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# 15 God and Fundamentality: From Fundamentality to Perfection

**Abstract:** This chapter explores a path from the premise that something is *fundamental* to the premise that something is *perfect* (in a certain sense to be defined). I begin by identifying a "fundamentality" puzzle, which challenges us to explain how anything could be fundamental. To unpack the puzzle, I consider a series of potential solutions that, for various reasons, only push the explanatory question deeper in. Then I present an account of fundamentality in terms of a purely perfect fundamental nature, and I show how this account has an explanatory advantage over others. Finally, I consider some objections that help draw out the implications of my account of fundamentality.

## 15.1 The Puzzle of Fundamentality

How could anything be *fundamental*? A fundamental thing, as I am thinking of it, would be ungrounded and inexplicable in terms of anything prior.[1] Could there be something like that? If so, how?

These questions invite us to seek some explanation of fundamentality. An explanation of fundamentality would demarcate fundamental things from non-fundamental things in terms of some relevant difference between things of these two sorts. For example, suppose some turtle were somehow a fundamental piece of reality. Then we might expect there to be some *relevant difference* between this turtle and every other turtle that depends on prior causes. In particular, we might expect the fundamental turtle to have some special nature that would explain how that turtle could be fundamental rather than dependent.

However, it is not obvious how we might explain fundamentality. Part of the problem is that we are not accustomed to experiencing things as fundamental. Instead, we experience things that call for an explanation in terms of prior things. A turtle, for example, depends on prior causes that jointly explain the turtle's existence. Same for trees, towers, and thoughts: each of these calls for a further explanation in terms of prior causes. If there is something that is instead not

**1** For the purposes of this inquiry, we may leave open whether a fundamental reality may, in some sense, be self-grounded or self-explained.

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dependent on anything, then it is an open question what, if anything, could set it apart from everything else.

We can translate the question of what might explain fundamentality into what I shall call, "the fundamentality puzzle." The fundamentality puzzle has two pieces:

1. Fundamentality: there is at least one fundamental thing.
2. Explicability: everything calls for some further explanation.

It is not my purpose here to argue for (1). Rather, I want to see how something could be fundamental in the light of (2). For the sake of focus, I will examine fundamental *concreta* (causally-capable) things. The challenge, then, is to see how anything concrete could be fundamental if everything calls for a further explanation.

There are many reasons one might like to have an account of how something could be fundamental. I note three benefits. First, an explanation of fundamentality would serve the investigation into the general structure of reality. If we can see why a certain portion of reality is relevantly different from dependent portions of reality, then we can gain insight into the general structure of any reality that would have a foundational portion. Second, this query serves natural theology by contributing to the identification stage of cosmological arguments for a supreme being; opening a pathway from *fundamental existence* to *perfection* contributes to the project of identifying the nature of a first (or fundamental) cause. Finally, this inquiry is relevant to philosophical theology. On classical models of God, God is fundamental. How? An explanation of how *anything* could be fundamental could help illuminate the divine nature (if there is one). Thus, by seeing what it takes to be fundamental, we position ourselves to see more of what is at stake in developing a theory of a divine being's relationship to fundamental reality.

In this chapter, I will seek to solve the fundamentality puzzle. My strategy is to identify some relevant difference between fundamental and non-fundamental things. If we can identify a relevant difference, then we can see how, despite the general call for an explanation, there could be an exception to the rule. I will examine candidate explanations of fundamentality in terms of these features: (i) being total, (ii) being necessary, (iii) being a tautology, (iv) being inexplicable, and (v) being perfect. I will show how, on a certain minimal conception of "perfection," feature (v) can unlock a deeper solution to the fundamentality puzzle than the others.

## 15.2 Some Proposals

In this section, I will consider some proposals for how one might try to explain fundamentality. In each case, I will say why I think the proposal in question does not solve the fundamentality puzzle. By seeing why these proposals fail, I hope to bring into greater light the challenge of explaining fundamentality.

