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A problem with Alston's indirect analogy-argument from religious experience

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Abstract: **In this paper, William Alston's argument from religious experience in *Perceiving God* is characterized and assessed as an indirect analogy-argument. Such arguments, I propose, should establish two similarities between sense perception (SP) and religious experience (CMP): a structural and a functional. I argue that Alston neglects functional similarity, and that SP and CMP actually perform different functions within the practices they belong to. Alston's argument is therefore significantly weaker than generally assumed. Finally, I argue that regardless of whether an increased emphasis on fruits could strengthen indirect analogy-arguments or not, this is not a strategy available to Alston as long as he retains his commitments to religious exclusivism and a religious metaphysical realism.**

Fifteen years after its publication, and more than twenty-five years after its basic ideas were first introduced, *Perceiving God* remains one of the most read and discussed works in contemporary philosophy of religion.[1] Despite a number of criticisms put forward over the years, most recently by Nick Zangwill and Ronald Johnson in this journal, my experience, for what it is worth, is that Alston's basic argument from religious experience enjoys widespread support – more widespread than the Reformed approach with which it is affiliated (Zangwill 2004, Johnson 2004). For those of us who are still unconvinced, this means that much work remains to be done.

In this paper, I interpret and assess William Alston's argument from religious experience in *Perceiving God* as an *indirect analogy-argument*. Analogy-arguments in general are arguments that seek to establish epistemically relevant similarities between experiences or modes of experiencing. Indirect analogy-arguments, as I shall understand them, derive their force from two points of analogy between religious experience and sense perception: a structural similarity between the perceptual practices, and a functional similarity between

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the logical roles the two perceptual practices play within the wider spheres of practice in which they are embedded. When considered from this perspective it is, I shall argue, fairly clear that Alston pretty successfully establishes the former analogy, but fails to establish the latter.

This becomes clear once we see that one important reason why we trust sense perception is that it has a critical function with regard to received opinion within everyday life and science, and frequently forces us to reconstruct our beliefs, while in religious settings, numinous experience is confined to the task of simply confirming received opinion. I shall argue that this difference is more epistemically significant than Alston thinks, because it shows that the two perceptual practices do not play a similar logical role in relation to the wider spheres of practice to which they belong. Towards the end of the paper, I raise the question as to whether an increased emphasis on fruits as a criterion of veridicality/reliability could salvage indirect analogy-arguments. To some extent I think it may, but such a move creates difficulties of its own for Alston's position, especially with regard to his standpoints on religious realism and religious pluralism. Thus, if my criticism is convincing, it shows that Alston's position needs reconstruction.

The background for Alston's indirect analogy-argument

The main contours of Alston's argument in *Perceiving God* are probably familiar to most readers that still bear with me, so a selective presentation should suffice. Alston presents us with a picture of human belief-formation as set in a number of socially established *doxastic practices*. Doxastic practices are individuated according to the input they deal with and 'the functions that make up the constituent mechanisms' (157). The doxastic practice with which we are most familiar is sense perception (SP), where several different sense organs (with rather similar ways of functioning) process physical stimuli from the environment (i.e. roughly similar kinds of input), and the result (output) is beliefs about our physical surroundings. As a rule, doxastic practices have a pre-reflective genesis: we *find* ourselves using them to orient ourselves and regulate behaviour, and we also have an initial attitude of trust towards them.

However, doxastic practices are not made up solely by the belief-forming mechanisms referred to above; they 'also involve distinctive ways of assessing and correcting the beliefs so formed' (158). These constitute the practice's *overrider system*. Each doxastic practice has, according to Alston, a practice-specific set of checks and tests that can lead us to call into question certain beliefs generated within the practice. These checks and tests have developed at least in part because doxastic practices are closely related to 'wider spheres of practice', where we act on them and thus put them to the test. SP, for instance, is 'part and

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parcel of our ways of interacting with the physical and social environments', and accordingly, 'it could not be abandoned or changed without a corresponding shift in the ways we respond to things and people about us' (169). This also means that it has not developed in a vacuum, but in the context of everyday interaction with the environment.

