CHAPTER 17

Certainty, Perfection, and Dogma

Presupposes: the self-vindication of difference (Ch. 1); the structural dependence of content on contrast (Ch. 2); the two infinities (Ch. 8); the ground/mind conflation (Ch. 10); the great moral conflation (Ch. 16).

Establishes: the two-dimensional classification of epistemic states; the perfection/infallibility distinction; the four-stage anatomy of dogma.

In brief. A clock that has shown the correct time for a thousand years is *perfect*; it could break in the next second. Perfection says no error has been detected; infallibility, that none is possible — a claim no finite evidence can carry. The subjective half of the confusion: the mathematician who grasps a proof and the dogmatist who clings to a creed feel *identical* conviction, because the feeling tracks emotional pull, never logical status. The objective half: to verify omniscience you would need omniscience — only God can prove God — and the omniscient-yet-simple guarantor classical theism requires conjoins the two infinities Chapter 8 opposed. Four stages take a standard from earned authority to severed foundation — and the book applies the verdict to itself: one self-vindicating claim; everything above it perfect, revisable, graded so.

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1 Introduction

Chapter 16 argued that the major ethical traditions have systematically confused empathic evaluation with orthotic assessment. They treat conformity to a standard as morality itself, when the standard is a derivative instrument whose authority rests on the empathic evaluations it codifies. But orthotic standards are not static. They are moral technologies, compressed records of prior empathic insight, valuable and revisable. What happens when they are declared irrevisable?

The answer is that the standard is severed from the empathic foundation that gives it authority: the instrument designed to serve morality becomes a substitute for it, so the tool displaces the thing it measures.

This chapter identifies the epistemological mechanism of the severance, which operates in two stages. The first (§§2–3) is the illusion of certainty: the absence of any reliable internal mark separating grounded from ungrounded conviction. The claim holds typically: the metacognition literature finds domain-limited signals of fluency and feeling-of-knowing (Koriat, 1993), so what the classification asserts is that no such signal tracks the logical status of a claim; signals of that kind exist. This allows dogmatic closure to masquerade as rational necessity.

The second (§§4–5) is the conflation of perfection with infallibility: the inference from "this standard has produced no detected errors" to "this standard cannot produce errors". Irrational certainty is the subjective condition that makes the conflation psychologically compelling; the perfection/infallibility gap is the objective condition that makes it epistemologically unjustified. Together they explain why revisable standards are fossilised into unreformable dogma.

The chapter proceeds in seven moves. It develops the two-dimensional classification of epistemic states (§2), diagnoses irrational certainty as the epistemological basis of dogma (§3), and establishes the perfection/infallibility distinction (§4). It then presents the impossible evidence argument and the two-infinities argument against infallibility's metaphysical precondition (§5), develops the four-stage anatomy of dogma (§6), applies the anatomy to the slavery case and three further domains (§7), and addresses objections (§8).

2 The Two-Dimensional Classification of Epistemic States

2.1 The logical axis

For any claim P, a question can be posed: can P's negation be truly held? If it cannot (if denying P generates a logical impossibility, or if the denial instantiates what it denies, so that any holding of the negation falsifies it), then P is logically closed. If it can (if there is any way for the negation to be both held and true), then P is logically open.

The axis must be put in terms of holding rather than of bare coherence, because the two come apart at the case the classification most needs, where the divergence is the framework's own finding. The negation of "difference exists" is coherent: Chapter 3's appendix exhibits a model of it, and Chapter 1 (§6.4) concedes that it holds unheld at a mindless state of pure equality. It is nonetheless unholdable, since every holding of it, in every mode, instantiates what it denies.

An axis defined over coherence would file the book's own foundation on the open side; an axis defined over holding files it where §4.2 independently places it. The self-vindication of difference is logically closed: its denial is coherent and cannot be held truly, which is the occupancy result of Chapter 1 (§6.4) and the Route 2 profile of §4.2 below. The claim that God created the universe is logically open, since its denial is coherent, whatever else may be said about it. The logical axis is binary: closed or open.

2.2 The emotional-pull axis

A methodological note. The emotional-pull axis receives its full theoretical treatment in Chapter 14, and nothing here depends on it. The classification needs only that thoughts carry emotional charges of differing intensity, a feature of epistemic life any reflective person can recognise. Affective epistemology describes it independently (Hookway, 2008; Brady, 2013; Friedman, 2019), and Damasio's (1994) demonstration corroborates it from the neurology: the removal of emotional markers degrades epistemic performance without impairing logical competence. The metaphysics of what a charge is belongs to Chapter 14. The classification is neutral among the answers, while the presupposes line records the dependency it actually carries.

The state the classification most needs to name is knowledge without conviction: evidence without endorsement, the logical axis settled and the emotional-pull axis flat. The one-dimensional analysis cannot characterise it at all. That such a state occurs is available to reflection and needs no clinical warrant.

The ventromedial-damage literature has been read as exhibiting it. On the somatic-marker interpretation of the Iowa gambling task (Bechara et al., 1997), healthy subjects develop a felt orientation that steers them from the disadvantageous decks before they can say why, while patients with ventromedial damage can often articulate which decks are advantageous and go on choosing badly. Whether that dissociation is affective, or instead a matter of what the participants explicitly knew, has been contested since Maia and McClelland (2004), whose exchange is unresolved. The classification takes no side, because nothing here depends on it: what it supplies is the coordinates for the state, not the evidence that it obtains.

For any claim P, two competing thoughts are available to the subject. The first is the thought that P could be different: that the contrast between P and not-P is a live possibility. The second is the thought that P cannot be different: that the contrast is closed. Each thought may carry an emotional charge (a positive or negative valence with a certain intensity) that draws the subject toward endorsement or pushes her away from it. The emotional-pull axis asks: which of the two competing thoughts carries the stronger emotional charge?