### 15.2.1 Totality

Perhaps something could be fundamental by being the *total* of all that exists. After all, there is nothing beyond the total of everything: everything includes everything. Therefore, there is nothing beyond the total that could *ground* (cause or explain) the total. For this reason, one might think the total is therefore ungrounded—and therefore fundamental.[2]

However, I don't think the totality proposal pulls out the root of the fundamentality puzzle. Consider, first, that while there is indeed nothing beyond the total of everything, it does not follow the total is thereby ungrounded. There is another option: the total might be grounded in something *within*. For example, perhaps the total includes some foundational item upon which all other things ultimately depend. Then the total itself might depend on the foundational item together with what it produces.

Second, and more fundamentally, even if a total *were* fundamental, its being a total does not itself tell us *how* (or why) it could be fundamental. To see what I mean, imagine a world with a turtle that includes all other things. In this world, a turtle is the total of everything. But is this world even possible? One might think not, for one might think that no turtle could exist without a prior ground or cause; then, no turtle could be an ungrounded total of everything. If there is an exception to this rule, one might think the exception would be *relevantly different* from every other turtle we know about. Consider that if some blob, *whatever it is*, were an ungrounded total of reality, that blob would be unlike dependent things. The question remains: how? Is there some relevant difference between the grounded and ungrounded? If so, what's the difference? Merely stipulating that something is the total of reality does not answer this deeper question. Totality is not enough.

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**2** It is controversial whether a total reality must include something fundamental. Cameron (2022), for example, defends the view that nothing is fundamental by challenging arguments against various types of infinite chains. On the other side, Rasmussen (2019) defends the view that the total of everything must include something fundamental, not by arguing against infinite chains, but by arguing that any total of dependent things must depend on something independent.

In fact, the totality proposal is part of what generates the fundamentality puzzle. For whether a totality is itself fundamental or includes something fundamental, it follows that *something* is fundamental. That was the first piece of the fundamentality puzzle: something is fundamental. Pointing to this piece does not tell us anything about how it might fit with the other piece—the piece defined by the general call for a further explanation. The whole challenge is to see how these pieces might go together.

### 15.2.2 Necessity

Some philosophers have proposed that the chain of grounds bottoms out in a *necessary* thing, where a necessary thing is something that *cannot* fail to exist.[3] Here is one rationale for this proposal. Unlike necessary things, non-necessary things *can* fail to exist. For this reason, some have proposed that non-necessary things call for an explanation to account for why they exist *rather than not*. Furthermore, they have proposed that the explanation will be in terms of prior causes or grounds. Therefore, non-necessary things cannot be fundamental. A necessary thing, by contrast, is importantly different. It cannot fail to exist. So, there is no reason to explain why it exists *rather than not*. Or if there is an explanation of its existence, that explanation could simply be in terms of the *impossibility of its non-existence*: i.e., it exists because it cannot not. There is no need, then, to posit some prior conditions upon which a necessary thing would depend. (A related proposal is that fundamental reality is *eternal*, and that being eternal sets it apart from all dependent things. My remarks about necessary existence apply mutandis mutatis to this proposal about eternal existence.)

Here again I do not think this solution pulls out the root of the puzzle. I have two points. First, even if a *certain* call for an explanation is removed, it does not follow that every call for an explanation is removed. In particular, some necessary things may still be explicable in terms of more fundamental grounds. For example, one might think *sets* are grounded in their members, irrespective of whether the sets are necessary (e.g., {1} is grounded in 1). Moreover, if one is a "trinitarian" theist, one might think that there is a structure of dependence between necessary divine persons within God (e.g., where God the Son depends on God the Father). While we may debate examples, my point here is that appealing to necessity does not *by itself* remove every reason one might have to expect a further explanation.

**3** For a defense of this proposal, see Pruss and Rasmussen (2018).

Second, and more fundamentally, the necessity proposal relocates the puzzle. Suppose there is a necessary concrete reality. We now face the challenge of answering this question: what sort of concrete reality could be necessary? Merely stipulating that fundamental reality is necessary does not itself tell us what could be necessary.

To draw out the challenge, consider the following "concrete foundation" model of reality. According to this model, abstracta are grounded ultimately in concrete particulars (e.g., in particulars that instantiate properties and/or in mental activities of particular beings). These concrete particulars in turn are grounded ultimately in a foundational portion of reality that exists on its own, ungrounded. Now suppose contingent realities are indeed dependent on prior grounds or causes. Then this foundational portion of reality is not contingent; instead, it has necessary existence. Still, we may wonder what it could be. In particular, what relevant difference, if any, might set it apart from things that are merely contingent. If being a turtle doesn't make the difference, what might? An answer to this question would give us a deeper explanation of how *anything* (big or small, turtle or not) could be a necessarily existent foundation.

