



## 5

# No Coincidence?\*

*Matthew Bedke*

### 1. INTRODUCTION

I will be discussing the following Coincidence Argument.

- (1) Normative beliefs are about *sui generis*, causally inefficacious, normative facts. (Non-Natural Purport<sup>1</sup>)
- (2) Causal [/Evolutionary] forces pushed us toward forming our normative beliefs and having the justifying grounds we have for those beliefs, but not *because* those beliefs represented any normative facts.<sup>2</sup> (Lazy Normative Facts)
- (3) There are many conceptually possible arrangements of non-natural, normative facts, including the absence of any, that are consistent with the causal[/evolutionary] facts and their influence on normative beliefs and their justifiers. (Many Conceptual Possibilities)

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<sup>1</sup> This is meant to preclude non-cognitivist treatments of the discourse. Whether it includes “non-metaphysicalist” views like Parfit’s is trickier. I think that it does so long as quietism is not a veiled form of non-cognitivism.

<sup>2</sup> The “because” clauses are causal-explanatory. The justifying grounds I have in mind are intuitions and the beliefs that feed into reflective equilibrium, though the Argument is not wedded to this epistemology. Whatever we base our normative beliefs on (in virtue of which they are meant to be justified), the explanations for why we have those bases do not aver to the truth of the normative beliefs they putatively support. Also, this premise basically grants that one horn of Street’s Darwinian Dilemma is least desirable, namely, the one that holds that evolutionary forces pushed us toward certain normative beliefs because those beliefs are true. Non-naturalists should be with me on this.



- (4) In relatively few of the possibilities in (3) do our normative beliefs represent normative facts (if such there be).<sup>3</sup> (Rare Alignment)
- (5) If (1), (2), (3), and (4), it would be an epistemic coincidence were we caused to form normative beliefs that represent the normative facts. (Conditional Coincidence)
- (6) It would be an epistemic coincidence were we caused to form normative beliefs that represent the normative facts. (Coincidence)

The epistemic upshot is meant to be this: when the Coincidence Argument is seen to apply to some set of our normative beliefs, Coincidence defeats any justification antecedently enjoyed by those beliefs. I take the Argument to roughly capture what exercised me in my (2009) and to perhaps more roughly capture the worries that Gibbard (2003: ch. 13), Joyce (2001, 2006, forthcoming), Ruse (1986), Street (2006, 2008), and others are keen to push, and Enoch (2011: ch. 7), Fitzpatrick (forthcoming a, b), Huemer (2005: 214–19), Kahane (2010), Schafer (2010), Shafer-Landau (2012), Skarsaune (2011), Wielenberg (2010), and others are keen to resist.

Of course, premises (1)–(4) are open to debate. But it is striking that those who accept these premises do not agree on whether a defeater threatens. Both sides try to make their case largely through metaphor and analogy, where skeptics suggest partners in crime with clear cases of epistemic defeat, and non-skeptics suggest innocence by association with clear cases of epistemic acquittal. My aspiration is to sort this out. This chapter is an extended attempt to see clearly what might be epistemically troubling about (1)–(4).

Let me proceed as follows. First, I will comment on the Argument and how it is related to similar arguments in the vicinity. Second, I will consider various attempts to bring the threat of epistemic defeat into sharper relief. Most of those attempts will be found wanting. In section 4, however, I articulate a principle—obliviousness—that does a better job. The problem with (1)–(4) is that they make normative beliefs oblivious to the normative facts (if such there be), where obliviousness is something like insensitivity of belief, justification, and explanation to fact.

<sup>3</sup> This basic idea has been put in terms of belief-forming processes failing to be reliable, beliefs failing to track the truth, or sheer coincidence of belief and fact, but all of these rely on some range of alternatives against which the evaluations of reliability, tracking, and coincidence are made.

## 2. THE “COINCIDENCE ARGUMENT” AND COINCIDENCE ARGUMENTS

I have formulated the Argument in terms of my preferred “cosmic coincidence” version of it. The bracketed alternative sticks to evolutionary debunking arguments that are more common in the literature. The evolutionary trimmings are inessential, however, for even if there are no significant evolutionary influences at play for some normative beliefs,<sup>4</sup> there will still be *some* complete causal explanation for why we have or tend to have the normative beliefs that we do. This explanation does not aver to non-natural normative facts, for those facts have no causal powers. That is part of the point of calling them non-natural. And noting this should generate as much a problem for normative non-naturalism as does an evolutionary debunking argument. Even better, it need not rely on potentially controversial evolutionary explanations.

The Argument is more encompassing than some other debunking arguments. Some debunking arguments are aimed at *moral* beliefs. But the basic worry easily generalizes to all normative beliefs insofar as they concern non-natural matters. Similarly, Joshua Greene and Peter Singer have lately offered selective debunking arguments that target deontology-friendly normative judgments (see Greene et al. 2008; Singer 2005). They typically rely on premises about what differences are morally relevant differences, or premises about the inferiority of judgments when and because they issue from certain cognitive processes, and argue that deontology-friendly judgments are sensitive to morally irrelevant differences, or issue from suspect cognitive processes. The Argument is not so narrowly focused. It takes aim at consequentialism-friendly beliefs and indeed all other normative beliefs insofar as they concern non-natural matters.

Yet other debunking arguments hold that all substantive normative beliefs arise by processes, or in contexts, that are generally distorting or contaminating (Sinnott-Armstrong 2007; Street 2006). That sort of argument is fairly encompassing, but it fails to cast Non-Natural Purport, Lazy

<sup>4</sup> See Parfit (2011: 534–42). He thinks that the belief that *P*'s likely truth is a reason to believe that *P* is no more advantageous than the belief that *P* is likely true, for the latter suffices to produce the belief that *P*. He also thinks it was not advantageous to believe that we have reasons to promote the survival and hedonic well-being of ourselves and our children, to avoid agony, etc., for we are sufficiently motivated to do these things without the aid of beliefs about reasons for them. Regarding the Golden Rule, he thinks it is hard to see how evolutionary forces helped to instill belief in it. Parfit is probably not considering all the relevant selective pressures. Be that as it may, the more general cosmic coincidence worry is immune to such controversies.

Normative Facts, Many Conceptual Possibilities, and Rare Alignment in leading roles.

