

The Epistemic Asymmetry: Why Divine "Brute Facts" Differ Categorically from Naturalistic Termination

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Abstract

Building on recent debates over the Principle of Sufficient Reason, this paper identifies a fundamental asymmetry in how different types of "brute facts" function within explanatory frameworks. While naturalistic brute facts serve as epistemic terminators that halt rational inquiry, divine existence as a "brute fact" functions as an epistemic generator that opens limitless avenues of inquiry. This asymmetry reveals that the common objection "God is just a brute fact too" commits a category error by conflating fundamentally different types of explanatory termination. The analysis demonstrates that divine infinity creates what I term an "uncaused infinite epistemic cause": a reality that generates unlimited rational inquiry rather than terminating it, with profound implications for natural theology, epistemology, and philosophy of religion.

Keywords: brute facts, epistemic termination, infinite being, natural theology, explanatory adequacy, divine attributes, philosophy of religion

1. Introduction

A persistent objection to theistic arguments involves the claim that positing God merely replaces one brute fact (the universe's existence or rational structure) with another (God's existence), offering no explanatory advantage. This objection assumes that all brute facts function identically within explanatory frameworks: as ultimate stopping points that resist further rational investigation. However, this assumption conceals a fundamental asymmetry that has received insufficient philosophical attention.

This paper argues that brute facts fall into two categorically distinct types: **epistemic terminators** that foreclose rational inquiry and **epistemic generators** that open boundless investigative possibilities. Divine existence, even if granted as a "brute fact," belongs to the latter category, creating what I term an "uncaused infinite epistemic cause" that opens rather than restricts epistemic opportunity. This asymmetry undermines the standard parity objection and reveals profound differences in explanatory adequacy between naturalistic and theistic frameworks.

2. The Standard Brute Fact Objection

2.1 The Parity Claim

Critics of theistic arguments frequently deploy what we might call the "brute fact parity objection": if theists object to naturalistic brute facts (logical laws, physical constants, universe's existence) as explanatorily inadequate, then positing God as explanation merely substitutes one brute fact for another. The objection assumes functional equivalence between different types of unexplained realities.

This objection appears in various forms across philosophical literature. Mackie (1982) argues that theistic explanations face the same ultimate termination problems as naturalistic ones. Oppy (2006) contends that divine existence requires explanation just as much as natural existence. Rowe (1975) suggests that cosmological arguments fail because they cannot explain their own first premise regarding divine existence. More recently, Della Rocca (2020) has pressed the demand for explanation across all domains, while

Rasmussen (2014) has defended the legitimacy of necessary existence as an explanatory terminus. However, these discussions have not adequately distinguished between different types of explanatory termination based on their epistemic consequences.

2.2 The Assumed Equivalence

The parity objection rests on several implicit assumptions:

1. **Functional Equivalence:** All brute facts function identically as explanatory terminators (including the assumption that unexplained explainers offer no advantage over unexplained phenomena)
2. **Epistemic Closure:** Brute facts necessarily halt rational inquiry

These assumptions treat "bruteness" as a uniform property that affects explanatory adequacy in the same way regardless of the nature of the brute entity. However, this analysis fails to consider how the intrinsic properties of different types of beings affect their epistemic consequences.

3. The Epistemic Asymmetry

3.1 Epistemic Terminators vs. Epistemic Generators

Careful analysis reveals that brute facts function in fundamentally different ways depending on their intrinsic nature. We can distinguish two categories:

Definition 1: *Epistemic Terminators* - Brute facts that halt rational inquiry by their very nature. When declared unexplainable, they close off investigative possibilities and resist further rational exploration.

Definition 2: *Epistemic Generators* - Brute facts that open unlimited investigative possibilities by their very nature. Even when unexplained, they invite and enable extensive rational inquiry.

This distinction depends not on whether something is explained, but on what kinds of rational investigation the entity's nature makes possible.

3.2 Naturalistic Brute Facts as Inquiry Terminators

Consider typical naturalistic brute facts:

Physical Constants: If the fine-tuning of physical constants is declared a brute fact, rational inquiry terminates. There are no further investigative possibilities—the constants simply are what they are, end of story.

