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EVIDENCE FOR GOD FROM CERTAINTY

Katherin A. Rogers

Human beings can have “strongly certain” beliefs—indubitable, veridical beliefs with a unique phenomenology—about necessarily true propositions like $2+2=4$. On the plausible assumption that mathematical entities are platonic abstracta, naturalist theories fail to provide an adequate causal explanation for such beliefs because they cannot show how the propositional content of the causally inert abstracta can figure in a chain of physical causes. Theories which explain such beliefs as “corresponding” to the abstracta, but without any causal relationship, entail impossibilities. God, or a very god-like being, provides the best causal explanation for such beliefs.

The fact that human beings can have indubitable beliefs about necessarily true propositions is evidence for the existence of God because the best causal explanation for the existence of such beliefs involves positing a being with two properties which, in combination, render their possessor at least god-like. This being has the sort of causal power that could produce beliefs in human minds, and it somehow possesses (or has immediate access to) necessarily true propositions *necessarily*. Aspects of the physical universe might have the former property, but nothing in the physical universe possesses the latter. I will focus on a specific sort of certainty and on beliefs about mathematical propositions. Some of the claims on which I base my argument are controversial, but they are defensible and worthy of consideration.

I will take it as a datum to be explained that human beings sometimes have “strongly certain” beliefs. I am using “belief” in a rough and general way such that it is legitimate to refer to an instance of knowledge or a rational intuition as a “belief.” A more fine-grained analysis might distinguish between “belief” and knowledge or the sort of “seeming” that constitutes rational intuition, but the catch-all term serves my purposes here. A strongly certain belief is characterized by several features. First it is veridical. It is held with a certainty such that having the belief entails the truth of the proposition believed. A variety of different epistemologies might allow room for such a certainty, and I do not need to fill out my conception in accord with one rather than another. My argument can proceed so long as it is granted that there are some beliefs which are held in such a way that what is believed cannot be false.

In addition to being veridical, introspection suggests that, as occurrent, strongly certain beliefs possess a set of properties which bestow upon them a recognizably unique phenomenology. I do not propose a complete description of the experience of having a strongly certain belief, and it is



plausible to think that there may be real characteristics which are too subtle to distinguish consciously, but which contribute to the felt *sui generis* nature of the strongly certain belief. There are, however, two key properties which can be isolated and described. First, strongly certain belief will be "luminous." That is, if I am strongly certain that x , then I know that I know that x . And secondly—though I think this quality is intimately related to the first, and perhaps really just another aspect of a single phenomenon—strongly certain belief will be "immediate." It will be characterized by a direct recognition perhaps best described phenomenologically through the standard metaphors of intuition, a "seeing" or "grasping" of the object or content of the belief. This sense of immediacy is only strengthened by careful consideration. With perception one might prima facie have some sense of immediately "seeing" one's monitor screen, but upon being told about one's eyes, photons, etc. one will grant that there is at the very least a many-linked causal story to tell connecting one's seeing and one's monitor. Strong certainty is not like that. There are no intermediaries between the intellectual "seeing" and the content seen, and careful consideration of the experience of "seeing" the content of one's belief only confirms the experience of immediacy.

The claim that some beliefs are held with strong certainty does not entail that every human thinker has strongly certain beliefs. Perhaps some people have none. Nor does it entail that if one person believes a proposition with strong certainty, then anyone who understands that proposition must also hold it with strong certainty. It should be noted that there are many reasonable analyses of what it means to be "certain" of some belief which fall short of strong certainty. On these analyses it is consistent that "I am certain that x " and yet it is not the case that x . In that situation the phenomenology of my belief would differ from that of a strongly certain belief—I would not know that I know x , and I would not "grasp" x immediately. Call instances of less-than-strong certainty, "weak" certainty.

A paradigm instance of a strongly certain belief is, "I exist." If I am strongly certain right now that I exist, then it is true that I exist. And I know that I know I exist. Timothy Williamson mounts an attack on the claim to luminosity in many of the standard examples, but even Williamson has to grant the possibility of a few luminous beliefs including "that one exists."¹ Moreover I "grasp" my own existence, I "see" myself with a sort of pure immediacy. Here it seems to me that my cognitive access to myself fits the sort of experience which William Alston calls intuitive knowledge. He quotes H. H. Price to the effect that "such knowledge 'is simply the situation in which some entity or some fact is directly present to consciousness.'" Alston goes on to explain, "I cannot be in the state of knowledge that p so construed, without its being the case that p ; for that state just consists of the presence of that fact to my consciousness; without that fact there could be no such state. Knowledge is not a state that could be just what it is intrinsically without the actual existence of the object; it has no intrinsic character over and above the presence of that object to consciousness."²

It seems to me that, in addition to being strongly certain that I exist, I have strongly certain beliefs about some necessary truths, like the basic laws of logic and some of the simpler mathematical propositions.³ In

this paper I will focus on strongly certain mathematical belief. The problem of the causes of knowledge of mathematical truth has already been discussed by philosophers of mathematics, and looking at how they frame the question will be useful. The content of strongly certain belief in simple mathematical propositions is interestingly different from the case of "I exist." In addition to my "grasp" of the bare proposition, like " $2+2=4$," there is recognition of the necessity of the proposition. It seems to me that this recognition of the necessity is included in the grasping of " $2+2=4$." A child might understand that " $2+2=4$ " without understanding what it means for some proposition to be necessarily true, but if the child does not see that " $2+2=4$ " in such a way that he automatically applies it in any instance, he does not really grasp it. If he really *gets* " $2+2=4$," a bit of Socratic questioning would soon elicit the fact that he sees that " $2+2=4$ " must be true always and everywhere. So if I have a strongly certain belief that " $2+2=4$," and recognition that this is a necessary truth is included in that belief, then $2+2$ *does* equal 4 necessarily, I know that I know this, and I have an immediate grasp of it.