How do emotional charges attach to thoughts about possibility and impossibility? Through association and investment. A subject who has organised significant aspects of her life around a belief — relationships, sacrifices, identity, community — has made an emotional investment in its truth. The thought that P could be wrong threatens the investment; the thought that P cannot be wrong secures it. The greater the investment, the stronger the pull toward closure and the weaker the pull toward openness.

Smithies (2019) argues that phenomenal consciousness plays an irreducible epistemic role, the felt character of experience partly constituting its epistemic standing for the subject. Whether or not that stronger claim holds, the felt charge is at least causally significant, since it is what makes irrational certainty so resistant to correction by evidence alone. It explains the resistance without conferring rational standing: the rationality of a certainty is fixed on the logical axis (§3), not by the intensity with which it is felt.

One further role of the emotional-pull axis is discharged elsewhere but anchored here. The felt necessity that accompanies grasped proof, the phenomenon Kant read as reason's own authority, is the pull axis engaged by content whose denial is incoherent: valence responding to logical structure. Chapter 16 (§3.3) develops the point into an account of epistemic bindingness generally, for which the classification supplies the machinery. The logical axis carries the response-independent correctness conditions; the emotional-pull axis carries everything that ever gripped an agent about them.

2.3 The four states

Crossing the logical axis with the emotional-pull axis yields four epistemic states that the standard one-dimensional analysis does not distinguish:

	Pull toward *closure*	**Pull toward *openness***
Logically closed	Rational certainty	Irrational uncertainty
Logically open	Irrational certainty	Rational uncertainty

Rational certainty. The claim is logically closed, its denial one that cannot be truly held, while the thought of impossibility carries the stronger emotional charge. Logic and emotional pull align. The paradigm is a mathematician who understands a proof and feels its necessity. The self-vindication of difference is the paradigm case: no holding of the denial is a true holding of it, so the subject who grasps this is drawn toward the certainty that difference exists.

Irrational certainty. The claim is logically open, its denial one that can be truly held, but the thought of impossibility carries the stronger emotional charge. The subject feels that the alternative is unthinkable, despite its being perfectly coherent, because the emotional charge attached to closure vastly exceeds the charge attached to openness. The closure may be felt as impossibility, or as the alternative's being beneath evidence — the second form, which §3 separates from the first,

is the commoner. The paradigm: a dogmatist who cannot entertain the possibility that her belief might be wrong, not because she has evidence of its necessity but because the thought of its being wrong carries no emotional pull.

Rational uncertainty. The claim is logically open, while the thought of possibility carries appropriate pull. The subject recognises that the claim might be wrong, feels the pull of openness, and holds the belief with the tentativeness its logical status warrants. This is the healthy epistemic default for contingent claims. The label names the logical status and no degree of confidence: a contingent claim held with high confidence, its alternative kept improbable and never impossible, is rational uncertainty in the classification's sense, which is the state most well-founded empirical conviction occupies.

Irrational uncertainty. The claim is logically closed, but the thought of possibility carries the stronger charge — the emotional pull exceeds the intensity attached to its impossibility. The paradigm: a student who follows every step of a valid proof, agrees that each inference is correct, accepts that the conclusion follows, and yet cannot bring herself to believe it. Clinical anxiety exhibits the same structure in a different domain: the anxious subject knows that the feared outcome is extremely unlikely but cannot stop feeling that it is imminent.

2.4 Engagement with the literature

Four bodies of literature reinforce the classification's independent credentials. Williamson's (2000) knowledge-first epistemology correctly analyses rational certainty without addressing conviction disconnected from epistemic position, and the emotional-pull axis supplies what his framework leaves out. The epistemology of disagreement (Christensen, 2007; Elga, 2007; Kelly, 2010) operates on the logical axis; the classification reveals that some persistent disagreements are evaluation-disputes sustained on the emotional-pull axis, requiring the transformation Chapter 21 calls deep persuasion rather than evidential reassessment.

De Sousa's (1987) emotion-as-salience and Brady's (2013) attention-based account independently confirm the axis as a real dimension of epistemic life. Stanley's (2005) interest-relative epistemology converges from another side, since what is at stake bears on whether a subject counts as knowing. That places the axis within epistemic life without making it a criterion of rationality, because it marks what matters to the subject rather than whether her certainty is warranted.

Sosa (2007) develops a virtue-epistemological account in which knowledge is apt belief: belief that is accurate (true), adroit (produced by a competent faculty), and apt (accurate because adroit). The two-dimensional classification maps onto Sosa's framework. Rational certainty corresponds to apt belief with appropriate emotional endorsement; irrational certainty corresponds to belief that is emotionally endorsed without being apt. What the classification adds is the explanation of why inapt belief can feel identical to apt belief: the emotional-pull axis does not track the logical axis, so the subject has no introspective access to the divergence.

3 The Illusion of Certainty and the Epistemological Basis of Dogma

The most consequential feature of the four-state classification is that rational certainty and irrational certainty are, as a rule, phenomenologically indistinguishable from the inside. The classification's yield follows: since the "closed" cell holds only logical truths and self-vindicating claims, every empirical certainty is "open," and the diagnosis of irrational certainty is made on the logical axis together with an evidential judgement; the pull axis explains the persistence of the misjudgement. In both states, the thought that something cannot be different carries the stronger emotional charge. The subject in each state experiences the same phenomenal profile: conviction, closure, the felt necessity of the belief. The mathematician who grasps a proof and the dogmatist who clings to a creed feel identical certainty. The difference lies outside the feeling. The

mathematician's conviction is grounded, since the opposite of the proved theorem is contradictory, while the dogmatist's is not, since the opposite of the creed is coherent. Both experience the thought of impossibility carrying the stronger charge, so from the inside the two states are identical.

