemic strength as compared to PP's, then PT_A fails. But at this stage all that is safe to conclude is that J_{nw} is too broad a category and therefore stands in need of further refinement.