To appreciate the challenge that remains, it can help to distinguish between a *sign* of fundamentality an *explanation* of how something could be fundamental. So far, we have identified possible signs of fundamentality. For example, necessity may be a sign that something is fundamental (because it lacks a certain call for an explanation). Totality may be a sign that *something or other* is fundamental (to explain non-fundamental chains without circularity). Still, signs of fundamentality don't themselves explain fundamentality. The challenge remains: what sort of thing could be set apart as fundamental?

### 15.2.3 Tautology

Perhaps fundamental things are facts that are self-evidently true, like a tautology. For example, the fact [1=1] is self-evidently true. For this reason, [1=1] does not call for a further explanation; we don't wonder why a number happens to equal itself. It is simply self-evident. Thus, no further explanation is required. Perhaps, then, everything is grounded ultimately in self-evident facts.[4]

My response involves clarifying the fundamentality puzzle. First, the puzzle I have in mind is about *metaphysical* grounds, not epistemic grounds. While [1=1]

**4** A related idea is that the basic, unexplained facts are mundane in a way that don't call for further explanation. Cf. Baras (forthcoming).

may be self-evident and thereby epistemically ungrounded, it does not follow that [1=1] just exist "out there" all on its own. My own view is that facts are grounded in the items those facts describe. Thus, for example, I think [1=1] is grounded in the number 1 together with the equals relation. This view illustrates how a fact could be epistemically self-evident while still metaphysically grounded.

Second, the fundamentality puzzle is not about facts, but about concrete particulars. Even if I am mistaken in my view about the grounds of facts, there still remains a puzzle about how a particular *non-fact* could be fundamental. For example, in keeping with the subject of this anthology, one might wonder how *God* could be fundamental. God is usually conceived of as a fundamental being, not as a fact. So, a theory of fundamental *facts* (whether epistemic or metaphysical) does not explain how a particular concrete *thing* could be fundamental.[5] The fundamentality puzzle remains.

### 15.2.4 Inexplicability

It has been suggested that fundamental facts do not admit of a further explanation (Dasgupta, 2016). Perhaps we can apply this suggestion to particulars, too: a particular is fundamental if and only if it *cannot* be further explained. Problem solved.

I believe this proposal points in the right direction. For I am inclined to think that whatever is ungrounded does not just *happen* to be ungrounded. Rather, it is the sort of thing that *cannot* be grounded.

Still, this question remains: what sort of thing cannot be grounded? The inexplicability proposal merely tells us that *whatever* is fundamental, it couldn't have *not* been fundamental. Great. But this information, if correct, merely inspires the original question: how might something be fundamental? If we say that fundamental things must be ungroundable, we have yet to say what concrete particulars, if anything, *could* be ungroundable.

To hammer down this point, consider again the case of an ungrounded turtle. Suppose some turtle were somehow fundamental and therefore ungroundable.

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**5** Perhaps we could try analyzing fundamental things in terms of fundamental facts. For example, we could suppose that God is fundamental because the fact that God exists is fundamental. However, this analysis only reframes the puzzle at hand. We can now ask why and how a fact about a concrete thing could be fundamental. If there is a fact about a concrete thing that admits of no further explanation, what is that fact? In other words, what is the nature of the concrete thing specified by a fact that admits of no further explanation? This question is a more elaborate way of asking our original question: what sort of concrete thing could be fundamental? So the puzzle remains.

Still, we might wonder *how* it could it be fundamental. We can say this much: the turtle is fundamental because it *couldn't have not* been fundamental. Still, this answer doesn't alleviate all curiosity. The deeper question remains: how could there be any turtle that *couldn't have not* been fundamental? How is this turtle different from all other turtles? What sets it apart? An answer to this question would provide a deeper explanation of its fundamentality.

## 15.3 The Perfection Proposal

I will now consider how we might explain fundamentality more fully. I will begin by clarifying a minimal concept of "perfection." I will then show why something that is perfect, on this concept, may be relevantly different from things that depend on a further ground.