The claim is structural in one respect and typical in another. Structurally: what would distinguish the states from within is a felt mark of grounding, which the classification leaves nothing to carry such a mark: the felt charge is the same species of state in both cases, and an axis cannot register differences in what lies behind it. The calibration literature corroborates the structure without being needed for it, since extreme confidence dissociates from accuracy across domains (Fischhoff, Slovic, & Lichtenstein, 1977) — which is what one expects if the feeling tracks the charge rather than the grounding.

This is why dogmatic conviction is so resistant to correction. The feeling of certainty is a reliable guide only to which competing thought carries the stronger emotional charge, never to the claim's logical status. Cassam's (2019) epistemic vices — closed-mindedness, dogmatism, intellectual arrogance — receive their mechanism here: closed-mindedness is the disposition toward irrational certainty, the disposition for the emotional pull toward closure to overwhelm the logical openness of contingent claims.

Irrational certainty is the epistemological basis of dogmatic conviction. The dogmatist treats a logically contingent claim as though it were logically necessary: she does not merely believe strongly; she feels the impossibility of the alternative despite its being perfectly coherent. The mechanism can be stated in one sentence: the emotional response attached to closure does not refute the logical openness of the claim; it renders the openness experientially inaccessible. The doubt-thought is not entertained and dismissed; it is not entertained at all, because the competing emotional response is too intense for the alternative to gain a hearing.

If rational and irrational certainty are phenomenologically indistinguishable, how can they be distinguished? The answer is

external, never the strength of the feeling. Where the claim's negation is contradictory, the certainty is rational, since it tracks a real impossibility. Where the negation is coherent, the certainty is not thereby irrational: a coherent alternative may be held as merely improbable, and a certainty that holds it so is perfectly rational.

When certainty becomes irrational. Certainty becomes irrational when it treats a coherent alternative as impossible, or as closed to the evidence that could favour it — when what is logically open is judged closed, or held beyond the reach of revision. The fault is a misjudgement of the claim's status, modal in the first case and evidential in the second, rather than an excess of conviction. The felt charge is the mechanism that installs and defends the misjudgement, not the criterion that condemns it.

The second form is the commoner, the one the anatomy of §6 tracks. A dogmatist seldom declares her creed's denial contradictory; she declines to let anything count against it. This is the diagnostic the theological sequence (Chapters 9–12) applied repeatedly: where the denial of a doctrine is coherent, a certainty that the denial is impossible has mistaken the emotional-pull axis for the logical one.

This verdict belongs to reflective certainty, the certainty a subject has arrived at by questioning a claim and weighing its denial. Sosa's (2007) contrast between animal and reflective knowledge marks the boundary. A certainty held before any such questioning is pre-reflective, the unexamined default with which most belief begins, neither rational nor irrational but simply not yet graded.

Wittgenstein's (1969) hinge propositions — that one has two hands, that the world existed before one's birth — occupy this pre-reflective ground. Their denial is coherent, yet to hold them fast is no error, because the believer has not judged the denial impossible so much as declined to put it in question at all. A hinge hardens into a dogma only at the reflective stage, when the alternative has been raised and is then refused a hearing, judged no real possibility when it demonstrably is one.

The contemporary hinge literature has built an epistemology on this ground, beside which the classification should be set. Pritchard (2016) argues that hinge commitments are rationally groundless without being irrational, since the fixed points that make rational evaluation possible cannot themselves be rationally evaluated. Coliva (2015) extends the notion of rationality so that accepting the hinges counts as constitutive of it. Both are describing, in the epistemology of justification, what the two-dimensional classification locates in its own coordinates: a hinge is a certainty of maximal pull whose logical-axis status has never been put in question, held fast because inquiry needs it held, and neither rational nor irrational for the reason the pre-reflective category supplies, since grading begins only where questioning has.

What the classification adds is the diagnosis of the transition the hinge theorists leave undescribed. A hinge examined and retained on its merits becomes reflective certainty and earns whatever the logical axis assigns it. A hinge examined and then insulated — the alternative raised and refused a hearing — has become dogma by the four-stage route of §6. The difference between Wittgenstein's river-bed and a hardened orthodoxy is the difference between the unexamined and the examination foreclosed.

The illusion of certainty is the subjective condition that makes the conflation of perfection with infallibility psychologically compelling. A standard that feels infallible — that carries the phenomenal profile of impossibility-of-error — feels that way because of the emotional-pull axis, not because of the logical axis. The next section shows that the objective condition is equally unjustified: no finite body of evidence can establish the universal claim that infallibility requires.

4 Perfection and Infallibility: The Structural Gap

4.1 Correctness and perfection

Correctness is the epistemological expression of the orthotic operation. To be correct means to conform to a given standard, as a word's spelling is checked against the dictionary. The operation has

three features. It is standard-relative, since the same word may be correct in one dictionary and incorrect in another. It is evidence-based, since alignment is checked by examining the output against the standard. And it is revisable, since the standard itself may change, and verdicts of correctness change with it.

Perfection is the limiting case of correctness: complete alignment of the output with the standard, with no detected deviation. Two features of perfection are essential for what follows. First, perfection is evidence-based — a discovery. One checks the gymnast's performance against the rubric, the proof against the rules of inference, the text against the standard. Perfection is falsifiable (a single detected error overturns the verdict), replicable (others can check the alignment), and public (the standard and the evidence are in principle available to all). Second, perfection is temporal — an assessment made at a given moment, on the basis of evidence available at that moment. A clock that shows the correct time right now is perfect right now. It may break tomorrow. A moral code that has withstood every challenge for centuries is perfect relative to the challenges it has faced. It may face a new challenge tomorrow.