More controversially, Alston extends his doxastic-practice approach to religious experience, and tentatively sketches the contours of a mainstream Christian doxastic practice that he terms Christian mystical perception (CMP).[2] For his purposes, Alston limits attention to cases of alleged non-sensory perception of God. I shall refer to such experiences as *numinous experiences*.[3] CMP takes people's numinous experiences as input, and its output is beliefs about God: God's actions, will, current attitude towards us and others, and so on. As such, it appears to offer substantial support for a large number of traditional Christian beliefs about God, including that God really exists. As regards the matter of checks and tests, Alston is eager to point out that CMP has its own specific overrider system, of which he asserts that CMP 'takes the Bible, the ecumenical councils of the undivided church, Christian experience through the ages, Christian thought, and more generally the Christian tradition as normative sources of its overrider system' (224). These sources offer two main requirements for numinous experiences to be considered valid: conformity to orthodox doctrine (thus passing what I henceforth shall call *the doctrine test*) and good consequences (fruits) for the subject (thus passing *the fruits test*). Note that although both tests are important, the doctrine test has a certain primacy, because it is from orthodox doctrine that we derive the accounts of fruits ('of the spirit' for example) that underlie the fruits tests. That is: to know what the fruits of a particular tradition should be, we need to be acquainted with the tradition in question.[4]

Of course, where justification is concerned, it is insufficient to establish that CMP exists; the crucial question is rather: is it reliable? Alston understands reliability of doxastic practices thus: 'a doxastic practice is reliable provided it would yield mostly true beliefs in a sufficiently large and varied run of employments in situations of the sorts we typically encounter' (104f., Alston's emphasis omitted). Many philosophers have argued that we should distrust CMP until we have gathered sufficient independent evidence for its reliability, that is, evidence which does not itself presuppose the reliability of CMP. Alston responds with the claim that *no* doxastic practice can be established on the basis of doxastic-practice-independent evidence. Understanding 'independent' to mean 'non-circular', Alston examines different philosophical arguments intended to give non-circular evidence for the reliability of SP, and after a lengthy discussion, the details of which need not detain us here, he concludes that none is successful. Upon examination, all the arguments turn out to be either unconvincing and/or viciously circular, which means that even SP lacks the kind of independent support sceptics demand of CMP (chapter 3). We have every reason to assume

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that other, less firmly established doxastic practices, such as CMP, face a similar predicament.

Alston is quick to remind us that practically and psychologically, scepticism would be an unreasonable response to this lack of foundations: 'In the press of life we are continuously forming beliefs about the physical environment, other people, how things are likely to turn out, and so on, whether we will or no' (150). Also, to give up SP would, in effect, mean giving up life – without it, we would have no chance of achieving our purposes or secure survival. Accordingly, he suggests that the most reasonable response to the lack of independent evidence for the reliability of a firmly established doxastic practice like SP is to continue to consider it reliable until we have evidence for its unreliability: 'What alternative is there to employing the practices we find ourselves using, to which we find ourselves firmly committed, and which we could abandon or replace only with extreme difficulty if at all?' (150). Fully fledged socially established doxastic practices should thus be considered reliable until proven guilty, that is, unreliable.[5]

Alston's approach may look extremely permissive: any mode of belief-formation which qualifies as a doxastic practice should be considered reliable. However, the permissiveness is limited, first, by the very criteria for qualifying as a doxastic practice (especially the requirement of being socially established), and second, by certain practice-independent requirements. To count as reliable, a doxastic practice's output must not contain massive and persistent inconsistencies, and its output should not conflict with that of other, more firmly established, doxastic practices. A doxastic practice that fails to meet the requirements needs revision (or 'purification'), and may ultimately have to be rejected (170ff).