It should be admitted first, though, that there are philosophers who deny the possibility of strong certainty. There are those—Quine springs to mind—who insist that even the claims of mathematics do not constitute necessary truth. "The proverbial necessity of mathematical truth resides merely in our exempting the mathematical sentences when choosing which one of a refuted block of sentences to revoke. We exempt them because changing them would reverberate excessively through science."⁴ This sort of fallibilism is a difficult thesis to defend, however. Either the fallibilist offers an argument for his position or he does not. If he does not, then we have no reason to accept his counterintuitive conclusion that even apparently necessary truths like $2+2=4$ might be false. But if he does give an argument, then it will have premises, and the premises will inevitably be more dubious than the claim that $2+2=4$ is a necessary truth. Quine's story about belief acquisition begins, "Our intake of information about the world consists only of the triggering of our nerve endings by light rays and molecules from our environment," and goes on to make a series of claims about conditioning, animal expectations, the molding influence of evolution, language acquisition, etc.⁵ This story about belief acquisition concludes to, among other things, the point about the in-principle-revokable nature of our mathematical commitments. But any of these claims is far, far more dubious than " $2+2=4$ " cannot possibly be false." One can read Quine's epistemic story as a version of a fallibilist argument. If this causal story of how we come to any and all of our beliefs is correct, then it follows that any belief, including $2+2=4$, is revokable. If this argument is valid—in a sense that is the claim of the present paper—then it seems a *reductio* showing that this causal story of how we come to our beliefs must be mistaken. Any argument for this skepticism about necessary truth must face the same sort of criticism, *mutatis mutandis*.

A more moderate fallibilist might say that there are necessary truths, but we have no infallible way to recognize them. We cannot know that we know, and we do not have the sort of "grasping of the content" that strong certainty entails. To such a one I can only respond that I find myself incapable of entertaining the belief that I might be wrong about $2+2$ equaling 4. Perhaps the fault lies with my imagination or perhaps the

more moderate fallibilist simply holds the belief that $2+2=4$ in a somewhat different way than I do.

It seems to me that I have a strongly certain belief that $2+2=4$, and I can only ask the reader to introspect regarding his own beliefs. The question I want to address is, how did I come to have such a belief? My belief itself is a contingent phenomenon, and therefore it has a cause. I will argue that such an effect is most plausibly ascribed to God (or a god-like being). It is important here to distinguish between the causal question which I am asking, and the different, epistemic, question of how I can trust my belief that $2+2=4$. I am *not* engaged in the sort of project which occupied Descartes in the First Meditation. Descartes holds that one could be brought to doubt even the simple rules of arithmetic if presented with the hypothesis of the evil genius. And then it is only by eliminating that hypothesis through the introduction of God that we can defeat skepticism.

The claim that the evil genius might deceive even with regard to what is most clearly and distinctly perceived generates the famous criticism of Descartes known as the Cartesian circle: How can we possibly mount an argument for knowledge of God, or anything else, if we have cast our most fundamental beliefs and our basic noetic abilities into doubt? Unlike Descartes I am not invoking God to solve some problem of ubiquitous doubt. In positing strongly certain belief in the basic laws of logic and simple mathematical propositions I deny Descartes' skeptical claim about these necessary truths. Mark Heller suggests this move as a solution to the Cartesian circle and argues that it follows that it is not necessary to introduce God to improve our epistemic status with regard to what is clearly and distinctly perceived.⁶ That seems to me to be correct. If I have strongly certain belief that $2+2=4$, my epistemic status regarding that belief really couldn't get any better. I need no further justification. My simply having it is sufficient to my epistemic needs. Though my discussion has epistemic ramifications, I am not asking about justification or reliability. Rather I am asking a question about adequate explanation: How did I come to have this (inherently justified, completely reliable) strongly certain belief?

My argument, then, is not of the same sort as Plantinga's in Chapter 12 of *Warrant and Proper Function*, where the naturalist hypothesis is seen as a defeater for the reliability of belief. My argument is closer to Augustine's in Book 2 of *On Free Will*: The evident fact of our knowledge of mathematical truth, which knowledge could not have its source in the contingent physical universe, shows that there is an eternal, immutable, and transcendent realm of such truth which must be identified with God.

The distinction between the question of epistemic reliability, which I am *not* addressing, and the question of adequate causal explanations is so important that perhaps a simple analogy will help to reinforce it. Suppose it is a metaphysical necessity that Snickers Bars have peanuts. Suppose I (occurently) know that this is the case. Then if I know I have a Snickers Bar in my hand, I know I have a candy bar with peanuts in my hand. Here the peanuts correspond to the veridical nature of the strongly certain belief. If I have a strongly certain belief I cannot even entertain the possibility of its being false. Period.