Some moral epistemologists seem to endorse something like the Argument, but occasionally try to rely on fewer premises. Sharon Street, for example, does not talk of conceptually possible normative facts in her 2006 paper except to say it is conceptually possible that pain counts in favor of that which causes it (2006: 148). In her 2008 paper, however, the range of conceptually possible arrangements of normative fact plays a central role in her summary of the Darwinian Dilemma. There, what is too coincidental is that “evolutionary pressures affected our evaluative attitudes in such a way that they just happened to land on or near the true normative views among all the conceptually possible ones” (2006: 208–9).

Richard Joyce (forthcoming) is less sanguine about appeal to a range of possibilities. He does not think “counterpossibilities” are needed to establish the claim that a process is not truth-tracking. He simply emphasizes the claim that evolutionary explanations for our normative beliefs and belief-forming processes do not aver to normative facts. For him, this lack of explanatory role seems to suffice to establish the absence of truth-tracking. So he sees a quicker route to our conclusion that only goes through Lazy Normative Facts. I do not. Showing that truth-tracking wasn’t *selected for* is not yet to show that normative beliefs actually *fail* to track truth, that it would be improbable (coincidental) were they to represent the facts, that the processes producing our beliefs do not reliably output true beliefs, or some such.<sup>5</sup> As Joyce himself notes, the causal (or evolutionary) stories by themselves are silent about what the normative facts are—their explanations do not aver to real normative facts—and so they are silent on whether or not evolutionary or causal forces have distorted our normative beliefs or pushed them toward conformity. For this reason we should be careful when we say that normative beliefs are the product of a *non*-truth-tracking process. This is ambiguous between the claim that the process has been shown to be unreliable and the claim that causal explanations for the process do not aver to the target facts. Our premises only make use of the second claim.

Sometimes moral epistemologists drop reference to non-natural normative facts (Street 2006) or indeed to real facts (Joyce forthcoming). Though one might try to construct a coincidence-type argument that applies to normative naturalism or irrealist views, non-naturalism is a nice test case for seeing whether there is an epistemic *problem* at all. Non-naturalism makes our job easier by separating out the normative facts from the facts that could enter into causal explanations, so we can focus on the relationship between (1)–(4) and an alleged epistemic defeater. If we can bring the defeater into

<sup>5</sup> See also Copp (2008: 194–6).

relief, then others are free to craft analogous arguments for these other meta-normative positions. I am skeptical that the sort of defeater at play for non-naturalists extends to other meta-normative views. But my main concern is with non-naturalism as a test case.

One last remark on the Argument. I have stated its epistemic significance in a way that is friendly to epistemic internalism, which we can gloss as the view that the justificatory status of *S*'s belief that *P* strongly supervenes on *S*'s mental states. More specifically, I will be talking about an epistemic assessment of how well one proceeds in making up one's mind based on the information to hand.<sup>6</sup> We are all trying to make up our minds about normative matters, and meta-normative matters, and there are certain considerations we have to go on. If there is something about the world that is in no way accessible to us as we make up our minds, we should let the external chips fall where they may. We can still get our houses in order. If, on the other hand, using information accessible to us we can show that our normative beliefs are at best coincidentally true, or unlikely to track the non-natural facts, or at best inexplicably track them, or some such, we could only make up our minds in a procedurally justified manner by revising some of the beliefs that generate the difficulty. The possibility that procedurally unjustified beliefs might enjoy some other kind of justification is cold comfort. So what follows focuses on this kind of internalist, procedural justification, though perhaps similar worries can be cashed out in more externalism-friendly ways.

With all this in mind, let me turn to explore some opening moves in the debate.

### 3. OPENING MOVES

I think we can put the initial worry this way. Causal forces would push us toward the same normative beliefs, and would push us toward having the same justifying grounds for those beliefs, regardless of what the normative facts turn out to be. If so, it would be coincidental should those forces happen to push us toward accurate representation of whichever normative facts turn out to be actual. Just this much gets me worried.

Others try to ease my distress by appealing to some normative facts. They argue that, given that the normative facts are thus and such, it is no

<sup>6</sup> I won't comment on the tricky issues surrounding internalism here. Clearly, mental states are often about things external to the mind, and the information we go on is often information about things external to the mind. So it is not so easy to draw a line between internal items relevant to justification and external items that are not.

coincidence that some of our beliefs represent them. The salve is roughly this: Why talk about what the normative facts *could be*, and the number of conceptually possible arrangements, when we have justified beliefs about what they *are*? David Enoch says that, given that survival and reproductive success are good, we can explain why beliefs that they are good would non-coincidentally correlate with the facts, for it looks like evolutionary forces would have pushed us in the direction of having such beliefs (2011: 168–75). Erik Wielenberg says that if people with certain cognitive processes have rights, we can explain why we know we have such rights, for evolutionary forces would have pushed us in the direction of having the cognitive processes needed to be rights-bearers, and such processes would have led us to believe that we have rights (2010: 447–52). And Knut Skarsaune says that, if pleasure is good, we can explain why belief that it is good is truth conducive, for evolutionary forces would have influenced us to have this true belief (2011: 233–6). (Actually, he relies on a dilemmatic structure to either save the realist in the above fashion, or to concede to the skeptic.)

In each case, certain normative facts would help to explain why beliefs about those facts are not merely coincidentally correct. Enoch emphasizes that no particular explanation given need be the one that discharges the burden. So long as *some* explanation is available for the non-coincidental correctness of normative beliefs the problem is (re)solved (2011: 171). Ideally, there are several such explanations yielding a decent stock of justified normative beliefs, enough to ascend from there via rational inferences to an even bigger set of justified normative beliefs and perhaps even normative theories.

