

A reliability challenge to theistic Platonism

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1. The reliability challenge to atheistic Platonism

The starting point for this paper is Hartry Field's (1989: 25–30) argument against non-sceptical mathematical Platonism. The kind of mathematical Platonism that Field targets includes a number of commitments. The first commitment is that there are mathematical facts that are neither metaphysically grounded in nor caused by our beliefs or by any other mental states. Another commitment is that mathematical facts are not the types of entities that cause anything to occur. Therefore, they do not play a causal role in shaping our mathematical beliefs. In short, according to this view, mathematical facts are mind independent. In addition, these Platonists reject scepticism and believe that we, especially the mathematicians among us, have mathematical knowledge. Such non-scepticism implies that there is a massive correlation between our beliefs and the mathematical facts. That mathematical Platonism encompasses all of these commitments is the first premiss of Field's argument.

The second premiss is an epistemic principle that says that if a theory implies that there is a massive correlation that seems in principle impossible to explain, then that fact is a reason to reject the theory. Why should we accept this epistemic principle? Field uses examples such as the one that follows to illustrate the reasoning: Suppose you believe that John and Judy have nothing going on between them. Suppose I bring to your attention to the fact that, throughout the past year, John and Judy were observed in close proximity to each other on countless occasions and in various locations, including at the movie theatre and at various cafés, clubs and museums. These observations seem to provide a good reason to seek an alternative theory. Why? Because the massive correlation between the locations of these two people over the past year seems too striking to leave unexplained. For instance, we may suspect that John and Judy are in a relationship (Field 2001: 325). Note, however, that not just any explanation will do. For instance, the conjunction of independent explanations for each particular location of John and each particular location of Judy every hour throughout the year will not suffice. Something less coincidental or more unified is required.¹

The third premiss is that it seems in principle impossible to explain how this massive correlation came to be. Why? There are two reasons. First, we

1 I say more about the particular type of explanation required in Baras 2017.

do not have at present such an explanation. Second, the supposed correlating components are causally and metaphysically independent of one another, and that is a principled reason to believe that no such explanation exists.

These three premisses imply that we have a reason to reject mathematical Platonism:

- (1) Mathematical Platonism implies that there is a massive correlation between our mathematical beliefs and mind-independent non-causal mathematical facts.
- (2) If a theory implies that there is a massive correlation that we have principled reason to believe to be unexplainable, then that is a reason for us to reject the theory.
- (3) We have principled reasons to believe that this correlation is unexplainable.
- (4) Therefore, we have a reason to reject mathematical Platonism.

This argument is known as *the reliability challenge* to mathematical Platonism,² or *the Benacerraf-Field argument*, because Field presents it as a development of an argument originally put forward by Paul Benacerraf (1973), philosophers have applied the argument to other theories with similar features. For instance, David Enoch (2009) argues that a parallel challenge is the most troubling epistemological challenge to robust realism about normativity, and Joshua Schechter (2010) worries about the parallel challenge with regard to our knowledge of logic.

The idea that theists do not face such a challenge is initially attractive: If we were created by an omnipotent, omniscient and benevolent God, then it is easy to explain our reliability in any domain. Surely God would have designed our minds so that our beliefs in mathematics, normativity and logic would be reliable. Given this logic, theists have the means to deny premiss (3) on the grounds that they have an available explanation for the correlation. Such claims are made by Robert Adams (1983: 751), C. Stephan Evans (2013: 121; 179–81), Katherin Rogers (2008) and Joshua Thurow (2013: 1601).³ Rogers further argues that, for this reason, the fact that we know mathematical facts (such as that $2 + 2 = 4$) supports theism. This thought has occurred not only to theists. Field himself mentions this possibility, although

2 Often, reliability and knowledge are thought to require a correlation across a set of close possible worlds in addition to the actual world. Field does not present it this way, however, and I will stay close to his presentation. As far as I can tell, nothing in my argument hinges on this issue.