Logical Laws: Declaring logical principles as brute facts closes inquiry. We cannot investigate why these particular logical relationships obtain rather than others, or explore their deeper nature.

Universe's Existence: If the universe's existence is brute, investigation stops. No further questions about ultimate origination, purpose, or deeper explanation are permitted.

Consciousness: Materialistic "brute fact" approaches to consciousness essentially declare it emergent and inexplicable, terminating investigation into its deeper nature.

The pattern is clear: naturalistic brute facts function as epistemic **dead ends**. They cut short rational inquiry by definitional fiat: "that's just how things are, stop asking."

3.3 Divine Existence as Epistemic Generator

Divine existence, even as a "brute fact," functions entirely differently. God's nature as infinite, personal, rational, and perfect being generates boundless avenues of inquiry:

Divine Attributes: Investigation of omniscience, omnipotence, omnibenevolence, simplicity, eternity, immutability, and their systematic relationships (Swinburne, 2004; Leftow, 2012).

Divine Action: Study of creation, providence, miracles, incarnation, and divine intervention in history (see Torrance, 1995 for comprehensive treatment).

Divine-Human Relationship: Exploration of revelation, prayer, mystical experience, divine commands, salvation, and spiritual development.

Theological Synthesis: Development of systematic theology integrating divine attributes with divine action and human experience.

Philosophical Theology: Investigation of divine simplicity, divine knowledge, divine freedom, divine temporality, and divine perfection.

Revelatory Possibilities: If God exists, revelation becomes possible, opening entire domains of theological and spiritual investigation.

Experiential Dimensions: Divine existence enables mystical experience, religious experience, and spiritual practices as legitimate objects of inquiry.

3.4 The Infinite Nature Difference

The crucial difference lies in **infinity**. Finite brute facts, when declared unexplainable, exhaust their epistemic potential. But infinite being, even unexplained, contains unlimited epistemic richness.

God's infinity means that declaring divine existence "brute" does not terminate inquiry but **explodes** it into unlimited domains. An infinite being necessarily provides infinite investigative opportunities simply by virtue of being infinite.

4. The Uncaused Infinite Epistemic Cause

4.1 Conceptual Analysis

This asymmetry reveals divine existence as what I term an "uncaused infinite epistemic cause": a reality that, even if unexplained itself, generates unlimited explanatory and investigative possibilities. (I use "cause" here in the broad metaphysical sense of productive source rather than efficient temporal causation. For recent debates on causal relations and grounding, see Schaffer, 2016.)

The concept has four essential components:

Uncaused: Divine existence may be unexplained or self-explanatory (self-explanatory in classical theist accounts via aseity) **Infinite:** Divine nature contains unlimited epistemic depth **Epistemic:** Generates knowledge, understanding, and investigative possibilities **Cause:** Actively produces rather than terminates rational inquiry

Consider how Trinitarian doctrine exemplifies this generative capacity: the Trinity has spawned investigations in logic (divine simplicity and distinction), metaphysics (substance and relation), epistemology (divine knowledge and human knowledge), and ethics (divine love and moral perfection), creating entire research programs across multiple philosophical domains (for recent Trinity logic work, see Rea, 2003).

4.2 Productive vs. Terminative Function

This formulation captures the fundamental asymmetry:

- **Naturalistic brute facts:** Epistemic terminators that signal "Stop asking questions"
- **Divine brute fact:** Epistemic generator that signals "Begin unlimited investigation"

The asymmetry is not merely quantitative (more vs. fewer investigative possibilities) but qualitative (productive vs. terminative function).

4.3 The Practical Tension in Infinite Investigation

An infinite epistemic cause creates a profound challenge for the brute fact objection. If God exists as a brute fact, critics must explain why boundless research avenues constitute explanatory failure. How can infinite investigative possibilities represent epistemic poverty?

The objection becomes self-defeating: declaring God explanatorily inadequate because unexplained while acknowledging infinite investigative richness created by divine existence.

5. Systematic Comparison Across Domains

The epistemic asymmetry manifests consistently across major philosophical domains. To avoid charges of selective analysis, I apply uniform methodology: examining how each domain handles ultimate explanatory questions under naturalistic versus theistic frameworks.