It is at this point that you might wonder whether we are entitled to rely on beliefs about what the normative facts are to get the relevant explanations for non-coincidental. It helps me to think through a familiar analogy outside of normative theory. If we wonder whether our experiences as of an external world are largely correct what we do is rely on experience, and experience-based beliefs, to assuage our fears. We do think that evolutionary forces, *inter alia*, have pushed us toward representation of facts of the external world; we think that a large swath of such beliefs reliably track truth. But these assurances are all built on the back of experience, and experience-based beliefs. That is OK so long as we are *prima facie* justified in relying on experience out of the starting gate, as it were. It can then play a role in vindicating its deliverances, and there is nothing question-begging about that vindication. Turning back to normativity, experience as of an external world alone does not vindicate the thought that normative beliefs adequately represent the normative facts. But do not some normative beliefs enjoy *prima facie* justification just as some beliefs about the external world do? If so, we can also rely on them out of the gate, just as we can rely

on experience and experience-based beliefs out of the gate. So let us rely on prima facie justified normative beliefs. In turn, we discover that causal forces have pushed us toward representation of some normative facts. In both cases, we do not wind up vindicating *every* belief about the external world and *every* normative belief. And perhaps proceeding this way *cannot* deliver universal debunking. But in both cases we find adequate representation of fact and the ability to further prune and revise.<sup>7</sup>

What shall we make of these opening volleys? It is as though proponents of the Coincidence Argument—let us call them *skeptics*—maintain that we must think each of some set of possible arrangements of normative fact are *equally epistemically* likely unless there is reason for thinking otherwise. They think we could break this symmetry if we had some causal explanation for why fact and belief would adequately align. But we do not. If nothing breaks the symmetry, adequate alignment between belief and fact is surely coincidental. Opponents of the argument—let us call them *realists*—grant that there is no purely causal explanation for why belief and fact would adequately align. And they grant that there are lots of conceptually possible arrangements of normative fact. They point out, however, that we have prima facie justification for believing that we are in some subset of all those possibilities, a subset wherein the evolutionary or causal forces have adequately pushed our beliefs toward alignment with fact. Ranging across this subset, belief-forming processes are reliable enough, belief sufficiently tracks truth, etc. For the realist, there is a mixed normative-causal explanation for adequate alignment. And why not help ourselves to our prima facie justified beliefs in the explanation, just as we help ourselves to beliefs justified by experience when we generate causal explanations for the non-coincidental correctness of perception?

I think this puts some pressure on skeptics to say more about why realists are not entitled to rely on their prima facie justified normative beliefs to locate them in an area of possibility space where there is adequate alignment. In the next few sub-sections, let me develop a couple of lines of argument on behalf of skeptics, and consider replies by realists. Things will be looking pretty good for the realist here. It won't be until section 4 develops

<sup>7</sup> Street (2008: 216–17) grants this, but wishes to draw a distinction between good and no good accounts of reliability. I am puzzled by her ensuing discussion. It seems like good normative theory will help sort out which starting points are likely true, and which belief-forming processes are reliable. I have already cited Greene and Singer as examples of people who start with prima facie justified normative beliefs and evolutionary theory to identify kinds of normative beliefs (deontology-friendly) as likely false, and the processes that produce them as unreliable, while identifying other kinds of normative beliefs (consequentialism-friendly) as likely true, and the processes that produce them as reliable. I don't mean to agree with their assessment, but just to point out a project that parallels the partial vindication of experience by relying on experience.

coincidence as obliviousness that we will see what is problematic about premises (1)–(4).

### 3.1 Random or Unreliable Analogies

Here is one thing the skeptic might say. Despite the prima facie justification of some normative beliefs, seeing that premises (1)–(4) hold is tantamount to realizing one's beliefs were generated *randomly or unreliably*. Drawing out the thought, Street describes a case where you learn that your views about Jupiter have been implanted in you by a hypnotist who picked them out of a hat (2008: 214). In that case, one cannot justifiably rely on one's Jupiter beliefs to discover that the hat-drawing hypnotic process tracked Jupiter truths. There are a lot of possible Jupiter facts, and it would be too coincidental to suppose that the hat-drawing hypnotic process happened to align belief with fact. Similarly, Joyce describes a couple of cases involving belief pills. In one, you learn that you took a pill that induced the particular belief that Napoleon lost the battle of Waterloo (2006: 179). In another, you learn that you took a pill that induced you to have beliefs about Napoleon in general, where various environmental factors helped to determine *which* Napoleon beliefs you formed, but where you would not have *any* Napoleon beliefs at all without the pill (2006: 181). In both cases, the relevant Napoleon beliefs have been defeated.

These are interesting cases, yet they are not clearly analogous to the Argument. Street tells us that the hypnotist picked the Jupiter views out of a hat, which most of us would reasonably take to be a random process, or one generally known to be unreliable. Similarly, forming beliefs by pill is reasonably taken to be random or unreliable. So the problem with using these cases as damning analogies is that it might not be similarly clear that the ex ante reasonable attitude toward the causal processes that influenced normative beliefs is suspicion that they are random or generally unreliable. To help see the point, consider a case where you learn that a book published by Kendall Hunt induced your Jupiter and Napoleon beliefs. In that case we would not assume that this is a random or generally unreliable way to form beliefs. It is just historical information that is epistemically benign (at least for those unfamiliar with Kendall Hunt; if that's too loaded with epistemic relevance for you, imagine the history is about the paper or the ink of the book). The realist can reasonably wonder why the historical information supplied by the Coincidence Argument is not similarly benign.

On this point, consider two kinds of skeptical case. In one case you realize is that it is *possible* that you are a brain in a vat with the same experiences you now have, but where your beliefs are largely false. In another case you realize is that the entire population of earth *has gone through a random*



*selection procedure* at birth to determine which half of the population will be envatted (and handless) for the rest of their lives and which will roam the earth unmolested. Now, maybe the first, purely modal, scenario induces some skepticism. But the second, probabilistic, scenario is far worse. It strikes me that Street's Jupiter case and Joyce's belief pill cases look more like the second skeptical scenario, where we reasonably believe that randomization or unreliability has intervened, whereas the Coincidence Argument does not clearly introduce such processes and seems more analogous to skepticism based on the mere possibility of envatment.

Having said that, I like the Jupiter and Napoleon cases, and I do think they have features that generate the same coincidence concern as is found in the Argument. It is just that these cases have *extra* features that give rise to further epistemic difficulties. This might lead realists to reasonably dismiss them as disanalogous and so non-probative of the normative situation. Let me save further discussion of how these cases are relevant for section 4. As we shall see, it is the fact that they feature oblivious beliefs that makes them damning analogies, where obliviousness can be pulled apart from process that we *ex ante* reasonably believe to be random or unreliable. Before getting to that, I want to discuss some other lines of argument available to the skeptic.