3 This idea continues a tradition of thought according to which theists can be more confident in their beliefs because of their faith that God secures the reliability of their cognitive faculties. The idea is most famously present in Descartes's *Meditations on First Philosophy*.

he mentions it dismissively, perhaps because he has a generally dismissive attitude towards theism (2001: 325).⁴

Of course, some authors reject some of Field's premisses and thereby avoid the challenge altogether. For instance, you may think that a lack of causal or constitutive explanation doesn't imply that there is no explanation because there are other types of explanation that are not ruled out by robust realism.⁵ However, in this article, I am concerned with the claim that theism fares better than atheism with regard to the reliability challenge. I therefore assume that Field's argument as applied to atheistic Platonism is sound and explore the consequences for the theism-atheism debate.

2. *A parallel reliability challenge to theistic Platonism*

Although it is initial, I will argue that this theistic line of reasoning does not work for some versions of theism. Theists' ability to explain the correlation between our beliefs and the relevant facts is of no advantage to theism if their explanation comes at the cost of positing another unexplained striking massive correlation down the line. And this does indeed seem to be the position of theists. They are committed to a massive correlation between God's beliefs and the relevant facts. If theists cannot explain the striking correlation between God's beliefs and the facts, then they are no better off than atheists because both theories posit unexplained massive correlations.⁶

Is God's reliability in mathematics, normativity, modality and logic explainable? This question may seem surprising, but some theistic views imply that the same reasons for thinking that human reliability in such domains is not explainable apply to God as well. Recall how premiss (3) of the reliability argument was justified. Two considerations were brought in its favour, the first of which was that we currently have no available explanation for the massive co_{\perp} was that there are no causal or metaphysical grounding relations between the correlates. Now consider God's reliability. It follows from this reasoning that if there are any facts that are causally and metaphysically independent of God and we have no current explanation for the

4 The idea that theists have a ready solution to the reliability challenge is also raised by Parfit (2011: 2:493), Weilenberg (2014: 173–75), Mogensen (*Ethics, evolution, and the coincidence problem: a skeptical appraisal, unpublished*) and several others (see Weilenberg's references). Weilenberg's discussion is close in spirit to my own. He too argues for the conclusion that theists are no better off than atheists regarding the reliability challenge, but his arguments are different from the argument of this paper.

5 I develop a response along these lines in Baras 2017. Justin Clarke-Doane (2016) develops a different line of response and includes many helpful references to the extensive literature on this issue.

6 This claim is only strengthened, not weakened, if there are additional reasons to believe that God's knowledge is unexplainable, as some theists argue (Plantinga 1993).

correlation between God's beliefs and those facts, then that is a principled reason to believe that the correlation is unexplainable.

Do theists – and more importantly, should theists – posit any facts with these features? Theistic Platonists such as Nicholas Wolterstorff (1970), Peter van Inwagen (2009) and Keith Yandell (2014) argue that there are at least some abstract facts that exist independently and distinctly of God. There are several oddities with the supposition that logical or mathematical facts depend on God. In addition, Euthyphronic considerations lead some theists to believe that there are at least some moral facts independent of God (Sagi and Statman 1995; Swinburne 2008). I believe that there are good arguments to recommend these views as better versions of theism. This is not a claim I can defend in this short article, and obviously many theists disagree.⁷ Those who disagree can consider my argument as narrower in scope. My argument is that theistic Platonism enjoys no advantage over atheistic Platonism. I will not discuss the merits of non-Platonist theism.

According to theistic Platonists, there are at least some facts independent of God. For any such fact, they face the challenge of explaining the correlation between God's beliefs and that fact. I know of no current explanation for this correlation. If independence is a reason to believe that no such explanation is forthcoming for the correlation between human beliefs and the truths, then I see no reason that this should not apply to God as well. Therefore, if a principled inability to explain a striking correlation is a reason to reject atheistic Platonism, it is no less a reason to reject theistic Platonism. Theism, at least of any kind that posits that there are some facts independent of God, does not enjoy an epistemic advantage over atheism regarding the reliability challenge.

The reliability challenge to theistic Platonism can be summarized as follows:

- (1*) Theistic Platonism implies that there is a massive correlation between God's mathematical, normative, etc. beliefs and mind-independent non-causal facts.
- (2*) If a theory implies that there is a massive correlation that we have principled reason to believe to be unexplainable, that is a reason for us to reject the theory.
- (3*) We have principled reasons to believe that this correlation is unexplainable.
- (4*) Therefore, we have a reason to reject theistic Platonism.