Start with the concept of "perfection." The seed idea I will work with is this: *x* is a perfect being if and only if *x* has a *supremely great* nature.[6] I stipulate two necessary conditions for a supremely great nature. The first condition removes *imperfections*: a supremely great nature includes no imperfections, where an imperfection entails some limit with respect to some possible excellence (or great-making property). For example, *being unable to know that 2 + 2 = 4* entails a limit with respect to what that being can know, which is a limit with respect to an excellence. Excellences may include knowledge, virtue, powers to make valuable things, or other great-making properties. I leave open whether excellences may themselves be further analyzed (such as in terms of a relation to what beings could like for its own sake).[7]

The second condition for a supremely great nature fills in *perfections*: a supremely great nature includes only perfections, where a perfection is a property that entails some excellence without also entailing a limit with respect to that excellence. For example, *being wholly good* is a perfection if it does not entail any particular limit with respect to goodness, and if goodness is an excellence.

These conditions provide guiderails for a minimal concept of perfection. Together, they entail that a perfect being would be purely great (having only great-making properties) without any particular great-making limits. These con-

**6** I define "nature" as consisting of the essential properties of a thing (i.e., the properties it cannot fail to have).

**7** For an analysis of perfections in terms of idealizations of various excellences, see Oppy (2004, pp. 64–68). As far as I can tell, this analysis leaves open whether excellences may be universal or relative to certain essences. Thanks to Kha Andani for drawing my attention to this distinction.

ditions *leave open* which properties count as great-making and whether a purely great being would also be a maximally great being.[8] (I will consider questions about the implications of this concept of perfection in the objections section.)

The next step is to see how perfection might help explain fundamentality. There are two ways perfection might make the difference. First, perfection *removes* certain calls for a ground by clearing away imperfections that, if real, would call for a further explanation. Second, perfection fills in purely positive properties that arguably entail independent, fundamental existence. I will unpack both ideas.

Start with removing the call for an explanation. Some properties call for a further explanation because they are like other properties that call for a further explanation. For example, suppose fundamental reality were fundamentally *blue*. Then we might wonder, why blue? Why not red? The difference between blue and red does not appear to make a difference with respect to having a further explanation. For this reason, we may not expect fundamental reality to be fundamentally blue. After all, all colors equally call for a further explanation.

To remove the call for an explanation, we need to find some relevantly difference. For example, if we could somehow see why *blue* is different from other colors, such that only blue could be fundamental, then we could see why blue would be relevantly different. Unless we can identify such a difference, however, we are not in position to suppose that blue lacks a further explanation. Instead, we can expect that blue has some further explanation in terms of a prior cause or ground. In general, for any property *P*, we can expect that fundamental reality is not fundamentally characterized by *P* unless we can identify how *P* is relevantly different from other properties.

The next step on this path is to see why *imperfections* are not relevantly different from properties that call for a further explanation. An imperfection (as I have defined it) is a property that entails some *limit* with respect to some excellence. For example, having knowledge of all even numbers *and no knowledge of odd numbers* entails a certain limit with respect to knowledge. We can define this "limit" in knowledge as marking a boundary between what it knows and what could be known. (In general, we may define a "limit" as a property that entails a

**8** This minimal concept may help us avoid certain challenges Speaks (2018) raises for perfect being theology. For example, Speaks considers the worry that, if a perfect being would have the greatest *conceivable* power, then a perfect being would be impossible, for it would have powers that turn out to be metaphysically impossible. The concept of perfection I offer here avoids this worry because it does not commit us to supposing that a perfect being would have the greatest conceivable power. I say more about Speaks account in Rasmussen (2019), where I develops a non-modal account of "perfection," similar to the account given here.

boundary between one possible degree and a higher possible degree.) Now we face the obvious question: why *that* limit? Is there something special about even numbers, such that fundamental reality could only know them? The problem here is that, unless we identify some special reason why only even numbers could be known by a fundamental reality, we have not identified a *relevant difference* between knowing even numbers and knowing odd numbers. Hence, we have not removed the call for a further explanation.

My idea, then, is that we can remove a certain call for explanation if we remove fundamental imperfections. Suppose, for example, fundamental reality has a fundamental knowledge-entailing property P. Then we may suppose that P does not itself entail any particular limit on its knowledge. For this supposition removes the call for explaining the limit—i.e., for explaining why fundamental reality has a property that entails *that* limit (among other possible limits).[9] (This account leaves open whether fundamental reality may have certain *non-essential* limits, which it only has contingently.)