### 3.2 Generic Skepticism?

Perhaps the skeptic should categorize the Coincidence Argument as an instance of generic skepticism. For one way to argue that each conceptual possibility is equally epistemically likely, despite putatively justified beliefs that favor some possibilities over others, is to argue as follows. If your putative justification cannot discriminate between scenarios in that you would have the same justification across the two scenarios, that putative justification cannot favor some of those scenarios over others. In the classical skeptical case the thought would be that the appearance as of having hands cannot discriminate between the possibility that one is envatted (and not handed) but made to have the appearance as of having hands, and the possibility that one has hands that reflect light into one's eyes, etc., etc. . . . So these scenarios are equally epistemically likely. Neither is favored over the other by one's putative evidence of it appearing as though you have hands. *Mutatis mutandis*, perhaps one's putative *prima facie* justification for normative beliefs cannot discriminate among conceptually possible arrangements of normative fact. The justifications are non-discriminatory because we realize they are fixed by the causal ways of the world, so you would have the same justification for your normative beliefs across the possible scenarios where we hold the non-normative ways of the world fixed and vary the

normative ways of the world. Perhaps one is thereby unjustified in believing that some one of these possibilities obtains rather than others.

If that is the point, realists can reply to skeptics in the standard ways. One could appeal to contextualist accounts to grant lack of justification when skeptical possibilities are salient, but maintain justification when they are not salient. This raises the interesting possibility that by making Non-Naturalist Purport contextually salient one introduces possibilities that need to be ruled out to have justified belief, just as raising BIV scenarios raises possibilities that then need to be ruled out. On such a view, justified normative belief would ebb and flow between attainable and elusive depending on whether the non-naturalist has her metaethics in view. Alternatively, one could be Moorean, where agents that cannot discriminate between scenarios (skeptical and non-skeptical) are justified in thinking they are in a non-skeptical scenario. Some of these agents will be lucky in that their external environment will cooperate while others will be unlucky in that their external environment will not. But procedurally they are all justified in thinking they are in the lucky scenario. Or so the thought goes. Whatever the response, realists can relax if their normative beliefs are no worse off than their beliefs about having hands.

### 3.3 Begging Questions?

So what if we let realists justifiably rely on some normative beliefs to explain non-coincidental alignment between belief and fact? What if we leverage these beliefs: reproductive success is good, we have certain rights, pleasure is good? Skeptics are then likely to vent some frustration. Joyce, for instance, says that the above authors have “speculated,” “stipulated,” and “conjectured” about the normative facts, whereas they need to make the views “plausible” before they can debunk the debunkers (forthcoming). Street says “It is no answer to this challenge simply to assume a large swath of substantive views on how we have reason to live... and then note that these are the very views evolutionary forces pushed us toward” (2008: 214).

Of course, skeptical frustration is misdirected if it fails to grant *prima facie* (defeasible) justification for some normative beliefs. If they are not *prima facie* justified, why the Coincidence Argument? Realists would lack justification for their normative beliefs before the skeptic utters word one. So I do not think we can charge the realist with speculation, stipulation, conjecture, or the like until we convincingly establish defeat of that *prima facie* justification.

In addition, the skeptics are at risk of arguing in circular fashion. For it can look as though they assume one’s normative beliefs lack *prima facie* justification (and hence cannot help locate one in possibility space) to argue

one into a conclusion that is meant to count as a defeater for said prima facie justification. Not a classical kind of circularity, but one that assumes lack of justification to show lack justification.<sup>8</sup>

Unfortunately, some realists seem to mischaracterize the nature of their burden, and that gives the skeptics a false sense of security. Enoch suggests that he is providing a defeater for a defeater by offering explanations of non-coincidence that rely on normative premises (2011: 170 n. 41). But you cannot defeat a defeater by relying on the defeated belief. That would be like acknowledging that you are not justified in believing a wall is red after learning it is bathed in red light half the time, but then enlisting your belief that the wall is red, *justified by how red it looks*, to defeat the defeater.

We should not think of the replies on behalf of realists above and elsewhere as attempts to *defeat a defeater* or *reinstate justification*. Instead, they should be cast as expressions of incredulity that there is a defeater in the first place. Unless realists can be made to see the defeater they are well justified in relying on their (still) justified normative beliefs to account for various ways in which their beliefs are non-coincidentally true. The response is not to charge them with begging the question, but to show that there is indeed a defeater there.<sup>9</sup>

Until that is done, realists might reasonably see the Coincidence Argument as turning a blind eye to prima facie justification, as a premature refusal to let justified normative beliefs pare down possibility space, as smuggling in suppressed and unjustified premises about randomness or general unreliability, or as a recipe for generic skepticism. It is no wonder they are not yet worried.

### 3.4 But Still... an Inexplicable Alignment?

So far we have seen explanations for why we would tend to believe P, for some normative propositions P that we antecedently justifiably believe

<sup>8</sup> Cf. Schafer (2010).

<sup>9</sup> Another form of begging the question is purely dialectical and is not at issue. It is the sort you get when you use premises your opponent does not justifiably share in an attempt to convince him of some conclusion. As far as the Coincidence Argument is concerned, the background project is for the realist to make up her mind about normative non-naturalism and belief in particular normative propositions. The Argument is meant to offer up some considerations that should make her retract her views in the face of prima facie justification. When making up her mind she can use premises she is justified in believing even if others do not share those views. (But, really, if we cleanly separate out the first-order normative beliefs from the second-order metaphysical interpretation of their contents and focus on the former, who thinks they lack prima facie justification for some relevant normative proposition to which the realist is helping herself?)

(pleasure is good, survival is good, etc.). Suppose we do this one-by-one for many normative propositions P and theorize from there.

Perhaps there is a residual explanatory gap not yet addressed. For there is this related, second question: Granting that we have gotten these normative facts right, would we would get the normative facts right *as such* (Gibbard 2003: ch. 13)? Essentially, this is a demand that we explain why our belief-forming processes would reliably track the normative truths *whatever they turn out to be* (perhaps within a reasonable variation of possibilities, but certainly across some possibilities we have no prima facie reason to think actually obtain).<sup>10</sup> The demand can be met in the case of perception of the external world. Not only is there actual alignment between many beliefs and facts, but there would be alignment across a range of nearby possibilities where the facts change a bit.