The argument for the reliability of CMP

Alston concludes that 'CMP is rationally engaged in since it is a socially established doxastic practice that is not demonstrably unreliable or otherwise disqualified for rational acceptance' (194). That is to say, CMP meets all the requirements Alston set up for qualifying as a reliable doxastic practice. In addition, Alston points out that CMP, like SP, enjoys what Alston calls *significant self-support*, 'by the way in which spiritual development constitutes a fulfillment of promises that, in the practice, we come to believe are made by God' (253).[6] People who engage in CMP develop spiritually in the direction that the Christian tradition predicts, a prediction that in part is based on CMP's output. These two claims (that CMP qualifies as a doxastic practice and that it, just like SP, enjoys significant self-support) together comprise Alston's analogy-argument from religious experience.

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Alston's argument is rather far removed from the traditional analogy-arguments that philosophers like Richard Swinburne and Keith Yandell have put forward, where numinous experiences are more directly subordinated to the checks and tests of SP, or at least checks and tests derived from SP (Swinburne (1979), Yandell (1993)). Still, Alston cannot do without comparisons with SP, since it is SP which provides the standard against which CMP is measured. SP is, after all, the paradigm example of a doxastic practice that it is rational to consider reliable, and comparisons between SP and CMP are inevitable. To capture the difference between these two ways of drawing on SP to construct an analogy-argument from religious experience, I want to propose that we categorize Alston's argument as an *indirect*, rather than *direct*, analogy-argument. Let us look at how he characterizes his own argument:

> Any argument from analogy depends on certain points of resemblance and not on others. The analogies between CMP and SP that are needed to yield the conclusion that CMP is rationally engaged in and rationally taken to be reliable if SP is, are the ones just noted: being a full-fledged socially established doxastic practice with distinctive input-output functions, having a functioning overrider system, the lack of sufficient reasons to take the practice as unreliable, and a significant degree of self-support. … If these analogies hold, then CMP enjoys basically the same epistemic status as SP, though it may well be less firmly established, less informative, and its output may well enjoy a lesser degree of justification. (174)

To ask for more is to commit the mistake Alston labels 'epistemic imperialism': to expect that every reliable doxastic practice uses or should use very similar checks and tests to evaluate perceptual claims (199).

The reason for characterizing Alston's argument as indirect is that it involves no direct comparisons between instances of sense perception and numinous experience, but rather reflections on the general characteristics of reliable doxastic practices. The comparison of sense perception and numinous experience thus becomes a comparison of two autonomous modes of perception from the perspective of a more general approach. To say that the argument is an indirect analogy-argument is to acknowledge that it retains, as already mentioned, a comparison between SP and CMP, and the strength of the argument depends on whether the relevant similarities can be established or not. I ask the reader to keep this characterization in mind as I now turn to a critical examination of Alston's argument.

The shortcoming of Alston's indirect analogy-argument

The most significant problem with direct analogy-arguments is their inability to show that numinous experiences actually *pass* the checks and tests suited for sense perceptual claims. Swinburne, for instance, repeatedly confuses 'passing a test' with 'not being a proper candidate for a test' (e.g. Gale (1991), 318).

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From an epistemic point of view, the confusion makes all the difference, because you can reasonably argue that unless we know how to use the relevant checks and tests, it will be virtually impossible to distinguish between veridical and unveridical numinous experiences. That, in turn, means that it is inappropriate to apply Swinburne's principle of credulity (stating that in the absence of evidence to the contrary, it is rational to believe that things are the way they appear to be) to numinous experiences.[7]

Alston's indirect analogy-argument is superior to Swinburne's in this respect, because it avoids the embarrassing attempts to apply the checks and tests of sense perception to numinous experiences. Those attempts are, according to Alston, simply misguided. Here, Alston's doxastic-practice approach to epistemology helps him avoid several standard objections to analogy-arguments. However, his argument has problems of its own.

According to Alston, every doxastic practice rests on certain basic presuppositions which are such that 'we couldn't engage in [the doxastic practice] without at least tacitly accepting those propositions' (although *pace* his reading of Wittgenstein, Alston thinks that they can sensibly be questioned) (164). SP presupposes 'the existence of physical objects and the general reliability of sense perception', while CMP presupposes 'the existence of [the Christian] God and the reliability of this way [that is, CMP] of forming beliefs' (164, 188). The similarity of the basic presuppositions of SP and CMP seem to further strengthen Alston's analogy-argument. But not so fast! The presuppositions are actually importantly different.