4.2 The gap

Infallibility is a categorically stronger claim than perfection. Where perfection says "no error has been detected," infallibility says "no error is possible." The question is: can perfection ever entail infallibility?

No. The argument has a determinate form. Perfection is based on a comparison between an output and a standard using a finite body of evidence. Infallibility requires that this comparison would yield the same result under all possible evidence, including evidence not yet available. But no finite body of evidence can establish a claim about all possible evidence, because the space of possible evidence is open-ended. The transition from perfection to infallibility is a leap off the epistemological chain, from evidence-based assessment to evidence-transcending assertion.

The chess player who has won every game is perfect; she could lose her next game. The clock that has shown the correct time for a thousand years is perfect; it could break in the next second. The moral code that has produced no detected errors over centuries is perfect; a new moral insight could reveal an error tomorrow. In each case, perfection is a fact about the assessed body of evidence, while infallibility would be a claim about all possible evidence, which no assessed body can establish however large. In the language of epistemological defeaters (Pollock, 1986), perfection is always defeasible, since new evidence can undercut the assessed alignment, while infallibility declares itself undefeatable by fiat.

4.3 The relationship to certainty

The two-dimensional classification (§2) provides the diagnostic. Perfection warrants rational uncertainty: the standard has survived every test, but the thought that it could fail a future one is coherent. Infallibility claims the status of rational certainty — the standard cannot fail — while for any empirical standard the denial is coherent. The infallibility claim is therefore irrational certainty: the emotional pull toward closure has overwhelmed the logical openness of the claim.

There are two structurally distinct routes to a claim's being always perfect, to infallibility, and only one of them is available.

Route 1: Omniscient guarantee. A claim is infallible because its source knows everything and cannot err. This is what scriptural inerrancy, institutional infallibility, and moral-code infallibility claim. Section 5 shows this route is structurally unavailable.

Route 2: Logical self-vindication. A claim is infallible because its denial is self-defeating, since any context in which the claim is made is necessarily a context in which the claim is true. The occurrence premise of Chapter 1 (§5.3) is infallible in this way: to deny that anything happens is to make something happen, so the making of the denial instantiates what the premise asserts. The foundational result built on it with the composition premise — that at least one difference obtains — inherits the same standing, since the denial of difference is an act with

two components, and two components of a real act are a real difference. These claims are not merely perfect, with no error detected so far; they are always perfect, because the conditions under which they could be false are the conditions under which they could not be made.

The present book's own foundational result, that diversity exists, is infallible by Route 2. The claims derived from it — the structural analyses of grounding, time, consciousness, value, together with the political consequences that follow — are perfect: the best available given the analysis's premises and inferences. They are not infallible by either route, because they depend on premises that could in principle be challenged. The book practises what it preaches: its foundation is logically secure, its superstructure revisable.

The correspondence with the book's own confidence register should be made explicit, because the Register is this chapter's distinction institutionalised. Route 2 is the Register's self-vindicating tier, the only tier that is infallible, and infallible for the Route 2 reason: the denial of a self-vindicating claim instantiates it, so the conditions under which it could be false are conditions under which it could not be made.

The tier holds two premises and the one result built from them; the narrowness should be read as this chapter's own doctrine applied to the book: the occurrence premise, the composition premise, and the result that at least one difference obtains (Chapter 1, §5.3). The vindication law that names the mechanism, together with the exhibitive closure that deploys it, both run through a premise graded established, and a claim is infallible only where nothing it depends on is revisable.

Established, constructed, and proposed results are the three tiers beneath it, as the General Introduction (§5) defines them. Established and constructed results are species of perfection, the best available on the evidence and inferences in hand, falsifiable, replicable, and revisable, differing from each other in how much would have to go wrong and from the self-vindicating tier in kind. A proposed result claims the coherence of an option, sometimes under conditions the grading names, and no more, so it stands furthest from Route 2 of anything the Register grades.

The register is therefore not bookkeeping appended to the argument. It is this chapter's epistemology applied to the book itself: every grading locates a result on the perfection/infallibility line, and no grading above the self-vindicating tier claims what Route 1 cannot deliver — which is why the framework, unlike the systems §6 anatomises, has no Stage 2 available to it.

Where the argument stands: the four epistemic states are classified (§2), irrational certainty is identified as the epistemological basis of dogma (§3), and perfection has been separated from infallibility (§4). What remains is to show that infallibility's precondition cannot be met, and then to anatomise what happens when it is claimed anyway.

5 The Impossible Evidence and the Two-Infinities Argument

5.1 The impossible evidence

The claim that a finite text is infallible is, implicitly, a claim about omniscience. The chain of assumptions: the text is infallible because its author cannot err; the author cannot err because the author is omniscient; the author is omniscient because the author is God. Each link is asserted; none is demonstrated.

But could the chain be demonstrated? Imagine you meet a being who asserts that it knows everything. You might ask it a question — but you can only verify the answer if you already know the correct response. You could ask a million questions, and every correct answer would establish only that the being has answered correctly so far: perfection, not infallibility. To verify omniscience you would need to check the being's knowledge against every possible truth — which requires that you yourself possess every possible truth. Only omniscience can verify omniscience. Only God can prove God.