Before we ask whether the demand is met in the normative case, we should ask whether it is a fair explanatory demand in the first place. I'm not sure what to say. On the one hand, it is questionable that lack of explanation for some kind of reliability is a defeater, for it is questionable that some showing of reliability is needed for procedural justification. As noted above, we do not need to show that perceptual experience, or the beliefs based on them, reliably track truth before justifiably relying on them. More worrisome would be a positive showing of unreliability, but the Argument does not supply that.<sup>11</sup>

One way of developing Gibbard's worry is not to demand an explanation of reliability prior to having justified normative beliefs, but to demand that the initial justified reliance on normative belief eventually lead to an account of reliability. I like to think of this as probationary epistemology. The basic idea is this: One can justifiably rely on basically justified beliefs (*a*) until one comes to have justification for believing in their reliability after sufficient inquiry, perhaps by appealing to the very beliefs enjoying probationary justification, in which case their justificatory status becomes secure, or (*b*) until one fails to come across such justified beliefs about reliability despite sufficient inquiry, in which case the probationary justification lapses and the beliefs are no longer justified. If these are sound epistemic ideas,

<sup>10</sup> Regarding mathematical Platonism, Field has a similar worry that "how our beliefs about . . . remote entities can so well reflect the facts about them" is *in principle* inexplicable (Field 2005; cf. Clarke-Doane forthcoming).

<sup>11</sup> Even if an explanation of reliability is needed, it is not clear how robust the reliability has to be. In the case of experience of the external world, it is not literally the case that we would reliably track truths *whatever* they turn out to be (hence the parenthetical about reasonable variation). Given that, it is not clear to me that we do not get analogous reliability across reasonable variation in the normative case, especially once we are allowed prima facie justified normative beliefs to help settle how the normative facts vary with variations in the non-normative facts.

one might complain that the probationary justification of normative beliefs has lapsed, whereas experience-based beliefs have passed their probationary justification and earned secured justification.

This probationary epistemology is worth further exploration. But I think there might be a quicker route to skepticism. Rather than try to show normative beliefs are unreliable, or show that we cannot explain how they could be reliable after sufficient inquiry, perhaps the thing to focus on is their insensitivity to the facts they are about. This is related to reliability worries, but more narrowly focused on what one believes in nearby worlds where one's beliefs are false. I think the best way to develop this thought is in terms of obliviousness, so let me turn to that now.

#### 4 COINCIDENCE AS OBLIVIOUSNESS

I want to show that premises (1)–(4) of the Coincidence Argument ensure that normative beliefs, justifications, and explanations are robustly insensitive to fact. Sensitivity is usually discussed as a condition on knowledge, where one's justified true belief is sensitive if (defn.) in the nearest possible world(s) where the belief is not true, one would no longer believe it. We are talking about procedural justification, so conditions on knowledge are not directly relevant. Still, when making up one's mind about whether to believe P it does seem relevant whether, were P false, one would have believed that P. Realizing that this is the case should cause some concern. Realizing in addition that there is some erstwhile justifying basis J for the belief that P that would be the same were P false should cause even more concern. And finally, realizing that, were P false, the same explanation would hold for why one has the justification J and belief that P should be even more disconcerting.

Let us say, then, that the belief that P based on justification J is *oblivious* to the target fact when it meets these conditions—when, were P not the case, (i) one would believe that P, (ii) one would have the same justification J for believing that P, and (iii) the same causal explanations for why one believes that P and why one has justification J would hold.<sup>12</sup> I claim that realization that one's belief that P is oblivious to the target fact is a defeater for justification J. Once defeated, J cannot help to locate us in the space of possibilities. And that is what makes adequate alignment between belief and fact too coincidental to accept.

<sup>12</sup> It is not clear to me whether we need (iii) to get defeat. In classic cases of defeat, like the red wall case discussed below, (i) and (ii) seem to suffice. But the addition of (iii) makes the case for defeat for normative non-naturalism that much better.

Premises (1)–(4) of the Coincidence Argument ensure that normative beliefs about basic non-natural facts are oblivious. Let *prima facie* justification do its work, so we take ourselves to be in some world where the causal forces conspired to adequately align normative belief with fact. So anchored, we wonder what we would believe, and what justification we would have, and why we would have it, were the basic normative facts other than we believe them to be. We realize that everything we believe about the natural world can be held fixed in these scenarios we are imagining. We need only imagine scenarios where the basic normative facts differ or do not exist, so that pain isn't bad, or pleasure is not good, or some such (always construed as a difference in non-natural fact of the matter). Were that the case, we would have the same normative beliefs, the same justification for them (e.g. it would still seem as though pain is bad, pleasure is good, and so on), and the very same causal explanations for why we have those beliefs and those justifications would apply. Our beliefs are oblivious to the facts. Justification defeated.

Generic skeptical cases do not exhibit this defeater. Let us grant that one has justification for believing that one has hands, and so one centers oneself in a range of possibilities where belief and fact align. When one wonders what one would have believed if one didn't have hands, the nearby scenarios to consider are those where one lost one's hands in a tragic accident. In those scenarios one would no longer believe that one has hands, and surely one's evidence for being handed would differ. So the belief that one has hands is not oblivious to the fact. This mirrors application of sensitivity requirements on knowledge.

Obliviousness helps to see how Street's Jupiter case and Joyce's belief pills cases introduce conditions analogous to (1)–(4) of the Argument (as well as additional epistemic difficulties already discussed). In Street's case, for any given Jupiter belief, if that belief were false one would still believe it, one would have the same justification for so believing, and the same explanation for why one has the belief and justification would hold—namely, the hypnotist pulled that slip out of a hat. In Joyce's cases, for any given belief about Napoleon, if the belief were false one would still believe it, one would have the same justification for so believing, and the same explanation for why one has the belief and justification would hold—namely, the pill (plus environmental factors) induced the belief. That these processes are additionally known to be unreliable or random is an extra difficulty. But we could have a string of more benign historical information—about the publisher of the book, the ink, etc.—that cumulatively meet the obliviousness conditions and thereby constitute defeat.

My hope is that when this epistemic principle of obliviousness is spelled out and seen to apply whenever the conditions of premises (1)–(4) above

are met, it will bring the case for defeat into sharper relief. Admittedly, it is difficult to explain why fundamental normative statuses are as they are, so it is difficult to explain further why recognized obliviousness is a defeater.<sup>13</sup> Nevertheless, it does seem on its face to capture an epistemic concern, and it nicely categorizes and explains not only the above cases, but also classical cases of defeat. Consider the old red light illuminating a wall case. Initially you believe a red-looking wall is red. When you realize the wall is illuminated with red light, what seems to make that a defeater is obliviousness, or something very similar to it.

