



## Abstract of Comments: Abnormal Experience and Abnormal Belief

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## ABSTRACT OF COMMENTS

### *Abnormal Experience and Abnormal Belief*

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The core of Professor Alston's argument may be represented as follows:

(1) Let 'PP' stand for the complex of habits and procedures that comes into play when we form beliefs about physical environment on the basis of sensory experience. The strongest sense in which PP may be said to be "justified" is this: there is no known (compelling) reason to suppose that PP is unreliable. PP is *not* justified in the following sense: there is some known (compelling) reason to suppose that PP *is* reliable.

(2) Let 'CP' stand for the complex of habits and procedures that comes into play when Christians form beliefs about God's activities on the basis of sensory or religious experience. (The part of CP that deals with ordinary sensory experience is presumed to coincide with PP.) Like PP, CP is *not* justified in the following sense: there is some known (compelling) reason to suppose that it *is* reliable.

(3) If there is some known compelling reason to suppose that CP is *not* reliable, this reason will appeal essentially to certain well-known differences between CP and PP. (At any rate, all reasons that anyone has ever given make such an appeal.) These differences center around the fact that PP prescribes standard ways of checking the veridicality of particular sensory episodes and the (alleged) fact that the prescriptions of PP are followed by all normal adults of every age and clime.

(4) These differences, however, do not constitute a reason for supposing that CP is unreliable that is so *obviously* compelling that no *argument* is required to show that they constitute a compelling reason for supposing that CP is unreliable. Indeed it is far from clear initially whether they provide us with any sort of reason for supposing this.

(5) It can be shown that the commonly cited differences between PP and CP provide no reason for supposing CP to be unreliable. To see this, consider the following story about how the world might (for all we know) be: “God exists and is so ‘wholly other’ that we can only dimly grasp his nature and can discover no ‘regularities’ on the basis of religious experiences. He decrees that religious experiences will be comparatively rare, owing to the fact that they are reserved for very special people in very special circumstances. Nonetheless, people who do have these experiences experience God and come to known truths about him thereby.” This story entails *both* that religious experiences are (sometimes) veridical and that these experiences differ from sense experience in the ways commonly cited. Since no one has ever given any good reason for supposing that this story is false, no one has any reason for supposing that the commonly cited differences between CP and PP are a compelling reason for supposing CP to be unreliable. And, therefore, CP is justified in the only sense in which PP is justified: there is no known compelling reason for supposing it to be unreliable.

There are various ways one might react to this argument. One reaction I anticipate from those who believe that religious belief *must* be somehow irrational could be put like this: “Any reasonably coherent group of people who acquire abnormal beliefs on the basis of abnormal experiences will have standard ways of deciding whether particular instances of such experience are veridical. Take, for example, a circle of flying-saucer enthusiasts who believe that they are in telepathic contact with the representatives of an advanced extra-terrestrial species who reveal the secrets of the universe to them. If Alston’s arguments were right, such lunatics as these might be as justified in their abnormal beliefs as we are in our ordinary perceptual beliefs.” I shall defend Alston against this charge by arguing for the thesis that, depending on how the details of the story of the flying-saucer enthusiasts are filled in, these people may well be justified in their abnormal beliefs, in every sense in which we are justified in our ordinary perceptual beliefs. I shall also try to determine the force of a contention that Alston does not explicitly consider: that while PP has no rivals, CP has many (Islamic practice, Hindu practice, etc.).