Any prophet claiming divine authorship of a text faces the same limitation. His own knowledge is finite, so he cannot verify the infinite extent of God's. He may be convinced, since the experience of revelation may carry overwhelming emotional force, but the conviction

is on the emotional-pull axis rather than the logical one: his report is evidence that he had an experience, not that the experience was produced by an omniscient being. The belief that a text is divinely authored, and therefore infallible, remains an unsupported opinion even if the text appears flawless at present, because flawlessness is perfection, and perfection does not entail infallibility.

The argument's core has a lineage that should be owned. Locke's rule that assent to testimony can carry no more certainty than the witness's own knowledge possessed (Locke, 1689/1975, IV.xvi), and Hume's audit of testimony to the marvellous (Hume, 1748/1999, §10), both operate here. What the present treatment adds is the conjunction with the perfection/infallibility distinction and the structural argument of §5.2.

5.2 The two-infinities argument

The epistemological argument of §5.1 shows that infallibility cannot be verified by any finite mind. The structural argument goes deeper: infallibility requires a metaphysical precondition that is not merely unverifiable but structurally incoherent.

To guarantee that a text contains no errors under all possible evidence requires knowledge of all possible evidence. That requires omniscience, which requires a mind of infinite internal distinction: a mind that registers every possible truth as a distinct item of knowledge, distinguishing each truth from every alternative. This is infinite diversity (Chapter 8), the endless extension of internal structure.

But the traditions that claim infallibility, the Abrahamic traditions in their classical formulations, also claim that God is absolutely simple: a being with no internal distinction, no composition of parts, no complexity. This is infinite equality (Chapter 8), the complete dissolution of all structure. The claim of infallibility therefore requires that its guarantor simultaneously possess infinite diversity, omniscience to know all truths, and infinite equality, divine simplicity to be the God classical theism identifies.

Chapter 8 established that these two infinities are structurally opposite conditions. Chapter 10 established that the conjunction of divine simplicity with intelligence is incoherent, and closed the evasion the omniscient guarantor most needs here: that God knows all truths in one simple, non-discursive, non-representational act, so that omniscience demands no internal multiplicity. That reply is stated at Chapter 10 (§§3.1–3.2, §5.2) and is defeated upstream twice rather than merely relocated; the present argument collects it rather than re-fighting it.

The containment fork (Chapter 10, §3.2) makes the point a theorem. What is known is either a determinate content — a knowing of every truth rather than of nothing, and so a distinction in the knower — or nothing truth-specific at all, in which case "knows all truths" has been emptied.

The content-level formulation of the truthmaker argument (Chapter 10, §4.2) closes the last exit on the fine-grained individuation of necessary contents that Chapter 2 (§2.4) licenses. "Knows P" and "knows Q" are distinct contents even where both are necessary, the exclusion operating at the level of content-individuation, contrastive whether or not the knowing is composed, sequential, or representational. The formulation carries that grain condition, recorded at its source, and a reader on the coarse grain retains the containment fork, which suffices for the theorem.

The intra-attribute distinctions required for any cognitive state to be a cognitive state survive the collapse of every inter-attribute distinction (Chapter 10, §4) and every trace of succession into one act, surviving it by derivation rather than by assertion. The chain of assumptions that supports infallibility terminates in a structural impossibility.

This is the chapter's distinctive contribution beyond standard fallibilism. Peirce (1877), Popper (1963), Kuhn (1962), and Quine (1951) argue that infallibility lacks evidential support: that our evidence is always finite and therefore cannot establish a universal claim. The present analysis agrees, but adds: infallibility requires a metaphysical precondition, the conjunction of the two infinities, that is not merely

undemonstrated but structurally unavailable. The infallibility claim rests on incoherent foundations. This refutation is scoped accordingly: it bites only the guarantor that classical theism conceives — omniscient and absolutely simple at once. A theism that relinquishes divine simplicity, as personalist, open, and process theologies do, escapes the structural argument, though not the evidential one above, which by itself suffices to defeat the claim that any finite evidence base attains infallibility.

Plantinga's (2000) reformed epistemology deserves particular attention, because it offers the most philosophically developed attempt to bypass the evidence requirement altogether. Plantinga argues that belief in the great truths of the Christian faith can be "properly basic" (warranted without inferential support) if produced by cognitive faculties functioning properly according to a design plan aimed at truth. The structural argument does not reach him, nor should it be made to: Plantinga rejects divine simplicity (1980), so the designer his design plan requires is a being of infinite diversity, and the conjunction the two-infinities argument targets is not one he holds. What reaches him is the evidential argument, on his own terms. Warrant, on Plantinga's account, is defeasible: a properly functioning faculty can be overridden by defeaters, the design plan can malfunction, and no feature of proper basicality upgrades a warranted belief in a text's divine origin into a guarantee that the text contains no error under all possible evidence. The bypass delivers warrant, which is a species of perfection, and not infallibility, which is all §5.1 needs. The reformed epistemologist's route reaches the same station as every other: well-grounded belief, revisable in principle, declared unrevisable only by the conflation this chapter names.

The convergence objection deserves a brief response: multiple independent lines of evidence converging on one conclusion may seem to bridge the gap. Convergence does strengthen a claim, making it more securely perfect. But multiple finite lines remain finite. Convergence increases the degree of perfection without eliminating the gap between "no error detected across multiple independent checks" and "no error possible", so the objection mistakes very high-quality perfection for infallibility, which is the conflation this chapter identifies.

6 The Four-Stage Anatomy of Dogma

The conflation of perfection with infallibility generates a specific pathology. The inference runs from "this standard has produced no detected errors" to "this standard cannot produce errors", so the pathology operates through a four-stage mechanism identical across scripture, institutional authority, moral codes, and scientific consensus.

Stage 1: Earned authority. A standard is established that aligns with the available evidence: a text with no detected errors, an institution whose judgements have been consistently adequate, a moral code that has served well, a scientific theory that has survived every test. The standard has earned its authority through demonstrated alignment. This is perfection.