The main source of resistance in the normative case, I suspect, concerns the necessity of the fundamental normative truths. How can we consider what would be the case were pain not bad when we justifiably believe (*a*) that pain is bad, (*b*) that if pain is bad, then necessarily it is bad, and so (*c*) that necessarily pain is bad? However, we should not be glib about appeals to necessitation. Whether they block application of obliviousness depends on what kind of necessitation we are talking about and how we interpret the subjunctives.

#### 4.1 Obliviousness to Necessary Truths

There is nothing inherently strange about being oblivious to whatever turns out to be a necessary truth, at least for certain necessary truths. Consider Sally, who is justifiably convinced that the world is governed by deterministic laws of nature. While in a bar one night she reflects on this belief, and forms the conditional belief that if Dropout sinks the eight ball, necessarily Dropout sinks the eight ball. Dropout shoots and...sinks the eight ball. Now Sally justifiably believes that, necessarily, Dropout sunk the eight ball in that there is no nomologically possible world (i.e. one with the same past and deterministic laws) where Dropout did not sink the eight ball. Can she still intelligibly wonder what she would have believed were it not the case that Dropout sunk the eight ball? Yes. Nomological necessity does not get in the way. And, fortunately, Sally justifiably believes that, if Dropout hadn't

<sup>13</sup> How obliviousness applies to beliefs about the future and beliefs based on enumerative induction is a tricky matter. For some such beliefs, obliviousness will be a concern. (Not for all. Consider: What would I believe, and what would be my justification for believing it (and what explains both), were the sun not to rise tomorrow? Well, the nearest possibility where that happens is one where the laws of nature differ, or where there has been good evidence that sun will not rise. If so, my belief that it will rise is not oblivious.) But these will be special cases in epistemology generally, where we think that there are grounds for justified belief—e.g. some uniformity of nature thesis—despite forms of insensitivity. Non-naturalist realists have offered no reason for grouping normative facts with facts about the future and the unenumerated so as to enjoy those justificatory grounds.

sunk the eight ball, she wouldn't have believed that he did, and would have lacked justification for believing it. Maybe he would have set her up for an easy win. In any event, her belief is not oblivious.

Or consider Claire, who sells glacier water. She justifiably believes that water is  $H_2O$ . Moreover, she has read enough philosophy to justifiably believe that if water is  $H_2O$ , then necessarily it is  $H_2O$ . So she thinks that necessarily water is  $H_2O$ . As we like to say, there is no metaphysically possible world where water is not  $H_2O$ . Can Claire still intelligibly wonder what would be the case if water were not  $H_2O$ ? This is a trickier case. It is easy to hear the question along the following lines: What would be the case if this stuff (splash it around for emphasis) were not this stuff (again, splash it around for emphasis)? *That* seems unintelligible. In other words, if we think of this necessity as secured by a special kind of reference enjoyed by these terms, where they pick out the same referent directly and rigidly, then perhaps the question is not really intelligible.

Suppose so. Still, non-naturalists should not take comfort in the example. For they eschew theories of co-reference that would make our normative subjunctives as problematic as the one above about water. They think that "bad" refers to a different property than any natural one. If they are right, then when we ask what would be the case were pain not bad we are not asking about what would be the case were something not itself. We are asking about what would be the case if pain had a different normative property than the one we take it to have, or no normative property whatsoever. Unlike the case of water, there is no threat that the meaningfulness of the subjunctive is ruled out by a special kind of referential relationship.

To aid discussion, it helps to distinguish two ways one might justifiably believe the necessity of substantive normative truths. One way is derivative and parasitic on justified beliefs in actual substantive normative truths. In that case, one's justified belief about *which* substantive normative truths are the necessary ones is derived from (a) the general belief that normative truths are necessary, and (b) beliefs in actual, substantive normative propositions, where the justification for (a) does not depend on having justified beliefs of type (b). For example, one might justifiably believe that some supervenience principle holds a priori because it is analytic:<sup>14</sup> necessarily, if some object O has normative status S, necessarily any object that is identical to O in all non-normative respects has normative status S. That would be a general, non-substantive normative belief. If one also justifiably believes that some episode of pain is bad, one can then infer that, necessarily, anything identical to that episode of pain in all non-normative respects

<sup>14</sup> Though how we are justified in believing the necessities is not relevant, so long as their justification is separate from the justification of the normative statuses of things.



is bad. That is the sense in which this episode of pain is necessarily bad.<sup>15</sup> Alternatively, one might justifiably believe that basic normative principles are necessarily true, justifiably believe that an actual basic moral principle is *an action is right iff and because it maximizes happiness*, and infer that, necessarily, an action is right iff and because it maximizes happiness.

However general beliefs about the necessity of truths in a domain are justified, the necessity of the truths does not insulate the particular beliefs in that domain from sensitivity-type tests. To see this, set to one side the justified general belief that normative truths are necessary and focus on non-modal beliefs about what the normative facts are. Let us rehearse the example about pain being bad. If pain were not bad—consider this counterfactually if you like—would we still believe it to be bad, and would we have the same justification for so believing, and would the same explanation for why we have that belief and that justification hold? Unfortunately, the answers are all “yes”. So that belief is oblivious, as are the stronger modal beliefs derived from it and some general necessitarian thesis.

Let us craft an eight-ball case that features similarly oblivious beliefs, just to convince ourselves. Imagine that Sally learns that she took a pill that would cause her to hallucinate sinking eight balls. She now thinks the belief that Dropout sunk the eight ball oblivious. She cannot block obliviousness by noting that events that did take place are nomologically necessitated, as though there is a problem even considering the obliviousness questions because they take us to counter-possible worlds. Obliviousness of the belief about the actual event ensures that she cannot justifiably locate herself in the right space of nomic possibilities, so she does not know if she is asking after counter-possibilities or genuine possibilities. To know that she must first settle what the actual world is like, and she lacks justification for beliefs about it insofar as they are recognizably oblivious.

Now, replace sinking the eight ball with the badness of pain, nomic necessity with normative necessity, and the pill with premises (1)–(4) of the Coincidence Argument, and you have an analogous problem on your hands. The realist cannot block obliviousness by noting that normative statuses are necessitated, as though there is a problem even considering the sensitivity-type questions because they take us to normatively impossible

<sup>15</sup> Some views about a posteriori knowable identities would be structurally similar. We might know a priori that water is the stuff that meets some set of criteria associated with the concept of water, and then discover a posteriori the nature of the stuff that actually meets those criteria. We would then be able to infer the substantive necessity that water is that stuff. Those who endorse this view of things should have no problem testing for the obliviousness of the beliefs about the nature of the stuff that meets the relevant criteria. Obliviousness of those beliefs would ensure that one cannot justifiably locate oneself in the right space of metaphysical possibilities.

worlds. Obliviousness of the belief about badness ensures that she cannot justifiably locate herself in the right space of normative possibilities. What is possible and what is impossible depends on what the actual world is like, and we lack justification for beliefs about it insofar as they are recognizably oblivious.