First, within SP, we can always learn that a particular physical object did not really have the properties we thought it had. Through experiment and observation, we can learn that we had previously been mistaken about some aspects of physical reality. In fact, this happens all the time in everyday life and science. I may be convinced that Stella is a really mean person. However, when forced to interact with her, I learn that she is actually quite nice, and that her tendency to sometimes appear nasty is a result of her low self-esteem. Can we, in an analogous way, learn that we had previously been mistaken about spiritual reality, that is, God? How is that supposed to happen? It looks more or less impossible given the prominent role of orthodox doctrine in religious thought.

Second, let me raise a question: does SP really presuppose the existence of physical objects? In a way it does, because if there were no physical objects, there would exist no people to use SP, and no sense organs either. However, that does not establish any relevant similarity between the ways in which SP and CMP presuppose the existence of physical objects and God respectively. If we disregard this type of dependency, SP could actually force us to conclude that all physical objects had vanished. Needless to say, we would initially grope for alternative explanations of why we no longer perceive physical objects. But at a certain point, we would simply be forced to conclude that all physical objects had actually

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vanished (it makes no difference for this thought-experiment that we could not possibly survive long enough to draw that conclusion). However, if people were to stop having numinous experiences, would that lead us to the conclusion that there is no God? Maybe, but it would not be CMP that led us to that conclusion in the sense that SP could lead us to the conclusion that there are no physical objects. So the problem is not only that CMP cannot teach us that there is no God, but also that CMP cannot but confirm that God exists and has the properties we already think God has. Anything else ceases to count as part of CMP. I think the difference between SP and CMP that these observations reveal is highly relevant for our evaluation of Alston's analogy-argument. Let me explain.

I have already stipulated that successful indirect analogy-arguments from religious experience need to establish two similarities between SP and CMP: a structural similarity and a functional similarity. The structural similarity, which is at the centre of Alston's attention, is necessary to establish that CMP is a fully fledged doxastic practice: that it has its distinct form of input, and that this input is processed and scrutinized to produce an output in the form of beliefs. But here, I wish to focus on the functional similarity, which, as we have already seen, is significantly smaller than Alston thinks.

I would suggest that the two dissimilarities between SP and CMP that I have pointed to above have a common source: in CMP, received opinion about the object of perception plays a much more prominent role within the overrider system than it does in SP. Any experience that does not accord well with, and thus confirm, the Christian image of God, fails to qualify as a numinous experience at all, or, if it does, it is deemed unveridical on the grounds that the subject was confused or even hallucinating, and that it thus was no reliable encounter with the Christian God in the first place. As a consequence, CMP has a very limited, possibly nonexistent, critical function in relation to the 'wider spheres of practice' to which it belongs. SP, on the other hand, has the potential, sometimes realized, to force us to revise our beliefs about some object of perception, and even about physical reality as a whole. As a consequence, it can also force us to reconstruct the wider sphere of practice that it belongs to in a wholly different way than CMP can.

Alston is partially aware of this difference, although I would say that he underestimates its importance. He offers two responses to neutralize it. First, he notes that CMP to a lesser degree than SP is a source of new information. Here, Alston distinguishes only two types of new information: information that comprises 'a net addition' to 'the perceiver's prior stock of beliefs', and information about 'what one already knows or believes, save for updating' (206). He argues that CMP supplies us with both; it informs us about God's present standing towards the perceiver, but it also gives us an update on what we already believe about God (206f.). Hence, he argues that the differences between SP and CMP are smaller than most critics have assumed. However, more important is the kind of

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new information, or novelty, that Alston neglects to discuss: that which comprises a challenge to, or even a correction of, what we already thought we knew, information which is more than just an extrapolation from beliefs we already accept (which is what I suspect the 'new information' that Alston finds in CMP comes down to at the end of the day). The problem remains, that unless an experience within CMP conforms very closely to what we already expected, we will distrust that experience (rather than received opinion), and no amount of further information can alter that. Hence, CMP works in a way which systematically excludes the possibility of new information that challenges or corrects received opinion.