Stage 2: Extended permanence. The standard's track record is extended into a claim of permanent adequacy. The inference — sometimes explicit, sometimes tacit — is that because the standard has produced no errors, it cannot produce errors. This is the epistemological break: the transition from a finite body of evidence to a universal claim about all possible evidence.

Stage 3: Foreclosed revision. The claim of infallibility forecloses revision. The standard is no longer subject to challenge, because any apparent challenge is reinterpreted as the challenger's error. Anomalies are explained away, dissenters are marginalised, while the evaluative engagement that produced the standard is replaced by conformity to it. The stage has a valid-looking argument behind it, the dogmatism paradox Kripke (2011) found and Harman (1973, pp. 148–149) first reported: if one knows that P, any evidence against P is misleading, so one may disregard it in advance. The resolution is Harman's, which the anatomy makes its own: acquiring the evidence changes what one knows, so a knowledge one holds at a time licenses no policy of ignoring what has yet to arrive. Foreclosure claims that licence, which is why even a standard known true at Stage 1 has no title to Stage 3.

Stage 4: Severed foundation. The standard is severed from the evaluative foundation that gave it authority. The moral code generated by empathic insight is no longer answerable to empathic insight. The

scientific theory generated by empirical inquiry is no longer answerable to empirical inquiry. The standard has become self-authorising — a closed loop that derives its authority from itself.

The mechanism mimics the structure of self-vindicating certainty (Chapter 1). Infallibility claims the status of self-vindication for claims that do not possess it, for which the classification supplies the diagnosis: the felt impossibility of error is on the emotional-pull axis, not the logical one. The four stages are structurally identical across domains, since any standard whose authority is derivative becomes incoherent when declared self-authorising — immune from the process that generated its authority — whether it is a sacred text, an institutional pronouncement, a moral code, or a scientific theory. Peirce's (1877) methods of tenacity and of authority are the third and fourth stages seen as methods of fixing belief, the one refusing the anomaly and the other institutionalising the refusal; the anatomy adds the two stages that precede them and the conflation that carries a standard from the first to the third.

What would refute the anatomy. The identity claim is what the anatomy stakes, and refutable. What would break it is a standard declared irrevisable that nonetheless retained its corrective process: an authority immune from challenge whose anomalies were still registered, whose dissenters were still heard, and whose foundation still answered to the evidence that produced it — Stage 3 without Stage 4, foreclosure without severance.

The anatomy predicts that this does not occur, a prediction that is no tautology, because the two stages are separately specified. Foreclosure is a claim about what may be challenged; severance is a claim about what the standard remains answerable to; nothing in the definition of the first supplies the second. A documented case of the one without the other would show the four stages to be one path among several rather than the structure of the pathology, so the anatomy would have to be rebuilt as a description rather than a mechanism.

One asymmetry among the domains belongs in the statement of the claim. In the scriptural and institutional cases Stage 2 is often declared;

in the scientific case it is enacted, the consensus treated as settled in the conduct of gatekeeping while no one announces its permanence. The identity across domains is functional, holding at the level of what the four stages do. Where the declaration is tacit the diagnostic is conduct: anomaly-dismissal, the marginalising of dissent, and severance from the corrective process identify Stage 2 by its downstream signature.

7 The Anatomy Applied

7.1 Slavery and the foreclosure of empathic recognition

The case of slavery exposes the four-stage mechanism with particular clarity and connects the anatomy directly to the great moral conflation of Chapter 16.

Stage 1. The moral code that permitted slavery in the antebellum American South was perfect in the technical sense. It was aligned with the prevailing standards — scriptural interpretation, economic analysis, legal precedent — and no challenge had successfully overturned it. The evidence available to the community converged on the correctness of the code.

“Perfect” here is the technical term of §4.1, complete alignment with the prevailing standards on the evidence in use, so the term must not be allowed to flatter the case. The standards were themselves corrupt, and evidence was available that the community refused to take up. The testimony of the enslaved was discounted, the credibility deficit Fricker (2007) names testimonial injustice, so the perfection was relative to an evidential base curated by the affected ignorance Stage 3 institutionalises (Moody-Adams, 1999). The technical sense marks how the code presented from within, unrefuted by everything admitted as evidence, without exculpating the community that did the admitting.

Stage 2. The perfection was elevated to infallibility: the code could not be wrong, because God had ordained it, because the scriptural basis was divinely inspired, and because the tradition had withstood all challenges.

Stage 3. New empathic evidence — the testimony of enslaved persons, the direct perception of suffering, the moral arguments of abolitionists — was structurally foreclosed. Not because the evidence was weak, but because the infallibility declaration placed the code beyond the reach of evidence.

The anchor result of Chapter 16 (§6.7) states what kind of thing was thereby barred. Not future arguments, but existing moral facts: the enslaved persons' own registrations, fully present and constituting the wrongness then and there (Chapter 14, §6.4). The declaration did not delay moral truth's arrival; it refused delivery of truth already at the door. Affected ignorance is the refusal of uptake; the anchor is what there was to take up. The abolitionists were not merely arguing against a strong consensus; they were arguing against a standard that had been declared unrevisable.

Stage 4. The moral code was severed from the empathic foundation that gave it authority. The code generated by empathic responses to suffering (the original prohibition against certain forms of cruelty) was no longer answerable to empathic responses to suffering (the recognition that enslaving persons causes suffering the original empathic responses would have condemned).