If I take my Snickers Bar as "given" then I need not look for some additional explanation for the presence of the peanuts. But Snickers Bars

are contingent. I might demand a causal explanation for the Snickers Bar itself, and the fact of the peanuts might play an important role in shaping my causal theory. Suppose I hypothesize that the candy bar factory down the street provides an adequate causal explanation for the existence of the Snickers Bar. But suppose I discover that, while the factory does produce various sorts of candy bars, nothing in the factory is capable of inputting peanuts. I will not decide that this Snickers Bar does not have peanuts, since I see that it does and I believe that it must. I am committed to the metaphysical necessity of peanuts in Snickers Bars. But since I know this Snickers Bar has peanuts, and I know that the factory down the street cannot produce candy bars with peanuts, I know that it is not the cause of the Snickers Bar. I must look elsewhere for an explanation—I must find a factory which has the capacity to add peanuts to candy bars.

I do not question the reliability of my strongly certain beliefs, but they are contingent phenomena, and so I aim to find a causal explanation for their existence. But an adequate causal explanation will involve causal factors which are capable of producing beliefs that have the inherently veridical nature and the unique phenomenology of strong certainty. I will argue that naturalistic causal theories fail to explain all that needs explaining. By “naturalism” I mean the view that the only things with causal power are things which are part of the spatio-temporal universe. By this definition a “naturalist” might believe in non-causal platonic abstracta. I will focus on mathematical beliefs since contemporary discussion of mathematical platonism has already brought some relevant difficulties with naturalism to light.⁷

For the time being I will assume that mathematical entities are platonic abstracta and that mathematical truths like “ $2+2=4$ ” are about abstract objects, though at the end of the paper, when the topic is the relationship of God to mathematical truth, some qualifications will be proposed. In any case mathematical truths are about some sort of “things” which are not spatio-temporal and are not aspects of the physical universe. Certainly this is controversial.⁸ But the alternative to platonism is to suggest that numbers, for example, *are* aspects of the physical universe. And then it should follow that they might come into or go out of being with the birth and death of the universe as we know it, or that it would not have been the case that $2+2=4$ if some radically different physical universe, or none at all, had existed. My strong certainty that $2+2=4$ entails that it is not possible that $2+2=4$ fail to obtain, and so any attempt to see this mathematical truth as an aspect of the changing and inherently contingent physical universe must be rejected.

If mathematical entities are platonic abstracta then presumably they are causally inert. How then to offer a causal explanation for strongly certain beliefs, given that the human knower is located in time and space?⁹ The difficulty lies in the fact that an adequate theory of the causes of knowledge must presumably allow for the content of the knowledge, the thing known, to play *some* role in the causal explanation. This is a common claim. A theory of the causes of perceptual knowledge which held that the objects of perception are entirely outside of the causal chain producing the knowledge would seem a very odd theory. Could it even be considered an explanation of my *seeing a tree*, if no tree at all were involved in the

explanation? The point can be put even a bit more strongly if one assumes something like a Kripkean analysis of meaning and reference in which a “chain of communication” reaching back to the thing being referred to is a necessary part of establishing the very *meaning* of a term such that belief would be impossible without the causal connection.¹⁰ Later in this paper I will have occasion to revisit this assumption that an adequate causal theory of knowledge must involve some connection between the knower and the known, even when the known is necessary truth, but let it stand for now.

Could we argue that the theory of evolution offers a causal explanation which can successfully relate the knower to the known in such a way as to explain strongly certain belief? The standard (radically simplified) evolutionary story about the causes of beliefs which have epistemic reliability goes something like this: (1) Eons of evolution have produced human beings with belief-producing mechanisms. (2) These belief-producing mechanisms produce beliefs that are likely to be “useful” (i.e., will help the believer survive and reproduce). (3) Beliefs that are useful are likely to be true. So evolution produces reliably true beliefs.

Even some staunch defenders of natural proofs for the existence of God hold that evolution is adequate to explain how our true beliefs come to be. In *Is There a God?* Richard Swinburne argues that Darwinism is adequate to explain the connection between the believer and the world. How would this come about?

The answer is evident: animals with beliefs are more likely to survive if their beliefs are largely true. False beliefs—for example, about the location of food or predators—will lead to rapid elimination in the struggle for food or predators [sic]. If you believe that there is no table present, when there is one, you will fall over it, and so on. Those in whom the brain states which give rise to beliefs are connected by causal chains to the outside world, in such a way that the causal chain is normally only activated by a state of affairs which causes the brain state which in turn causes the belief that the state of affairs holds, will normally hold true beliefs about the world and in consequence be more likely to survive.¹¹

Recently philosophers from very different camps have raised serious doubts that evolution could really be expected to produce epistemically reliable cognitive faculties.¹² But for the purposes of my argument I can grant that evolution is the source of mechanisms which produce beliefs which are likely to be useful and hence are likely to be true, especially when the issue is food or predators. But what about strongly certain belief that $2+2=4$? A very pressing problem is this: Given that this content is causally inert, what could possibly “activate” the causal chain which causes the brain state which causes the belief? I will return to this below in discussing Nagel. First I will focus on a somewhat different issue regarding the special status of strongly certain beliefs—their inherently veridical nature and unique phenomenology which includes luminosity and immediacy.

In the evolutionary story nature produced beliefs which are “likely to be useful and hence true.” But that *likely* entails “possibly not useful and,

even if useful, possibly not true." For any given belief produced through this mechanism it is possible that it is not really a useful belief. Roger Penrose suggests that mathematical beliefs may have arisen as an accidental, and potentially harmful, side-effect of the useful ability to understand about food and predators. He offers a splendid cartoon in which a brainy pre-historic fellow is having a moment of illumination with respect to Mammoth hunting, while his (even brainier) compadre studies geometry in the dirt, unaware that he is about to be pounced on by a saber-toothed tiger.¹³ One could even argue that, unlikely as it seems, whole categories of beliefs, perhaps all beliefs, are mere epiphenomena which play no genuine causal role in the survival and reproduction of the believer.