The dialectical situation here is similar to a dialectic that occurs in cosmological and teleological arguments for the existence of God. In these arguments, we are told that we should believe that God exists because the existence of our universe – or some finely tuned features of our

⁷ For a survey of the debate, see Gould 2014, especially his introduction.

universe – demands explanation, and theism provides such an explanation. A problem with such arguments, however, is that it is not clear that we make any explanatory progress by positing the existence of God, since it is not clear why the existence of God requires less explanation than the existence of our universe. Arguably, theism only pushes the challenge of explaining the existence of our universe one step further. Similarly, I am arguing that by positing that the existence of God explains our mathematical and moral reliability, theists only push the explanatory challenge one step further rather than solving the supposed problem.

It may seem unlikely that a person could justifiably believe that God exists and that God is omniscient but then lose the justification due to an inability to explain the correlation between God's beliefs and non-causal truths. However, if you think this is a problem, then you should think that the same problem applies to Field's original argument against mathematical Platonism as well. Field assumes that the Platonist has initial justification for believing that she has knowledge of independent mathematical facts but that such justification is lost once she becomes aware of her inability to explain the correlation between mathematical truths and her beliefs. Now you may ask how a person can be in a position to believe justifiably that she has knowledge of abstract mathematical facts but then suddenly lose that justification because she has no explanation for how the belief-truth correlation came about. Field's answer to this question is that our mathematical intuitions can provide initial justification to believe that we have such knowledge but that this justification can then be defeated by further considerations, such as his reliability challenge. We can imagine that a theist is in a similar position. Perhaps, she can have initial justification for her theism based on theistic intuitions or experiences and that they can then be defeated by further considerations, such as the reliability challenge to theism.

I will now consider three objections, each of which is based on a supposed disanalogy between God and us.

3. *Objection #1: We should not expect to be able to explain God's beliefs*

One objection runs as follows:

We should not expect to be able to explain the correlation between God's beliefs and the truths, since God is outside the sphere of what is available for us to study. All of God's activities are unexplainable to us, but that does not entail unexplainable simpliciter. The issue with human knowledge of platonic facts is quite different. We are in a position to study the acquisition of human beliefs—or at least to construct naturalistic theories about how some of it comes to be. And that means

that we can determine when some belief—such as beliefs about platonic facts—cannot possibly be explained naturalistically.⁸

My response: Although it is true that we are in a position to study our own beliefs in a way that we are not regarding God's beliefs, the given reason to believe that the belief-truth correlation is unexplainable is independent of this consideration. That is, if a lack of causal or constitutive relation is a reason to believe that a correlation is unexplainable, then I see no reason that this should hold for humans more than for God. If on the other hand a lack of a causal or constitutive relation is not a good reason to believe that a correlation is unexplainable, then that would undermine the challenge to atheistic Platonism just as well. Either way, atheists and theists remain on par.

4. Objection #2: God is essentially omniscient, and necessary facts need no explanation

A second objection runs as follows:

God necessarily has knowledge of all facts, since he is essentially omniscient. Thus, there is this difference between human and divine knowledge of non-causal mind-independent facts: the former is contingent while the latter is necessary. This difference seems significant. There seems to be more of an explanatory demand for contingent facts than there is for necessary facts. Indeed, necessary facts may require no explanation at all; or perhaps, better, their necessity explains why they obtain. Now, it does strike me that some necessities can be explained by other necessities (plausibly some mathematical facts are explained in terms of others), so maybe God's belief-truth correlation could have an explanation. However, it is not clear that if we could not come up with such an explanation, we would have a problem as worrisome as the problem of explaining human contingent beliefs.⁹

My response: In order for this objection to work, it is not sufficient that it be a necessary fact that if God exists, then God is omniscient, say, because that is just part of what it means to be God. That is because we would still have to explain how it is that such a God exists. The claim must be that necessarily God exists and necessarily God is omniscient, and this claim must be coupled with the assumption that necessary facts do not call out for explanation (or alternatively, are sufficiently explained by their necessity). Each these claims can be contested.

First, there are reasons to believe that even if God exists, his existence is not ontologically necessary. For one, it seems attractive to think that if we can

8 This objection was put forward to me by Katherin Rogers.

9 This objection was put forward to me by Joshua Thurow.

conceive of some possibility, then that is at least an initial reason to believe that it is not a metaphysical impossibility. Surely, we can conceive of a world without God. If it were difficult to conceive of a world without God, there would likely be many fewer atheists. This is a reason to believe that, even if God exists, his existence is not ontologically necessary.¹⁰ The theist owes us a good reason to believe that God's existence and omniscience are necessary facts, whereas our knowledge of mathematical facts is not a necessary truth.