Stage 4 and Chapter 16's banking result (§6.7) are one mechanism at two settings of one switch. A revisable orthotic layer banks empathic corrections, which is why moral progress ratchets; a layer declared infallible embalms empathic errors, which is why moral regress locks in. The infallibility declaration is the ratchet run in reverse — the conversion of the instrument that holds corrections into the instrument that holds them out.

Nussbaum (2004) analyses the dehumanisation slavery required as the systematic suppression of empathic engagement, the deliberate refusal to register the enslaved person's suffering as morally relevant. On the present analysis the suppression was made possible by the infallibility declaration, which foreclosed the empathic evidence that would have overturned the code. Moody-Adams (1999) argues that moral progress is the overcoming of affected ignorance, the refusal to

acknowledge what one already has the resources to know, where the infallibility declaration is the institutional mechanism that sustains it.

The value taxonomy (Chapter 15) explains the resistance. The derived value of an infallible text — its association with God, sacred tradition, ancestral authority — overrode any primary-value response to the suffering the code permitted. The catastrophe was not merely that people held wrong beliefs. It was that the beliefs had been placed in a category that prevented the self-corrective mechanism from operating.

The same analysis applies elsewhere: to the subordination of women, the criminalisation of same-sex relationships, and every other case in which a moral code once considered permanently correct has been revised in light of deeper empathic engagement with the persons affected.

7.2 Three further domains

Institutional authority. When a religious or political authority declares its pronouncements beyond error, dissent becomes impossible within the system. If the institution cannot err, any disagreement is by definition the dissenter's error, so the capacity for self-correction is eliminated. Küng (1971) argued that papal infallibility is historically contingent, theologically unnecessary, and practically damaging; the present analysis provides the diagnosis his argument lacks, since the claim severs the orthotic standard from its empathic foundation, disabling the conditions for deep persuasion within the institution.

Moral codes. When a moral code is declared permanently correct, it is treated as infallible even if the word is not used, so the severance follows. Mill (1859/1999) identified the mechanism in his defence of free expression: even if an opinion is true, treating it as infallible prevents understanding of its grounds, reduces it to dead dogma, and eliminates the rational contestation through which truth is maintained.

Scientific consensus. The mechanism operates in science whenever the current consensus is treated not as the best available theory, which is perfection, but as permanently settled truth, which is infallibility. The decade-long dismissal of Marshall and Warren's (1984) identification of

Helicobacter pylori as the cause of peptic ulcers is the case usually cited, and §6's refutation condition is tried on it, since the consensus dismissed the anomaly for a decade and then corrected itself. No declaration of irrevisability stood behind the dismissal, and the ulcer consensus never severed itself from the corrective process, which is why the correction eventually ran. The case is therefore, on the anatomy's own terms, perfection correcting slowly — the ratchet turning late — and it earns its place here by marking the line: anomalous evidence explained away is Stage 3 conduct, and it becomes the pathology only where the corrective process that would eventually admit the anomaly is itself disabled. The anatomy's scientific instances are the cases where that disabling occurs; the ulcer case shows what the ratchet looks like when it does not.

Where the disabling has occurred, the case is Lysenkoism, and it walks the four stages in order (Joravsky, 1970). Lysenko's agronomy earned its standing on practical claims about the vernalisation of crops (Stage 1). The 1948 session of the Lenin Academy of Agricultural Sciences declared Michurinist biology the settled doctrine of Soviet science (Stage 2). Mendelian genetics was dismissed as bourgeois pseudoscience and its anomalies explained away (Stage 3). And the corrective process itself was dismantled — institutes closed, journals purged, geneticists dismissed and imprisoned, Vavilov among those who died in custody — so that revision became possible only when the political protection lapsed, in 1964 (Stage 4). The case confirms the anatomy in the one respect the ulcer case cannot, since the four stages appear in science as they appear in creed and code; and it confirms the qualification: reaching Stage 4 took an external authority to remove the correction science institutionalises, which is why the scientific instance is rare.

Oreskes (2019) analyses why scientific consensus deserves trust, since the social process of inquiry filters out errors over time, to which the distinction adds what her analysis needs. Justified trust in consensus is trust in perfection; elevation of consensus to infallibility forecloses the very social process that made the consensus trustworthy. The inclusion of scientific dogmatism is essential to the chapter's integrity,

because the mechanism operates identically across religious and secular institutions, targeting any standard, from any source, that claims immunity from the process that generated its authority.

7.3 The connection to the great moral conflation

The four-stage anatomy connects directly to the great moral conflation (Chapter 16). An infallible standard is an orthotic standard declared permanently fixed, and Stage 4 states the connection: severed from the empathic evaluations that give it authority, the infallible standard is a moral technology that has cut itself off from the source of its own legitimacy.

The anatomy also forecloses the conditions for deep persuasion (Chapter 21), derivably so. Deep persuasion is field-enrichment (Chapter 15, §4.4) applied to evaluative hierarchies, and an infallible standard is a field closed to enrichment by decree, one class of secondary object ruled inadmissible in advance. Deep persuasion requires that evaluative hierarchies be transformable through engagement. If the standard against which behaviour is judged is revisable, agents can debate not only whether behaviour conforms to the standard but whether the standard is adequate. If the standard is declared infallible, engagement is limited to the question of conformity, so the deeper question — is the standard itself good? — is foreclosed.

8 Objections and Replies

8.1 The moral stability objection

Objection. If no standard can be declared infallible, morality becomes a moving target.

Reply. The distinction does not undermine stability; it clarifies its nature. A perfect standard, one aligned with the best available evidence and the deepest available empathic insight, is the best we have, to be followed until a better alternative is demonstrated through evidence and persuasion. What the distinction undermines is false stability: the illusion that a standard is permanently settled when it is in fact

revisable. That is more dangerous than real revisability, because it prevents the correction of errors that may cause real suffering. The code permitting slavery was once considered as stable as any moral standard, and its revision was one of humanity's great moral achievements.