The connection between "produced by eons of evolution" and "useful" seems likely, but is not necessary. It is possible that any given belief, or even the whole belief-producing mechanism, may fail to be useful. The connection between "useful" and "true" in the evolutionary story is not necessary either. One could tell many a plausible tale in which holding systematically false beliefs, perhaps about one's own talents and importance, proves more useful for the metaphorical "purposes" of evolution than believing the truth would have done. It seems reasonable to suppose that in general the beliefs that *seem* useful, are useful, and that the reason they are useful is that they are true. But the evolutionary causal story, if it is indeed the story of how we come by *all* of our beliefs, seems to entail the possibility that none of our beliefs are useful, and the possibility that none of them are true. But given that I am strongly certain that $2+2=4$ I know it is not possible that all my beliefs are false. The causal story which appeals to purely naturalistic evolutionary processes proposes that *all* of our beliefs—the true and the false beliefs about contingent phenomena, and the true and the false beliefs about necessary truths (I might easily have a false belief about a complex arithmetical proposition)—are the effects of the same evolutionary processes. But this causal explanation fails for our strongly certain beliefs because there is nothing in the story to account for the inherently veridical nature of these beliefs.

Moreover there is no explanation for the unique phenomenology of the strongly certain beliefs. If all of our beliefs are the effects of the same causes, whence the luminosity and the immediacy of the strongly certain beliefs given that these properties do not, *could* not, characterize other, less certain beliefs? A causal story which connects the knower to the known through the usefulness of belief seems ill-suited to explaining the fact that I "know that I know," when it seems obvious that luminosity would not contribute to a belief's enabling the believer to reproduce. Further, the evolutionary story ought to undermine the sense of immediacy which is part of the experience of strong certainty. It proposes that I believe that $2+2=4$ because eons of evolution favored the survival of those who held that sort of belief. This suggests a long, involved causal chain, where none of the links consists in any immediate "grasping" $2+2=4$. But this story strikes me as doubtful, whereas I do "see" that $2+2=4$. Unlike with perceptual knowledge, this causal theory does not incline me to reassess the immediacy of my "seeing" that $2+2=4$. Instead I conclude that something is lacking from the causal story. And, finally, remember that the strongly certain belief concerning " $2+2=4$ " recognizes the necessity of the claim.

The evolutionary account offers no explanation for our modal knowledge, since it seems clear that recognizing the contingency or necessity of certain propositions does not play a role in our success as reproducers.¹⁴

Thomas Nagel agrees that the processes of evolution are not sufficient to explain true belief, but goes on to dismiss the "religious proposal" in favor of,

some systematic aspect of the natural order that would make the appearance of minds in harmony with the universe something to be expected. . . . [There] are specific conditions of the primordial state of our universe that, given its general laws, will lead to the formation of molecules, galaxies, organisms, consciousness, and intelligence. My hypothesis is only that the laws are such as to make not only the first but also the last of these developments intelligible, given the initial conditions that lead to the development of some organisms or other.¹⁵

But what, in the physical universe, might "activate" a causal chain resulting in strongly certain belief? Nagel grants that the story which hopes to explain the reliability of belief through their evolutionary "use" is not likely to succeed. Still, there must be some causal explanation of belief, and presumably it must point to some connection between the belief and its content. Whatever one might hope for from a "systematic aspect of the natural order" which explains "minds in harmony with the universe," it seems overly optimistic to expect to discover a connection between the minds and platonic abstracta which would allow strong certitude concerning the necessary truth of $2+2=4$. The natural order, a contingent phenomenon, simply is not in a position to bridge the gap between itself and the world of necessary abstracta. The evolutionary causal story for strong certainty fails because the attempt to trace the cause of true beliefs through the evolutionary development of useful beliefs cannot explain the special nature of the strongly certain belief. But *any* naturalist story must suffer an even more fundamental failure. If there are platonic abstracta and necessary truths, then they are not aspects of the contingent, physical universe, and therefore if the causal processes which produce the molecules, the galaxies etc. are purely physical, they cannot supply a connection between the contingent knower and the abstract, necessary, known. A platonic abstractum cannot "activate" a spatio-temporal causal chain. That being the case, there will be no naturalist causal explanation for the veridical nature, the luminosity, and the immediacy of the strongly certain belief in a necessary truth like $2+2=4$. (George Bealer's analysis of rational intuition may reinforce this point when he argues that intuition, "intellectual seeing," and perceptual seeing, by and large, cannot overlap. He writes, "most things that can seem intellectually to be so cannot seem sensorily to be so, and conversely.")¹⁶

But perhaps the naturalist can deny my assumption that the causal explanation of the strongly certain belief must show some sort of causal connection between the knower and the known, between the belief and its content. Seeing that there can be no "natural" causal connection between the knower and the abstracta known, the naturalist might argue that there can be strongly certain beliefs, like the belief that $2+2=4$, which

are amenable to a causal explanation in which the abstract content simply does not play a role. Perhaps our strongly certain beliefs are just “thrown up” somehow, with no connection to the abstracta, and yet nonetheless, what “grounds” our strong certitude is the fact that the proposition about the platonic abstracta is true. Let us say that our beliefs are caused only by natural processes. Once you have explained the natural processes you have given a complete explanation for the existence of the belief. Some of our beliefs are held with strong certainty and are about platonic abstracta. We have strong certainty because the proposition is true, but there is absolutely no *causal connection* of any sort between the belief and the true proposition. There is simply a correspondence. And that is enough.¹⁷