5.1 Natural Science

Naturalistic termination: Physical constants as brute facts close off investigation (for accessible discussion, see Carroll, 2016 on fine-tuning) **Theistic generation:** Divine creation invites investigation of purpose, design, divine action in nature, teleology, and the relationship between natural laws and divine will

5.2 Logic and Mathematics

Naturalistic termination: Logical laws as brute facts foreclose further inquiry (cf. Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy entry "Platonism in the Philosophy of Mathematics") **Theistic generation:** Divine rationality enables investigation of the relationship between divine and human reason, divine knowledge, logical necessity, and mathematical Platonism grounded in divine ideas. Naturalistic approaches like Maddy's mathematical realism still terminate inquiry at unexplained mathematical facts.

5.3 Consciousness and Mind

Naturalistic termination: Consciousness as emergent brute fact exhausts investigation (see Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy entry "Consciousness" for overview) **Theistic generation:** Divine consciousness enables exploration of the image of God, divine-human psychological parallels, spiritual development, divine knowledge, and the relationship between finite and infinite mind

5.4 Ethics and Value

Naturalistic termination: Moral facts as brute evolutionary artifacts dead-end inquiry **Theistic generation:** Divine goodness enables investigation of divine command theory (Adams, 1999; Hare, 2001; see also Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy entry "Divine Command Theory"), natural law, moral theology, divine justice, and the relationship between finite and perfect goodness

5.5 Meaning and Purpose

Naturalistic termination: Meaning as human construction or evolutionary accident **Theistic generation:** Divine purpose enables investigation of cosmic teleology, individual calling, divine plan, eschatology, and ultimate significance

6. Philosophical Implications

6.1 Explanatory Adequacy Reconsidered

The asymmetry reveals that explanatory adequacy involves not merely solving specific problems but enabling continued rational inquiry. Explanations that halt investigation may be less adequate than unexplained realities that generate unlimited inquiry.

This suggests a new criterion for explanatory evaluation:

Principle of Epistemic Fecundity: Other things being equal, explanatory frameworks that generate unlimited investigative possibilities are superior to frameworks that terminate inquiry, even when the generative frameworks contain unexplained elements.

This principle contrasts with traditional explanatory virtues like simplicity, scope, and predictive power by focusing on investigative sustainability rather than immediate problem-solving. (This parallels Lakatos's emphasis on progressive versus degenerating research programmes in philosophy of science.)

The pragmatic implications are significant: generative frameworks incentivize ongoing research programs, foster intellectual curiosity, and sustain academic communities across generations. Terminative frameworks risk intellectual stagnation by declaring fundamental questions closed to investigation. Historically, medieval theology's emphasis on divine rationality and creation seeded the scientific revolution by encouraging systematic investigation of natural order as divine handiwork. This difference affects not only individual inquirers but entire disciplines and research traditions.

6.2 The Nature of Ultimate Explanation

Traditional philosophy assumes that ultimate explanations must themselves be explained or self-explanatory. The infinite epistemic cause suggests a third possibility: ultimate realities that generate infinite explanatory possibilities even if unexplained themselves.

This challenges the assumption that unexplained explainers are explanatorily problematic. An infinite epistemic cause may be explanatorily superior to explained finite terminators.

6.3 Worldview Assessment

The asymmetry provides a new framework for worldview evaluation. Rather than asking merely whether worldviews explain particular phenomena, we should ask whether they generate or terminate epistemic possibilities.

Worldviews that systematically terminate inquiry across multiple domains may be less adequate than worldviews that generate unlimited investigation, even if the latter contain unexplained elements.

7. Objections and Responses

7.1 The Infinite Regress Objection

Objection: If God generates infinite investigative possibilities, this creates infinite regress of explanation rather than solving explanatory problems.

Response: This conflates infinite investigation with infinite regress. Infinite regress involves endless chains where each step requires the previous step. Infinite investigation involves unlimited depth and richness within a single infinite reality. God as infinite being provides unlimited epistemic opportunities without requiring infinite explanatory chains.

7.2 The Accessibility Objection

Objection: Many of the investigative possibilities generated by divine existence are not genuinely accessible to finite minds, making the asymmetry less significant.