So far I have only discussed one way of justifiably believing in the necessity of substantive normative truths. The second way of being justified is more direct—it is not via inference with a premise concerning actual substantive normative propositions. Perhaps, for example, one is more directly justified in thinking that *necessarily* pain (or an episode of pain like *that*) is bad. Maybe I know directly the modal status of this synthetic claim, or synthetic moral principles. Would that make it harder to intelligibly apply the subjunctives that test for obliviousness?

It might seem so. For it looks like our counterfactuals have built-in counter-possibility. But this is a pretty cheap way for a justified belief to gain immunity from the threat of obliviousness. The necessity is still part of the content of the belief, so it should be possible to show a belief with that content—or any content—is oblivious or not.

To handle the situation, we can think of the obliviousness subjunctives as asking after *allodoxic* possibilities, not counterfactuals. Allodoxic possibilities are false belief possibilities—they are those we can assume to obtain contrary to what we actually believe and our justifying bases for believing it.<sup>16</sup> Assuming our actual beliefs are false and justifying bases misleading, we can then emphasize the third component of obliviousness: How much of our explanatory picture of the world would have to change to explain how our beliefs and justifications get things so wrong?

To see how this works, consider the belief that water is H<sub>2</sub>O and all our justification for believing it. To consider the allodoxic possibility that it is not H<sub>2</sub>O we assume for the sake of further inquiry that it is not H<sub>2</sub>O (and never has been), and then examine what adjustments to our explanatory picture of the world would have to change to explain why we nevertheless have all this justification/evidence/reason in favor of the false belief that it is H<sub>2</sub>O. There is a lot of explaining to do, of course. Have the chemists been lying to us? What of the chemistry I think I know that explains why water has some of the interesting properties it has, like the fact that it expands when it freezes? We can see that the belief that water is H<sub>2</sub>O does not meet the obliviousness criteria, interpreted in terms of an allodoxic possibility.

<sup>16</sup> I prefer this way of thinking about the questions over near cousins (e.g. counter-actuals and various ways of separating two dimensions of intension). Those alternatives either get at slightly different questions, or get at the same questions in more confusing ways. Also, it seems natural to ask after allodoxic possibilities with the subjective mood. But if it bothers you, try indicatives.

Neither would the modal belief that, necessarily, water is  $H_2O$ . Assuming that is false for the sake of argument, we would have a lot of explaining to do for why we have the false belief and the misleading evidence we have.<sup>17</sup>

Now, assume it is not the case that, necessarily, pain is bad, as part of an allodoxic possibility. Let us hold fixed the non-normative ways of the world (as we justifiably believe them to be). Focusing on the third part of the obliviousness criteria, what of our explanatory picture of the world needs to change to explain how we nevertheless have all this justification/evidence/reason in favor of the false belief that, necessarily, pain is bad? For example, what of our causal-explanatory picture must change to explain why we have the intuition that it is bad? Well, nothing. In the assumed scenario, there is no additional or different explanation for why we (ex ante) justifiably believe pain is necessarily bad. If some evolutionary explanation explains why we think pain is necessarily bad, and explains why we have the justifying bases for so believing, that same explanation holds under the allodoxic possibility that pain is not necessarily bad. This belief is oblivious.

We avoid this result if we deny that these allodoxic possibilities are conceptual possibilities, or hold that our justifications constitutively depend on the normative facts of the matter (no facts, no justifications). I do not see how the former can be squared with non-naturalist realism, whereby basic, substantive normative beliefs are about stance-independent facts that cannot be known merely by reflection on concepts. And the latter cannot be squared with procedural justification and causal closure of the natural world, for when making up our minds about normative matters we do not have the non-natural facts to go on, and if we did the natural world would not be causally closed. I see no other way of avoiding the defeat.

#### 4.2 Better Safe than Sensitive?

Nevertheless, there are some things that worry me about obliviousness. First, it is a cousin of sensitivity requirements on knowledge, which have been called into question. I take some comfort in the fact that non-obliviousness is a condition on procedural justification with a few more bells and whistles than sensitivity. But these days some prefer a safety condition on knowledge in lieu of a sensitivity condition, in part because of apparent difficulties when applying sensitivity to modal truths. A belief that *P* is safe if (def.) in many(/all) nearby possibilities where one believes *P*.

<sup>17</sup> Similarly, if you wonder about being envatted as the actual state of things, you have a lot of explaining to do. A good deal of your beliefs and justifications regarding the external world would be explained not via interaction with the external world, but by interaction with some systematically deceptive device.

I have suggested that the modal concerns might be overstated. Nevertheless, it would be nice for the skeptic were normative beliefs in non-natural facts unsafe as well as oblivious. The problem here is figuring out which possibilities are *nearby*. Are possibilities where the (necessary) normative facts are not as we believe them to be nearby? Maybe. One measure of nearness is how much of our ordinary explanatory picture must be shifted to adequately explain what is going on in a target possible world. BIV worlds are obviously far off on this metric. But in worlds where the (necessary) normative facts are other than we believe them to be nothing in our causal-explanatory picture of the world need be shifted. So maybe our normative beliefs are unsafe insofar as they are about non-natural facts. If they are unsafe and insensitive in the ways described above, call our normative beliefs *robustly oblivious* to the facts. Realization that our beliefs are robustly oblivious is an even better defeater than mere obliviousness.

Unfortunately, I am not at all confident about what the metric of nearness is for safety checks. I worry that safety involves a nearness metric that is far too deferential to the beliefs we are testing to provide epistemic checks with real bite. So I will not pursue robust obliviousness any farther. The skeptic's clearest case rests on mere obliviousness.