First it is important to remember that I am not asking what it is that “makes” strongly certain beliefs reliable. Suppose the naturalist claims that “Any causal explanation which is sufficient to explain the existence of our strongly certain beliefs is sufficient to explain their veridical nature (absolute reliability), luminosity, and immediacy.” I agree. Any causal explanation which is sufficient to explain the existence of a Snickers Bar is sufficient to explain its having peanuts. In cases like “ $2+2=4$ ” it is right to say that, “whatever explains the undeniable fact that we have intuitions with specific contents, suffices as an explanation of the actual reliability of our intuitions as it surely excludes contradictory content.”¹⁸

My question, however, is not what explains the *reliability* of the strongly certain belief, but what explains the strongly certain belief. Not just any explanation will do. Suppose Anne expresses her puzzlement over the source of her strongly certain belief that $2+2=4$ to her mother. And suppose her mother answers that the complete causal explanation for Anne’s belief is that when sentences are inscribed on crystal tablets and then the tablets are ground up and fed to small children, the children will come to believe what was written on the tablets with strong certainty. Anne ingested the ground crystal bearing the sentence “ $2+2=4$ ” with her strained peas, and that is why she believes $2+2=4$ with strong certainty. Hearing this odd theory about its cause will not shake Anne’s commitment to that belief that $2+2=4$. *Whatever* caused the belief, the belief is true, luminous, and immediate. But is the strained pea theory adequate as a causal explanation for the belief?

The strained pea theory suggests several serious questions. Ordinarily in our thinking about belief acquisition the digestive system plays little if any role because it presumably is not the part of the person which receives the sort of data which can be processed as information. Anne’s mother might respond that Anne has made a mistake in assuming that the causes of strongly certain belief must involve the reception of data like the causes of other sorts of beliefs. Anne might note that the actual scratchings on the crystal, in the form of the Arabic numerals we use, are merely symbols without inherent meaning and could not possibly convey any concept to an infant. Anne’s mother might respond that Anne is still making the mistake of assuming that the content of the belief must figure somehow in the cause of the belief. Anne’s mother admits that the scratchings on the crystal do not somehow “contain” the actual content, $2+2=4$, but her contention is this: the fact that $2+2=4$ has no causal role to play in the production of Anne’s belief.

Anne might respond that divorcing the content of $2+2=4$ from the causes which produce the strongly certain belief that $2+2=4$ leads to impossible consequences. On the strained pea theory, " $2+2=5$ " could have been inscribed on the crystal, and then, according to the theory; she, Anne, would have the strongly certain belief that $2+2=5$. But that is impossible. Anne's mother might argue that the latter point is irrelevant, since in fact it was " $2+2=4$ " that Anne ingested with her peas. But Anne's criticism is not refuted. The theory entails that " $2+2=5$ " really could have been scratched on the crystal, and then that Anne would have had a strongly certain belief that $2+2=5$. But a strongly certain belief that $2+2=5$ is an impossibility. A theory which entails an impossibility is not a good theory.

The naturalist's proposed "correspondence" theory is subject to roughly the same problems as the strained pea theory. The correspondence theory proposes that the belief that $2+2=4$ is correct because it corresponds to the truth, and it is inherently reliable, but the fact that $2+2=4$ plays no role in the causal history of the strongly certain belief that $2+2=4$. The belief itself can be completely causally explained by naturalistic factors. As in the strained pea theory, there is no causal connection between the knower and the known, but, according to the correspondence theory, that doesn't matter.

The first claim, echoing Anne to her mother, is that it is standard to suppose that knowledge requires some sort of causal connection between the knower and the known. This is certainly true of perceptual knowledge. Suppose we were to tell a correspondence story of the causes of perception. There is no causal connection at all between the object "seen" and the experience of seeing it. Rather, natural processes happen to have produced the experiences of seeing certain objects, and they happen to have produced the actual existence of those objects, and there just happens to be a consistent correspondence between the presence of the object and the experience. (It is not that natural processes "happen to have produced a correspondence" as some sort of causal connection between the perceiver and the perceived. The correspondence itself must be a brute fact.)

This seems a very strange story to tell about perceptual knowledge. On this theory the experience that we would ordinarily describe as "seeing a tree" seems better put as "having a tree-seeing experience," since there is absolutely no connection between you, the perceiver, and the tree. And if this is the story you tell about perceptual knowledge, then you invite skepticism. The scenario entails the possibility that natural processes have thrown up perceptions without the corresponding objects. Your theory *says* that the objects are there, but it also claims that your knowledge and absolutely all the phenomena of your experience are explained without any appeal to the reality of the objects.

A theory of the causes of perceptual knowledge which denies any causal role to the objects of perception seems a non-starter. Could it be that strongly certain belief is so different from perceptual knowledge that, while theories about the latter need to establish a connection between the knower and the known, theories about the former do not. The paradigm case of the strongly certain belief is "I exist." Here there seems to be a clear and direct cause of the belief—the knower's immediate presence to himself. But perhaps the story is different when the content of the belief is necessary truth. It seems

to me that the burden of proof here is on the one who would deny the standard requirement that knowledge depend in some way upon the facts known. But perhaps the correspondence theory has an argument to show that knowledge of necessary truth *must* be treated differently from other sorts of knowledge.