It will not help to appeal, at this point, to the fact that the doctrines used to assess numinous experiences partially have their origin in the output of CMP. Besides the fact that this may be a dubious empirical claim, it does not remedy the difference between CMP and SP as they function presently: in SP, received opinion has not, as in CMP, been allowed to take the status of unquestionable dogma.

Alston's second response is one that he uses frequently: because of the significant differences between the nature of SP's and CMP's objects of perception, it is only to be expected that CMP will provide less information, and that the information is more obscure (219). Correct as this point may be, it is of limited value to Alston: after all, it is up to him to show us that there are good reasons for accepting CMP as a reliable doxastic practice. Explaining *why* CMP will always fail to resemble SP in epistemically relevant respects does not alter the fact that CMP fails to resemble SP. Besides, there is nothing in the scarcity and obscurity of the information obtained in CMP that, in itself, rules out novelty, if CMP had been open to it in the first place. In all, this line of response does not look very promising.

The obvious response

There is, however, another obvious response readily available to Alston: to reject my claim that a convincing indirect analogy-argument needs both the structural and the functional similarity. After all, why is structural similarity not enough? Well, to see that, we need to attend closer to the question: *why do we trust sense perception?* What is it about it that gives it a privileged epistemic status? The question is important because the answer(s) to it tells us something about what it is CMP should aspire to.

Alston presents us with two answers: first, a *psychological answer*, saying that sense perception presses itself upon us and we cannot choose not to trust it, and second, the *doxastic-practice answer*, according to which sense perception is part and parcel of a set of practices that, as far as we can see, function well, practices from which it derives its positive epistemic status.

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The psychological answer indicates that trusting sense perception is not something we choose to do, but also that it is not something that we could choose not to. But the latter claim is dubious. If called for, we could very well develop habits of belief-formation to adjust for 'mistakes' (like we do with the famous stick that looks broken when immersed in water). The same point can be made with reference to people with double vision. A person who sees everything double does not form the belief that there are two identical persons in front of her; her mode of belief formation is adjusted to the knowledge that she tends to see things double. So clearly, it is possible to develop critical attitudes towards instances of sense perception. The fact that we normally cannot help trusting sense perception is not so much a psychological law, as it is a result of habits developed and sustained in the absence of reasons for mistrusting sense perception under normal conditions.

The doxastic-practice answer is more promising. According to it, we trust sense perception because it is part and parcel of a set of practices that function well together, a set of practices it appears impossible to do without. These practices are constituted by all the ways in which we interact with, talk about, and so on, the physical environment. But this picture is somewhat incomplete, because it says nothing of the *special* role that SP has, and the contribution it makes to the wider sphere of practice to which it belongs. I want to suggest that we trust SP not only because it is part of a wider sphere of practice, but also because it is a corrective to that wider sphere of practice, to which it thus makes independent contributions. SP's output continually makes us adjust our behaviour towards our physical surroundings. Hence, it is not merely a question of SP harmonizing with, and receiving support from, the wider sphere of practice to which it belongs; it is equally the case that SP offers support for this wider sphere of practice.

It may appear as if CMP does the same. But unlike CMP, SP's support is not of the kind that simply confirms what we already thought we knew; instead, its support comes to an equal degree from its critical potential, its ability to function as a corrective to currently accepted belief. This critical edge offers the beliefs which we see no ground to question a positive epistemic status which is 'higher' than it would be if SP could not call them into question, but only confirm them. It is this 'higher' positive epistemic status that religious beliefs cannot aspire to, as long as CMP's function is limited to that of merely confirming received opinion. The functional dissimilarity between SP and CMP thus weakens Alston's argument more than he thinks.

