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Political Space Curves (Reflections on the centennial fate of a mathematical 'fact')

Mathematicians tend to view their science as cumulative ; what has once been proved belongs to a durable body of knowledge and will not be undone by future generations. Philosophers or historians of mathematics may find it difficult to be quite as enthusiastic. But when they point out that different standards of mathematical rigor prevailed at different times of the historical process, this hardly threatens the mathematicians' profound confidence in the perennity of their science.

The story I will tell in my talk on "Political Space Curves" suggests a different question, which may get us closer to what is really going on : How exactly do mathematic(ian)s manage to generate stable knowledge ? A steady creative reinvention of truth seems to do the trick. In passing, we will see that controversies do in fact exist in mathematics, but they tend to do surprisingly little to unveil the truth.