One might argue that the fact that $2+2=4$ could not possibly figure in any causal explanation. Joel Pust, developing an argument by David Lewis, writes,

we can make little sense of the truth-makers of necessary propositions being causally implicated in the explanation of any fact, including the fact that we have reliable intuitions regarding necessity. . . . This is because the counterfactuals upon which such an explanation would presumably rest, counterfactuals such as “If $2+2$ were not equal to 4, then I would not find $2+2=4$ intuitive,” are deviant and, on standard semantics, uniformly and vacuously true. . . . Hence, a natural strategy often employed in the realm of contingent truth to show that our opinions depend upon the truth—that of showing that if the facts were different, so too would be our opinions—simply has no application to the necessary.¹⁹

Does this argument show that our knowledge of necessary truth must be causally independent of that truth? An alternative conclusion would be that there are difficulties with the analysis of causation which reduces it to nothing but counterfactual dependence, and these problems become glaring when the question is how we know necessary truth. A general discussion of the nature of causation would take us too far afield. Here I will simply suggest that what Pust’s argument actually proves is that some claims figuring in causal explanations resist counterfactual analysis.

In saying that necessary truth can play a constitutive role in a causal explanation, I do not mean to say that necessary truth per se or platonic abstracta can act as causal agents. But the claim that they can play no role at all is false. Suppose I ask my son how it is that I owe him \$11. He responds that on Friday I borrowed \$8 and then last Tuesday I borrowed \$3, and $8+3=11$. He has given me a causal explanation involving not only the historical facts of our financial transactions, but an additional piece of mathematical information without which the explanation would be incomplete. I might jokingly respond, “So if it’s not the case that $8+3=11$, then I don’t owe you \$11!” Of course, if it is not the case that $8+3=11$ anything and everything follows. But that does not mean that my son’s explanation is either non-causal or incoherent. And it doesn’t show that “ $8+3=11$ ” was not part of the explanation.

And there are deep problems with saying that the content of the necessary truth does not play a role in the causal explanation of our strongly certain beliefs—that there need be no causal connection between the knower and the known. The correspondence theorist grants that “ $2+2=4$ ” is not a phenomenon of the spatio-temporal universe. He goes on to hold that my strongly certain belief that $2+2=4$ is wholly the product of natural processes, perhaps beginning with Quine’s “triggering of our nerve endings by light rays and molecules from our environment.” Nerve endings

get triggered, a long chain of events occurs in the spatio-temporal universe, and I come to have the strongly certain belief that $2+2=4$. I have no doubt that my belief is veridical and utterly reliable, but is this “triggered nerve” theory plausible? (Let the “triggered nerve” stand for the natural processes invoked to explain belief.)

It seems in principle to be in the same family with the strained pea theory. It gives a causal explanation for how the belief comes to be, and it holds that the content of the belief, $2+2=4$, plays no role at all in the causal history. That being the case, the theory ought to hold that, had the natural processes followed a slightly different path, as of course they could have done being contingent, a belief with all of the properties of a strongly certain belief but with a different content, say “ $2+2=5$,” could have resulted. This is impossible.

It will not do to say that there is no problem because the natural processes in fact threw up a belief that “ $2+2=4$.”²⁰ Analogous to the strained pea theory, the correspondence theory entails that the light rays *really could have* triggered the nerves in a “ $2+2=5$ ” kind of way. There would then have been no correspondence to the truth, but the claim of the theory is that every aspect of the belief is explicable through the natural causes which simply have no connection to the content of the platonic abstracta. The theory entails that the strongly certain belief, with its content and phenomenology, would exist as the contingent phenomenon caused by the natural processes even if its content were “ $2+2=5$.” And that is impossible. The triggered nerve theory, like the strained pea theory, entails an impossible consequence, and thus is not a good theory to explain the existence of the strongly certain belief.

Naturalism seems unable to provide a causal connection between belief and platonic abstracta, and denying the need for some connection, as does the correspondence theory, leads to impossible consequences. But does the God hypothesis do any better? The claim is that God (or a god-like being) provides what naturalism is lacking. He is a powerful causal agent who can produce human beliefs, and He knows necessary truths necessarily so there is no issue of explaining how He came to possess them. No contingent being—even a powerful angelic spirit, or a lesser god like Zeus—supplies what is required here, since for any contingent being, its beliefs must be contingent phenomena and hence in need of further causal explanation. It is true that a necessarily existent knower with great power might fall short of the God of classical theism. Still, the argument points to a being who is at least very god-like. With the possible exception of Anselm’s *Proslogion* argument, this is the case for all of the attempted proofs and adduced evidence for God.

There are different possible analyses of the relationship of God to necessary truth. The fact that He knows necessary truths necessarily means that there is no question of how He came to know them, and that may be enough for my purposes here. A full discussion lies beyond the scope of this paper, but a brief mention of some of the possibilities should assure the reader that the job of providing a coherent analysis can be done.²¹ I should note that Descartes’ suggestion that God somehow “creates” necessary truth is *not* among the viable options, in my opinion. It is subject to the insurmountable problem that it places God “above” the laws of logic. But if the laws of logic do not apply to God then nothing coherent can be said about Him.²²

Many contemporary philosophers of religion go to the opposite extreme and embrace what is in essence the other horn of the logician's version of the Euthyphro problem. If God does not create the laws of logic and mathematics, then, it is assumed, such laws must exist independently of God. This view might be adequate for my argument here. On the thesis that the necessary truths exist independently of God, perhaps the claim that God is necessarily omniscient is enough to explain His knowledge of necessary truth, and so it may be sufficient for my present purposes.