This explains my stress on functional similarity as an important element of any successful indirect analogy-argument: without it, religious beliefs supported by CMP cannot aspire to the same level of positive epistemic status that beliefs supported by SP can.[8] Since Alston fails to establish that there is a functional similarity between SP and CMP, he also fails to make his overall case convincing,

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that is, establish that religious beliefs enjoy an epistemic status that, in relevant respects, is similar to that of sense perceptual beliefs.

Fruits and significant self-support to the rescue?

So far, focus has been on CMP's dependence on the doctrine-test. This dependence proved troubling, because it reduces CMP's role to that of a confirmer of received opinion, thus robbing it of any critical potential it otherwise might have had. Is it possible that an increased focus on fruits could help restore CMP to a more autonomous and critical position? And is that a strategy which could salvage Alston's position? These are the questions I want to look closer at in this section.

It is important to note that fruits tests can be given a relatively speaking more practice-dependent, and a more practice-independent, shape. Practice-dependent fruits tests explicitly derive criteria for veridicality from the religious tradition/practice itself, and that tradition's own account of what fruits we should expect from genuine encounters with God. This resembles closely what Alston refers to as CMP's 'significant self-support': that numinous experiences help people develop spiritually the way the Christian tradition predicts and prescribes.

Most philosophers are suspicious of appeals to fruits tests, and for good reasons. There seems to be a number of reasonable explanations of why people who have numinous experiences also develop spiritually, explanations which, without aspiring to be reductionist, nevertheless avoid reference to any supernatural agency. One example is the theory of role-taking developed by, among others, the Swedish psychologist of religion, Hjalmar Sundén (Sundén (1966)).[9] The relevant question for my purposes is, of course, whether increased attention to fruits could offer CMP a more SP-like, critical role within religious practice. When considered from the perspective of practice-dependent fruits tests, the answer is bound to be negative. After all, such fruits tests retain a dependence on orthodox doctrine in such a way that experiences with good fruits that fail to conform to orthodox doctrine are either deemed unveridical, or at least incomplete, misinterpreted by the subject, or something similar. No real challenge to orthodox doctrine is ever forthcoming from CMP.

What if we were to develop practice-independent fruits tests, stating that veridical *religious* (not just numinous) experiences are those with good consequences for the subject, and that orthodox doctrine should be assessed by, just as much as an arbiter of, these experiences? Would that make a difference to CMP's logical role within religious practices? Perhaps, because if we were to take such experiences seriously, then religious experiences would no longer be forced to simply confirm received opinion in religion, but would also at times conflict with it. Such conflicts could bring about revision of orthodox doctrine to accommodate the experiences in question.

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To be sure, there are many problems to overcome in the development of practice-independent fruits tests, like how to stipulate what to count as good fruits, and how to balance the fruits and the doctrine tests against one another. Here, I leave the questions whether practice-independent fruits tests could be developed, and whether they could remedy the lack of a functional similarity between SP and CMP, open. Suffice it to note here that the strategy is no attractive supplement to Alston's position, because it conflicts with his commitment to religious realism and religious exclusivism. Let me clarify.

First, appeal to a more practice-independent fruits test faces the same kind of problem that I pointed out in relation to practice-dependent fruits tests: why think that the spiritual development of people who undergo religious experiences is best explained by a supernatural agency rather than some human psychological capacity? If you were to adopt William James's approach to these questions, you could argue that what it means to claim that God is real is that interaction with God is regenerating and turns us 'into new men' (James (1982), 516). The question whether a religious experience with good fruits was also veridical would, on this approach, simply not arise, because it is regeneration itself that warrants our talk of veridical, as opposed to unveridical, experiences. But James's approach is hardly attractive to Alston, who repeatedly has defended a full-blown religious metaphysical realism, where what it means to say that God is real has nothing to do with God's effects on us, or our existential or epistemic standing towards God (4, see also Alston (1995)).