Response: Even partially accessible infinite investigation exceeds completely terminated finite investigation. Moreover, the accessibility objection applies equally to naturalistic frameworks: quantum mechanics, consciousness, and logical necessity are also partially inaccessible to finite minds, yet naturalistic approaches foreclose rather than generate investigation.

7.3 The Quality vs. Quantity Objection

Objection: The asymmetry focuses on quantity of investigative possibilities rather than quality of explanation. Many investigative possibilities may be spurious or unproductive.

Response: The asymmetry is qualitative, not merely quantitative. The difference lies in generative vs. terminative function, not simply more vs. fewer possibilities. Moreover, infinite being provides unlimited quality as well as quantity: perfect goodness, perfect knowledge, perfect power generate qualitatively superior investigative domains. Historically, classical theism has driven significant advances in mathematics (through divine perfection concepts), ethics (through natural law theory), and natural science (through rational creation theology), demonstrating productive rather than spurious investigation.

7.4 The Circular Investigation Objection

Objection: Investigation of divine attributes may be circular: we investigate God's properties using concepts derived from assuming God's existence.

Response: This applies equally to naturalistic investigation: we investigate natural properties using rational faculties whose reliability naturalism cannot guarantee (Plantinga, 1993, pp. 216-237). Moreover, circular investigation differs from terminated investigation. Even circular investigation provides epistemic engagement, while termination provides none. If circularity disqualifies theistic investigation, it equally disqualifies naturalistic investigation of ultimate questions.

8. Implications for Natural Theology

8.1 Reframing Theistic Arguments

The epistemic asymmetry reframes traditional theistic arguments. Rather than merely solving explanatory problems, theistic conclusions generate unlimited explanatory possibilities. This provides a new type of argument structure:

Corollary: The Epistemic Generation Argument

1. Naturalistic explanations halt epistemic inquiry
2. Theistic explanations generate boundless research avenues
3. Epistemic generation is superior to epistemic termination (given widely accepted explanatory virtues favoring theories that enable rather than foreclose continued investigation; compare Lipton, 2004 on inference to the best explanation)
4. Therefore, theistic explanations are superior to naturalistic alternatives

8.2 The Cumulative Case Approach

The asymmetry strengthens cumulative case approaches to natural theology (Swinburne, 2004; Mitchell, 1973). Each domain where naturalism terminates inquiry while theism generates investigation contributes to the cumulative epistemic advantage of theistic frameworks. This approach finds systematic development in Craig & Moreland's comprehensive surveys, which demonstrate how multiple lines of evidence converge toward theistic conclusions.

8.3 Beyond Problem-Solving

Traditional natural theology focuses on solving specific problems (fine-tuning, consciousness, moral facts). The epistemic asymmetry suggests focusing additionally on generative capacity—the ability to open rather than close investigative possibilities.

9. Conclusion

The epistemic asymmetry reveals a fundamental category error in the standard brute fact objection to theistic arguments. Divine existence functions as an "uncaused infinite epistemic cause" that generates unlimited rational inquiry rather than terminating it. This differs categorically from naturalistic brute facts that serve as epistemic terminators.

The asymmetry has profound implications for explanatory adequacy, worldview assessment, and natural theology. Explanatory frameworks should be evaluated not merely on their ability to solve immediate problems but on their capacity to generate continued rational investigation. By this criterion, theistic frameworks demonstrate systematic superiority over naturalistic alternatives across multiple domains.

The common objection "God is just a brute fact too" thus commits a category error by conflating epistemic terminators with epistemic generators. Far from being explanatorily equivalent, these represent fundamentally different types of reality with opposite epistemic consequences.

This analysis suggests that even if divine existence were granted as a brute fact, it would constitute the most explanatorily fecund brute fact possible—an infinite source of rational investigation rather than its termination. The choice is not between explained and unexplained realities, but between realities that terminate inquiry and realities that generate it into infinite epistemic opportunity. Future research might apply this epistemic

generation framework to evaluate specific fine-tuning models, examining whether multiverse theories terminate inquiry while theistic design hypotheses generate continued investigation.

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