From the perspective of (*very*) traditional theism, though, this position demeans God. It reduces Him to the role of a sort of platonic demiurge, a being whose knowledge and power must depend upon and conform to a "World of the Forms" outside itself. This is not the God of the classical theism of philosophers like Augustine and Anselm and Aquinas. The classical theist God is the absolute source of all. All that exists is God or what He makes. On this view, God's knowledge of necessary truth does not depend on anything outside Himself. Rather, He is Perfect Being, and necessary truth—the laws of logic and mathematics—are the way all being has to be. They reflect the nature of God. Classical theism holds that God is simple—His nature is identified with His omnipotence, His omniscience, and His perfect goodness. On this view, not only can there be no demand for how God "comes to know" necessary truths, but there is no explanation at all for God's knowledge of necessary truths beyond the simple fact of His necessary existence.²³

This "anti-platonic" analysis of the relationship of God to necessary truth has the further advantage that it does not hypothesize a world of ontologically dubious platonic abstracta just "there" in the universe. Absent God, the platonist understanding of numbers seems preferable to the alternative, the claim that numbers are an aspect of the physical universe. But nevertheless, the universe of the naturalist who allows this platonic realm seems a strange, unparsimonious, and indeed schizophrenic place. All of the causal action is set among the objects of perceptual experience, but in addition to spatio-temporal things there are these other . . . what? Besides the problem of how the abstracta could play a role in the beliefs of corporeal creatures such as ourselves, there is an intrinsic puzzle about their ontological status. The theist who sees necessary truth as existing independently of God seems to face this question as well. What sort of "things" are these platonic abstracta? As Robert Adams notes, they *seem* like ideas.²⁴ Classical theism solves the problem by placing necessary truth in the mind of God and identifying it with the nature of God. This seems to me by far the best move.

There may be various ways to tell the story of how God causes our strongly certain beliefs. Perhaps, as Augustine thought, He implants them directly in our minds. This may accord best with the phenomenological quality of immediacy that I have taken to be characteristic of strongly certain belief. Perhaps other stories might do the job as well. The most important claim is that God is involved as an agent who establishes the required *causal connection* between the believer and the propositions believed.

But if God is omnipotent couldn't he produce a strongly certain belief in a false proposition, " $2+2=5$ " for example? That is, doesn't the theist hypothesis face the same problem as the correspondence theory and the strained

pea theory? No. First note that God is good and would not Himself deliberately deceive. But more fundamentally, a strongly certain belief with the content " $2+2=5$ " is an impossibility. A belief in " $2+2=5$ " is not veridical or luminous, and does not have the sort of immediacy which consists in a "grasping" of a fact. The problem with the strained pea theory and the correspondence theory as causal explanations of strongly certain belief is that both divorce the content of the belief from the causal processes that produced it and so could not avoid the impossible entailment that a strongly certain belief could have a falsehood as its content. The theist theory, on the other hand, insists that only a cause which could "implant" the content of necessary truth in our minds could possibly be the source of strongly certain belief. God is omnipotent, but omnipotence does not include the ability to do the impossible. God is in a position to cause strongly certain belief, but this does not entail the impossible consequence that God could cause a strongly certain belief in a false proposition.

But doesn't invoking God as the cause of our strongly certain beliefs generate a problem of what might be termed epistemic theodicy? That is, the vast majority of our beliefs are held with less than strong certainty. We are, in fact, woefully ignorant. Surely if there were a good God who loves us and produces our strongly certain beliefs, He would *want* us to know as much of the truth with as much certainty as possible. Undoubtedly many beliefs are not of the sort that could be held with strong certainty, but couldn't we have more strongly certain knowledge than we do? Isn't our ignorance evidence that there is no belief-producing God? No. The premises of the argument from epistemic evil are weak. For all we know, our ignorance may be a necessary part of the divine plan. Perhaps the struggle to overcome it is valuable for the development of human virtues. And perhaps our ignorance ultimately stems from human free choices so God cannot eradicate it without doing damage to the freedom which is a terribly important human property. This question in epistemic theodicy is amenable to the same sorts of responses that any version of the theist problem of evil raises.

Only a god-like being can provide a sufficient explanation for our strongly certain beliefs concerning platonic abstracta (and necessary truth in general), and so the existence of such beliefs provides some evidence for the existence of God. There are responses open to the committed atheist. He can simply deny that there are strongly certain beliefs regarding mathematical propositions and hold that no belief involving platonic abstracta can be held with the proposed unique phenomenology such that the belief entails the truth of the proposition believed, is luminous and immediate. Possibly it is not the case that $2+2=4$. And then he can provide a causal history of his belief that $2+2=4$ through any of the naturalist theories proposed above. These theories fail as explanations of strongly certain belief, but they might succeed as explanations for beliefs of a different sort.