## 5. THE MOOREAN REPLY

Here is another thing that worries me about obliviousness. While I find obliviousness a compelling defeater I am not inclined to abandon my normative beliefs. Pain is bad, torturing people at random is wrong, P's likely truth is a reason to believe that P, and so on. But it is important to bear in mind that the Coincidence Argument does not imply that we are unjustified in believing these things, but rather that we are unjustified in believing these things insofar as they are about non-natural normative facts. For the argument relies on a premise about non-natural purport. This bears directly on a Moorean reply to the skeptical conclusion. Let me turn to it.

It often helps to notice that one is not forced to accept the conclusion of a valid argument populated by premises one already accepts. There is always the option of rejecting one of the premises, and this is the rational thing to do when one is more justified in believing the negation of the conclusion than one is justified in believing the conjunction of the premises. Parfit makes this move in relation to evolutionary debunking arguments. His preferred formulation is the following:

- (1) [Our normative] beliefs were often advantageous, by causing us to have true worldly beliefs which helped us to survive and reproduce.

(2) Because these normative beliefs were advantageous, natural selection made us disposed to have them.

(3) These beliefs would have had the same effects whether or not they were true.

Therefore

(4) These beliefs would have been advantageous whether or not they were true.

Therefore

(5) Natural selection would have disposed us to have these beliefs whether or not they were true.

(6) We have no empirical evidence for the truth of these beliefs.

(7) We have no other way of knowing whether these beliefs are true.

Therefore

We cannot justifiably believe that these beliefs are true. (2011: 512, 525–6)

In both the epistemic and practical cases, one of his responses is that we are more certain or justified in normative claims—e.g. when a belief is likely true, we have reason to believe it (p. 521), and torturing children for fun is wrong (p. 544)—than we are of the premises of the skeptical argument.

Parfit identifies (7) as a weak link (in addition to premise (2)). But it is important to note that (3), and so also (4) and (5), relies on a suppressed premise: that normative beliefs are about non-natural facts.<sup>18</sup> Without this, there is little reason to think that normative beliefs would be selected for or caused regardless of their truth. If the fact that an action is right just is the fact that an action maximizes happiness, and the belief that an action is right just refers to this fact, it might not be adaptive to believe that actions are right regardless of whether they maximize happiness. At least, I would need to hear more to be convinced.

The import of a non-naturalist suppressed premise is this. One can get a lot of mileage out of an apparent threat to beliefs no one is willing to abandon, e.g. that torturing people at random is wrong. But if the skeptical argument relies on the premise that these beliefs are about non-natural entities a clear way out of the problem is to abandon the offending meta-ethical position. We can leave Parfit's Moorean data intact and reject non-naturalism.<sup>19</sup> This also helps us to see that the argument is not self-defeating. It does presume a certain kind of normative significance: certain considerations available to the mind count as epistemic defeaters. But the argument only

<sup>18</sup> Things are complicated by Parfit's "non-metaphysicalism." I think we can safely put this in the non-naturalist camp so long as it is not a veiled form of non-cognitivism.

<sup>19</sup> See also Bedke (2009: 205).

undermines that claim when conjoined with a meta-normative claim about Non-Natural Purport.

Even better, our reaction to the Coincidence Argument might itself provide some evidence that our normative beliefs are not about non-natural facts. Normally, we expect beliefs about matters of fact to go out of existence when we receive defeaters. Perhaps failures to obey this expectation can be explained away on a case-by-case basis. But it would be much harder to explain why all beliefs about a certain domain of fact (the normative) are systematically recalcitrant in the face of what we take to be good defeaters for those beliefs. This, I submit, is the situation the realist faces when she realizes that her normative beliefs are systematically recalcitrant in the face of the coincidence-as-obliviousness defeater. The fact that she is not the least inclined to abandon her normative commitments in the face of the defeater is some evidence that these normative commitments are not beliefs about non-natural properties after all.<sup>20</sup>

So it is looking as though resistance to the Coincidence Argument is fueled primarily by steadfast commitment to one's normative beliefs, and this can lead some to think there must be something wrong with the Coincidence Argument. But that position feels compelling only because we have not clearly separated out normative commitments and meta-normative options. The least justified premise is the one regarding normative non-naturalism. And it becomes even less justified when one realizes that one's normative beliefs are recalcitrant in the face of a defeater for justified belief in non-natural fact.

## 6. CONCLUSION

I have tried to sort through some of the key moves in the coincidence literature. To my mind, the skeptical case is best expressed in terms of obliviousness, and we have seen that the modal status of the target domain offers no absolution.

One thing I have not addressed is how the points might generalize to, say, mathematical Platonism. I think that extensions of the argument are problematic. We can intelligibly wonder what would be the case were pain not bad. A meta-normative theory then steps in to inform the subjunctive. Under non-naturalism we may interpret the subjunctive one way, where we consider counterfactuals or allodoxic possibilities about properties and facts entirely distinct from any natural ones (though supervenient upon them). Naturalism would have us interpret the subjunctive differently, as

<sup>20</sup> See also Bedke (forthcoming).

concerning natural properties and facts, in which case it *might* be as problematic as subjunctives about water not being H<sub>2</sub>O. And such subjunctives are just difficult on a non-cognitivist meta-normative view.

When we turn to mathematics we do not get similarly intelligible first-order questions to be glossed in different ways by different meta-mathematical positions. I'm not sure what we are asking when we ask what would be the case if 2+2 did not equal 4 (without an alternative conceptual schema that makes sense of this, and thereby changes the subject). So I'm not sure that we get so far as to ask what a Platonic gloss would be, or a structuralist gloss, or a naturalist gloss, or what have you. Sure, it is intelligible to ask what would be the case were some Platonic objects different, or if they enjoyed different relations with the natural world than we think they do.<sup>21</sup> But given the status of the first-order mathematical claim, and the unintelligibility of its negation on first order (non-meta-mathematical) grounds, it is very hard to see how it could be about Platonic objects. At least, this is a problem the mathematic case runs up against that the normative case does not.<sup>22</sup>

Be that as it may, when we follow the argument in the normative case we see a defeater on the horizon. The natural reaction is to dig in our heels on the normative commitments. This reaction makes most sense if the normative commitments are not beliefs about non-natural facts. So, at the end of the day, we get a defeater for our normative beliefs insofar as they are about non-natural facts, and some evidence that they are not about non-natural facts after all.

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<sup>21</sup> Cf. Clarke-Doane (2012).

<sup>22</sup> Even if there is parity with the mathematical case, I think a similar resilience of mathematical belief in the face of the defeater can be brought to bear as some evidence that those beliefs are not about Platonic objects after all.

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