8.2 The self-undermining objection

Objection. If no claim is infallible, then the claim that no claim is infallible is itself revisable.

Reply. The chapter's central claim, that perfection does not entail infallibility, is a structural result rather than an empirical generalisation. The inference from a finite body of evidence to a universal claim about all possible evidence is invalid because the space of possible evidence is open-ended. This is a claim about the logical relationship between finite and infinite domains, not an inductive claim that might be overturned by a counterexample.

The distinction between the two routes provides the basis. Route 1 is the omniscient guarantee, structurally unavailable; Route 2 is logical self-vindication, available for self-defeating denials. The claim that perfection does not entail infallibility is not self-vindicating, since its denial does not instantiate what it denies, yet it is established by structural argument rather than by inductive generalisation. It is perfect, not infallible — in the Register's terms, established (§4.3), a tier defined as a species of perfection. The framework's consistency here is therefore a correspondence built into the grading system itself rather than a happy accident to be checked case by case.

8.3 The religious authority objection

Objection. For many believers, the authority of scripture is a direct conviction grounded in faith rather than an inference from perfection.

Reply. The chapter does not deny that the conviction is sincerely held or grounded in a powerful experience of the sacred. A person can maintain a profound, reverent, and deeply engaged relationship with a text while recognising it as excellent — possibly the best moral technology available — without declaring it incapable of error. The

classification diagnoses the conviction: the felt impossibility of error is on the emotional-pull axis, sustained by the derived value of the text's sacred associations, not on the logical axis. The conviction is real; it is not evidence that the text is infallible.

8.4 The practical indispensability objection

Objection. Communities need stable foundations. Declaring core standards revisable invites endless contestation.

Reply. The practical benefits of stability are real, and perfection provides them without infallibility. A community that treats its best standards as excellent and follows them with conviction has all the stability infallibility promises. What infallibility adds is not stability but unreformability: the foreclosure of the process through which the standards could be improved. The history of moral progress is a history of communities revising standards they once treated as beyond challenge, so practical stability requires confidence in one's standards rather than a declaration that they are incapable of error.

8.5 The bypass objection

Objection. The chapter's argument targets the inference from perfection to infallibility. But infallibility need not be inferred: it can be established by testimony (the prophet reports God's word), by religious experience (the believer feels the text's divine origin), or by properly basic belief (the sensus divinitatis warrants belief without inference).

Reply. Each bypass fails for the same reason: none can establish the universal claim infallibility requires. Testimony transmits knowledge under appropriate conditions (Lackey, 2008), but a finite testifier cannot confirm an infinite claim. Religious experience is evidence that an experience occurred (a real and potentially transformative evaluative event), not that its cause is omniscient. Properly basic belief is addressed at §5.2: warrant is defeasible on Plantinga's own account, so proper basicality delivers perfection and not infallibility. Each strategy may produce perfection — justified, well-grounded, even excellent belief. None produces infallibility.

A fourth bypass is the classical one, met elsewhere: omniscience is not verified at all but entailed, either by the concept of a perfect being or by the cosmological route to a first cause. Section 5.1 does not touch this, and does not need to. The entailment carries only if its terminus can bear cognition at all, which Chapter 10 (§3.2) denies at theorem strength, and only if the cause can be shown necessary, which Chapter 11 denies it can. The route is closed upstream rather than here.

9 Conclusion

The chapter yields three results.

The two-dimensional classification (established). Crossing a logical axis with an emotional-pull axis generates four epistemic states that explain dogmatic closure, sceptical paralysis, together with the phenomenological indistinguishability of grounded and ungrounded conviction. Irrational certainty is the epistemological basis of dogma.

Perfection is not infallibility (established). Perfection is an evidence-based, standard-relative, temporal achievement; infallibility is a universal claim about all possible evidence, which no finite body of evidence can establish. The impossible-evidence argument shows that only omniscience can verify omniscience. The two-infinities argument shows that infallibility's metaphysical precondition, omniscience conjoined with divine simplicity, is structurally incoherent. Infallibility is therefore unsupported for any guarantor whatever, by the evidential argument, and unavailable for the guarantor classical theism conceives, by the structural one — a theism that relinquishes divine simplicity escaping the second and not the first.

The anatomy of dogma (constructed). The four stages — earned authority, extended permanence, foreclosed revision, severed foundation — are the mechanism by which revisable standards become unreformable, operating identically across scripture, institutional authority, moral codes, and scientific consensus. An infallible standard is an orthotic standard severed from the empathic foundation that gives it authority, so the severance forecloses the conditions of deep persuasion (§7.3).

If moral standards are revisable rather than infallible, the agent's relationship to those standards is one of engagement rather than submission. But the agent's capacity for engagement is itself limited. The evaluative hierarchy (Chapter 15) from which she evaluates standards was not itself chosen; it was delivered by processes she did not command. Chapter 18 argues that intentional and unintentional behaviour share the same chain architecture — a unified causal model in which the evaluative hierarchy that determines choice was not itself chosen — and that this holds for any possible mind, in any possible world.

Grades and Dependencies

1. **The anatomy's stake.** The classification and the perfection/infallibility distinction are *established*; the four-stage anatomy is *constructed*, its identity claim refutable (§6): documented Stage 3 without Stage 4 demotes it from mechanism to description; tacit Stage 2 is diagnosed by conduct. The two-infinities argument is scoped (§5.2): structural against the classically simple guarantor, evidential against every guarantor; the grain condition (Ch. 2) attaches to the content-level formulation only. The Premise Register carries the chain.

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