Perfection not only *removes* a certain call for grounds (by removing imperfections), but perfection may also add a call for fundamentality. A classical view is that a perfect being would be *too great* to depend for its existence on other, prior things. If so, then absolute perfection may independently entail independent, fundamental existence.

Here is one way we might unpack this idea. A purely great nature has no room for properties that would call for a further explanation. For example, a purely great nature would lack particular fundamental limits that call for a further explanation. Instead, it would be purely great, without fundamental limits. If, instead, fundamental reality were partially great (e.g., a mixture of great and non-great essential properties), then the partial degree would call for an explanation: why that degree? Pure greatness, by contrast, does not call for further explanation in the way partial degrees would. By removing the calls for a further explanation, what remains is a reality that *calls* for no further explanation.[10]

A related idea is that any ground of a thing imposes certain constraints that detract from pure greatness. For example, if some *x* grounds some *y*, then *y* has

**9** Koons (1997) raises similar considerations in his argument for the conclusion that the basic (uncaused) properties of a fundamental (uncaused) reality are not *finitely measurable degreed properties*. Finite degrees, like limits, call for a further explanation.

**10** Pure greatness is also unlike specific determinates, like red, that are arbitrarily different from other specific neighbors. Specific determinates call for an explanation: why red rather than blue? Pure greatness is different because, unlike red, pure greatness is not a determinate among arbitrarily different neighbors.

the particular property of *depending for its existence on x*. This particular property, one might think, imposes a certain constraint (i.e., depending on *x*). Pure greatness includes no such constraints, one might think. If that is right, then a perfect thing cannot be dependent. Instead, perfection entails independence.

At this point, one might wonder what, if anything, might ground *pure greatness*. Here is an Aristotelian idea. Pure greatness may be grounded in the fundamental being itself. This idea is different from the idea that some arbitrary limit is grounded in the being itself. For an arbitrary limit is precisely what invites the question: why ground *that* limit rather other equally arbitrary neighbors.? Pure greatness, by contrast, is not an equally arbitrary neighbor of imperfections (or any other property). So pure greatness is better suited to fill in the nature of a fundamental reality.

In summary, perfection unlocks a unique solution to the fundamentality puzzle. I call this solution, "the perfection proposal." The perfection proposal has two parts. First, we *remove imperfections* that would call for an explanation in terms of a prior ground. Second, we *fill in perfection* (in a complete way), which results in a call for no further ground. In this way, we identify a relevant difference between a fundamental thing and grounded things: a fundamental thing, unlike grounded things, would lack fundamental limits, boundaries, and arbitrary specificities that depend on some ground. A *perfect* thing, then, is precisely the sort of thing that would lack fundamental limits, boundaries, and arbitrary specifies. For this reason, a perfect thing is precisely the sort of thing that could be fundamental.

## 15.4 Objections and Replies

To further clarify what is at stake, I turn to some objections.

*Objection 1*. Why think there is any puzzle to solve? Perhaps there is no explanation of fundamentality. Instead, the foundation of reality is simply *whatever it must be* to explain the rest of reality. That's it.

*Reply*. There is value in seeing how we might explain something, especially if we can identify an explanation. What makes fundamentality puzzling (to my mind, at least) is that, by default, things seem to call for an explanation. It doesn't matter if we've had any prior experience with those things. Suppose we see a large red cube in the sky. We could still expect some explanation of the cube's existence, despite having no prior experience with explanations of red cubes appearing in the sky. If instead something has no further explanation (in terms of a prior ground or cause), we may wonder why not. What sets it apart? An answer

to this question would give us greater insight into *how* something could be fundamental.

A principle at work in this reasoning is the principle that, other things being equal, we can expect an explanation. This principle is itself a reason to expect an explanation of fundamentality. For if something lacks an explanation (in terms of a prior ground), we can then expect an explanation of this lack of explanation. If no explanation is available, perhaps the best we can do is live with mystery. However, by the light of the perfection proposal, an explanation is available. Therefore, we need not live with mystery in this case.