An alternative move would be to grant the strongly certain beliefs about mathematical entities, allow the necessity of some connection between the believer and the abstracta, but radically revise one's platonism. One might propose that the platonic entities themselves do have some sort of causal powers.²⁵ But it is difficult to see how "3" might be an agent or interact causally with the citizens of the spatio-temporal universe. And a theory

depending on a possibly infinite number of agent abstracta at work in the world seems to depart from the empiricist and parsimonious motivations behind naturalism at least as much as, and perhaps more than, the religious thesis.

Another alternative for the atheist is to stick with standard platonism, embrace strongly certain beliefs regarding platonic abstracta, and admit that they defy explanation. A more optimistic move would be to grant that there is not a satisfactory causal story *yet*. Although now the inherent difficulties of explaining how the contingent phenomena of our physical universe could produce strongly certain beliefs about mathematical propositions seem insurmountable, we may trust that the Science of the Future will find a way. These responses are problematic, but one or another seems unavoidable for the atheist. Someone who is not powerfully committed to the non-existence of God, though, granting that we sometimes do have strongly certain beliefs about necessary propositions, ought to conclude that this provides some evidence for God.²⁶

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NOTES

1. Timothy Williamson, *Knowledge and its Limits* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 107.

2. William Alston, "Does God have beliefs?" in *Divine Nature and Human Language* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1989), pp. 178–93, see p. 187. Reprinted from *Religious Studies* 22 (1987): 287–306. Alston goes on to say that this sort of knowledge may be reserved to God.

3. Williamson (2000) allows luminosity to these as well, pp. 107–08.

4. From Quine's "Philosophical self-portrait" in the *Penguin Dictionary of Philosophy* ed. Thomas Mautner (1997), p. 466.

5. *Ibid.*

6. Mark Heller, "Painted Mules and the Cartesian Circle," *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 26 (1996): 29–56.

7. It does not seem to me that the problem of mathematical knowledge can be solved by reducing it to logical knowledge. The problem only gets pushed back a step. Bob Hale ("Is Platonism Epistemologically Bankrupt?" in Hale and Wright, *The Reason's Proper Study* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2001), pp. 169–88) notes the analogous nature of knowledge about mathematical statements and knowledge about logical statements.

8. There are a variety of theories suggesting that the necessity of mathematical statements can be preserved while locating mathematical "objects" within the confines of the physical universe. See for example, D. M. Armstrong, *A Combinatorial Theory of Possibility* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), chap. 10; P. Maddy, *Naturalism in Mathematics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997).

9. The apparent impossibility of describing the causal interaction between the World of the Forms and the physical world was one of Aristotle's chief criticisms of Plato in the first book of the *Metaphysics*. The contemporary *locus classicus* for the epistemic problem with mathematical platonism is Paul Benacerraf, "Mathematical Truth," *Journal of Philosophy* 70 (1973): 661–79. See

also Colin Cheyne, "Existence Claims and Causality," *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 76 (1998): 34–47.

10. Saul A. Kripke, *Naming and Necessity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1980), pp. 91–93.

11. *Is There a God?* (Oxford, Oxford University Press; 1996), pp. 87–88.

12. Steven Stich calls into question the very existence of "rationality" as a cognitive faculty aimed at discovering the truth (*The Fragmentation of Reason* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1993), chap. 3). Alvin Plantinga defends the reliability of our reasoning, but argues that it is unlikely that evolution alone would produce reliable cognitive faculties (*Warrant and Proper Function* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), chap. 12). Thus he holds that the theist is in a better position than the naturalist with regard to trusting his cognitive faculties.

13. Roger Penrose, *The Large, the Small, and the Human Mind* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), p. 114.

14. Michael Rea, *World Without Design* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2002), pp. 193–95.

15. Thomas Nagel, *The Last Word* (Oxford, Oxford University Press; 1997), pp. 132–33.

16. George Bealer, "Intuition and the Autonomy of Philosophy" in *Rethinking Intuition*, ed. Michael DePaul and William Ramsey (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1998), pp.201–40, see p.208.

17. Joel Pust, "On Explaining Knowledge of Necessity," *Dialectica* 58 (2004): 71–87. Jerrold Katz, if I am understanding him correctly, advances this thesis in *Realistic Rationalism* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1998).

18. Pust (2004) pp. 78–79.

19. *Ibid.*, p. 74. See David Lewis *On the Plurality of Worlds* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986), p. 111.

20. Pust (2004), p. 80.

21. For other suggestions regarding the relationship of God to necessary truth see: C. Menzel, "Theism, Platonism and the Metaphysics of Mathematics," *Faith and Philosophy* 4 (1987): 365–82; C. Menzel and T. Morris, "Absolute Creation," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 23 (1986): 353–62; also Plantinga's Presidential Address, "How to be an Anti-Realist" in the Proceedings and Addresses of the APA, 1982.

22. Katherin A. Rogers *Perfect Being Theology* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2000), pp. 94–96. Brian Leftow discusses a more moderate analysis of God's causing necessary truth in "A Leibnizian Cosmological Argument," *Philosophical Studies* 57 (1989): 135–55.

23. The question of whether or not humans have libertarian freedom, and how God knows human choices is a difficult one which would take us far, far afield.

24. Robert Adams, "Divine Necessity," *Journal of Philosophy* 80 (1983): 741–51, see p. 751.

25. There does seem to be some sort of connection between the physical world and the world of platonic abstracta. The physical world does behave in a mathematically describable way. Plato invoked the mysterious relationship of "participation," but a more plausible proposal might find "the hand of God" in this connection between the physical world and mathematical truth.

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