Second, there is a significant risk that practice-independent fruits tests prove too much, in the sense that it might become impossible to develop any consistent orthodox doctrine if all religious experiences with good consequences (perhaps even including those from non-theistic traditions) are considered veridical. God would suddenly have very many faces, and very many wills, if we could continue to speak of 'God' at all. To overcome that problem, you may have to develop a distinction like the one John Hick makes between God as experienced within a religious tradition like Christianity and 'The Real *an sich*' (Hick (1989), 236ff., see also Quinn (2000)). Given Alston's stand on religious realism and his related defence of religious exclusivism, it is unlikely that he would be willing to walk down that road.[10]

The conclusion of all this is that Alston's overall position is founded on, and developed in relation to, an understanding of CMP which is such that the doctrine test retains its priority and the fruits test is afforded a secondary status only. Hence, it looks difficult to retain Alston's overall position in *Perceiving God* (and other works) and at the same time develop the fruits test into a practice-independent test that could give CMP (or a more pluralistic successor) a more SP-like role within the wider sphere of practice to which it belongs. Put differently: the possibility I left open that increased attention to the fruits test might offer CMP a logical role more like that played by SP does not avail Alston as long as he

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retains his commitment to religious realism and religious exclusivism. Hence, my criticism points to a need for a more significant reconstruction of Alston's philosophical approach to religion.

Conclusion

The bearing idea of this paper is that to develop a convincing indirect analogy-argument from religious experience, it is not sufficient to establish a structural similarity between SP and CMP. Besides that, you also need to establish that there is a functional similarity, that is, that SP and CMP perform roughly the same logical role in the wider sphere of practice to which they belong. The importance of a functional similarity becomes clear once we see how SP's positive epistemic status is intimately related to the special role it has within the wider sphere of practice where it belongs. This is a role that CMP fails to perform with regard to religious practice, and even if it could be developed to take on a more SP-like role, this move is not available to Alston, at least not as long as he retains his standpoints on religious realism and exclusivism.

I noted at the outset that Alston's argument enjoys widespread support. It is over-optimistic to expect that my critique could make a radical difference to that fact. However, besides posing a significant challenge in its own right, it also adds to the other criticisms of Alston's indirect analogy-argument from religious experience put forward over the last decade and a half. It is time that the accumulated weight of these criticisms is taken seriously, and that the generally positive reception of Alston's argument is reconsidered in light of it.

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Notes

1. Alston (1991). References to *Perceiving God* are given in brackets throughout the paper.
2. By 'mainstream', Alston means that it is used by most, or even all, major Christian denominations.
3. As you would expect, Alston operates with a traditional theistic conception of God. On this conception, numinous experience is, in Keith Yandell's words, experiences of a being as 'being awesome, being majestic, being overwhelmingly powerful, being fascinating but dangerous and the like' (Yandell (1993), 236). For Alston, the most interesting cases, as already mentioned, are inner, non-sensory, experiences (20).
4. I shall complicate this simple picture later on, by distinguishing between two types of fruits tests. For now, this characterization suffices.
5. Here, Alston actually first argues for the claim that it is rational to engage in SP, and then he argues that acceptance of that claim commits us to the stronger claim that it is rational to consider SP to be reliable. He writes: 'To engage in a certain doxastic practice and to accept the beliefs one thereby generates is to commit oneself to those beliefs being true … and hence to commit oneself to the practice's being reliable' (179). Since this is a point which lacks relevance for this paper, I have chosen to more or less equate 'rational to engage in SP' with 'rational to consider SP to be a reliable doxastic practice'. For a critical exposition of Alston's strategy on this matter, see Steup (1997).
6. Alston's concept of 'significant self-support' contains some other elements as well. Here, I limit attention to the elements of interest for my discussion.
7. I have developed this critique of Swinburne and Caroline Franks Davis in Zackariasson (2002), 162ff.
8. I disregard, here, other kinds of support that may be given for religious belief, and concentrate on the support that CMP can supply for these beliefs. That means that at least when considered as *perceptual beliefs*, the beliefs supported by SP enjoy a higher epistemic status than the beliefs supported by CMP. This holds regardless of whether religious beliefs can receive support from other sources.
9. See also the critique of 'sanctity arguments' put forward in Owen Webb (1995).
10. For Alston's approach to religious pluralism, see, for instance, Alston (1991), ch. 7.

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