*Objection 2*. The perfection proposal goes too far. We can conceive of a fundamental reality that is not perfect. While we may have reason to shave fundamental imperfections (if they indeed call for a further explanation), it does not follow that fundamental reality must *have* perfections. Maybe fundamental reality is purely neutral, with no imperfections or perfections. Why fill in fundamental reality with any great-making qualities at all?

*Reply*. First, I acknowledge that I have not shown that a fundamental reality could not be purely neutral. Perhaps a fundamental reality could lack imperfections without having any perfections. That may be logically possible.

Still, the perfection proposal has certain advantages over others in relation to the *actual* world. Consider this path of thought. First, by experience, one might think the actual world includes certain specific kinds of "positive" (value-entailing) states, including a sense of beauty, feeling loved, and knowledge of the truth. Next, one might think positivity seeps to the foundation. For a foundation of our world would *ipso facto* have the resources to be a foundation for such valuable states, and one might think that having such resources is itself a great-making property. So, one might have reason to think fundamental reality is filled in with at least *some* greatness. Finally, to avoid arbitrary unexplained *gaps* in the fundamental nature of fundamental reality, one might suppose that fundamental reality is completely or purely great in its fundamental nature. The result of this line is that, if fundamental reality has some greatness, then it would be purely great (i.e., perfect) to avoid calls for a further explanation of its limits in greatness.

Second, the perfection proposal goes further in explaining why fundamental reality would be ungrounded. If we say that its fundamental nature is neutral, there remains the question of *why* that nature would preclude arbitrary limits, boundaries, or imperfections. A purely great nature, by contrast, is one that we can see would preclude arbitrary limits, boundaries, and imperfections. The perfection proposal provides a deeper solution, then, to the fundamentality puzzle. Theists who already believe that God is perfect may especially appreciate this result.

*Objection 3*. The perfection proposal does not go far enough. The classical view of God's nature includes *all* perfections, including perfect knowledge. But the

minimal account of "perfection" does not automatically entail all perfections. More to the point, the aspects of perfection that actually contribute to solving the fundamentality puzzle (i.e., by clearing away imperfections and filling in perfection without gap) do not thereby entail every classical attributes of God.

*Reply*. I consider it an advantage of my proposal that it is modest. First, my proposal does not *rule out* a fuller theory of the divine nature. So classical theists need not reject my proposal. Second, my proposal is also not committed to classical theism. So, non-classical theists need not reject the proposal, either.

Moreover, the modesty of the proposal may be a gift to those who are be worried about objections to various classical perfections (e.g., from the problem of evil, omniscience paradoxes, and omnipotence paradoxes, etc.). The more modest concept can then solve the fundamentality puzzle without thereby leading us into other, classical puzzles. Modesty reduces barriers.

Finally, the modesty of the perfection proposal can provide a foundation for additional fruitful research. The proposal identifies a minimal concept of perfection. The minimal concept is a seed concept that, not only helps us solve a certain puzzle, but also contributes to perfect being theology. Objections to certain fuller concepts of perfection could help carve away certain ideas without thereby carving away the seed concept. By starting with a minimal concept of perfection, we position ourselves to explore ways we might unpack this concept in ways that are consistent with actual reality.

## 15.5 Conclusion

Perfection can help explain fundamentality. The perfection proposal is helpful in two ways. First, it clears away fundamental imperfections, which helps clear away certain calls for a further explanation. Second, it fills in perfection, which helps explain why fundamental reality is not instead filled in with arbitrary limits, boundaries, or imperfections that would require a further explanation.

There is a bonus result. By seeing how perfection can explain fundamentality, we also open up a new pathway *from* a fundamental concrete reality *to* a perfect fundamental reality. Here are the steps in that path:

1. Suppose reality has some foundation (i.e., some ungrounded concrete layer of reality).
2. If reality has some foundation, then there is some explanation of the foundation's fundamentality (i.e., an account of why it is exempt from the general call for a further explanation).
3. If there is some explanation of the foundation's fundamentality, then that explanation is (most fully and completely) in terms of the foundation's perfection.

4. Therefore, reality has a perfect foundation.

Of course, not everyone will be in a position to take every step in this path. Still, I hope everyone reading this will appreciate the value of this path, either by seeing which steps not to take (and so which theories to avoid) or by seeing a new line to an interesting result.

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