Second, it is far from clear that necessary facts require less explanation than do contingent facts.¹¹ Mathematical theorems are standardly considered metaphysically necessary, and it seems plausible that mathematical theorems can call for explanation in the same sense that contingent correlations can.¹² Think, for instance, of Goldbach's conjecture. Doesn't it intuitively seem that if we only had weak inductive evidence for the conjecture (say, we only knew that it held up to $n = 100$), we would have reason to believe that the conjecture was either false or explainable? Admittedly, this question is difficult to answer, since in mathematics we have general reasons to resist accepting claims that have not been rigorously proven, regardless of explanatory considerations. Nevertheless, such examples do seem to suggest that necessary facts can call for explanation in the same way that contingent facts can call for explanation. If this is correct, then even if God's existence and omniscience are ontologically necessary, they can call for explanation. Therefore, principled reasons to believe that no such explanation exists constitutes a reason to reject those beliefs.

5. *Objection #3: God can interact causally with non-natural facts*

Although the relevant facts do not causally interact with *the natural world*—hence, their Platonism remains committed to non-naturalism—they are not completely impotent, for they do causally interact with the supernatural world (e.g., when God perceives them). On this

10 For discussion of the idea that conceivability is a guide to possibility, see Yablo 1993 and Szabó-Gendler and Hawthorne (2002). Among theists, Swinburne (1994) infers from this principle (in conjunction with some contentious claims about metaphysical necessity) that God exists contingently. Leftow (2010) objects. van Inwagen (1998) doubts that we are able to conceive these possibilities in the relevant sense of 'conceive'. His view implies that we cannot know whether God's existence, if God exists, is necessary, contingent or impossible. Given such a state of modal ignorance, it seems that the theist cannot securely resort to the necessity of God to explain God's knowledge.

11 The possibility that necessary facts can call for explanation has also been raised by Pruss (2013) and Craig (2009: 170).

12 Is a mathematical explanation just any mathematical proof? Mark Steiner (1978) argues that not all mathematical proofs are equally explanatory. For a recent survey on mathematical explanations, see Mancosu 2011.

view, God acts as a causal intermediary between two sorts of things (the Platonic and the natural) that cannot directly causally interact.¹³

My response: The first notable feature of this objection is that the view that it defends is somewhat different from the view originally targeted. The reliability argument targets the view that the relevant facts are non-causal. The objector asks us to consider a different view, according to which the relevant facts are causal, they even indirectly cause things in the natural world, and the only limitation on their causality is that they cannot directly cause things in the natural world.

You might think, though, that such a revision is in fact called for. Perhaps, given the reliability challenge, we should be considering this more moderate kind of Platonism. However, the original target of the argument was not chosen arbitrarily. The view is motivated by the intuition that mathematical, normative and modal facts (understood robust realistically) are not the kinds of facts that can cause anything. If so, this consideration seems to count against causation in the supernatural realm as well. Admittedly, others may have different intuitions. Plato himself, the father of Platonism, imagined that we have souls that perceive Platonic ideas. That does seem like a causal activity. Perhaps some people have only a more limited intuition that Platonic truths cannot directly cause anything in the natural world, but indirect causation or supernatural causation are fine. I concede that if you find this possibility palatable, you will have a way out of the challenge. For what it's worth, this view seems counterintuitive to me.¹⁴

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13 This objection was presented to me by an anonymous referee.

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Abstract

Many philosophers believe that when a theory is committed to an apparently unexplainable massive correlation, that fact counts significantly against the theory. Philosophical theories that imply that we have knowledge of non-causal mind-independent facts are especially prone to this objection. Prominent examples of such theories are mathematical Platonism, robust normative realism and modal realism. It is sometimes thought that theists can easily respond to this sort of challenge and that theism therefore has an epistemic advantage over atheism. In this paper, I will argue that, contrary to widespread thought, some versions of theism only push the challenge one step further and thus are in no better position than atheism.

Keywords: Platonism, Reliability Challenge, Benacerraf-Field Argument, Theism