

Three Views on
Creation, Causality,
and *Abstracta*

Introduction to the Conversation

In the spring of 2015, three philosophers of religion gathered on the campus of Southern Evangelical Seminary just outside Charlotte, North Carolina, to discuss their differing views on the relationship between God and abstract objects. After the long evening of robust exchange, the three scholars, William Lane Craig, Peter van Inwagen, and J. Thomas Bridges, each had an opportunity to update their original papers and write responses to the other two. It was a fascinating discussion, and we thought you'd like to "listen in" through the pages of *Philosophia Christi*. Sometimes formal, sometimes less so, you will sense the character of the original open discussion in the papers that we present here.

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God and Abstract Objects

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Central to classical theism is the conception of God as the sole ultimate reality, the creator of all things apart from Himself. Such a doctrine is rooted in Hebrew-Christian scripture. To select but one text, in the prologue of the Gospel of John, we read: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being” (John 1:1–3).¹ The evangelist gives us to understand that God through His Word is responsible for the existence of literally everything other than God Himself. Apart from God every existent belongs to the creaturely realm, the class of things which have come into being (*geneta*), and so owe their existence to God’s creative Word (*logos*), who is later identified as Christ (John 1:14–18). John 1:1–3 is thus fraught with metaphysical significance, for taken *prima facie* it tells us that God alone exists eternally and *a se*. It entails that there are no objects of any sort which are coeternal with God and uncreated by God.

The strongest challenge to the traditional doctrine of divine aseity comes from the philosophy of Platonism. Although contemporary Platonism differs vastly from classical Platonism in various respects,² both views are united in holding that there exist uncreated entities—for example, mathematical

ABSTRACT: Central to classical theism is the conception of God as the sole ultimate reality, the creator of all things apart from Himself. Such a doctrine is rooted in Hebrew-Christian scripture and unfolded by the ante-Nicene church fathers. Platonism, which postulates the existence of uncreated abstract objects, is therefore theologically objectionable. In order to overcome the presumption which anti-Platonism enjoys theologically, the Platonist would have to show that all other positions, both realist and nonrealist, are rationally untenable. No one has even attempted so audacious a project, nor is there any reasonable expectation that it could be carried out.

1. Ἐν ἀρχῇ ἦν ὁ λόγος, καὶ ὁ λόγος ἦν πρὸς τὸν θεόν, καὶ θεὸς ἦν ὁ λόγος. οὗτος ἦν ἐν ἀρχῇ πρὸς τὸν θεόν. πάντα δι’ αὐτοῦ ἐγένετο, καὶ χωρὶς αὐτοῦ ἐγένετο οὐδὲ ἓν.

2. Principally in taking abstract objects to be causally unrelated to the concrete world; neither do contemporary Platonists consider abstract objects to be more real than concrete objects. Nor do they think that concrete objects participate in some way in abstract entities, as Plato thought physical objects participate in ideal objects.

objects—other than God. Would-be Christian Platonists must maintain that John's domain of quantification is restricted in such a way that abstract objects escape his universally quantified statements.

Now it's important that we understand clearly the question before us, since it is so often misunderstood. The question is *not*: did John have abstract objects in mind when he said "all things came into being through him"? Probably not! But by the same token, neither did he have in mind quarks, galaxies, and black holes; yet he would doubtless take such things and countless other things, were he informed about them, to have been created by God and to be in the class of things he is talking about.

The question is not what John thought lay in the domain of his quantifiers; rather the question is whether John intends his domain of quantification, once God is exempted, to be unrestricted. Does he think that apart from God everything else that exists is created by God? It is more than probable that he did. For God's status as the only eternal, uncreated being is an earmark of first century Judaism. In his influential work on the character of ancient Jewish monotheism, Richard Bauckham identifies two characteristics that uniquely mark off Israel's God from all others, namely that "he is Creator of all things and sovereign Ruler of all things."³ There is in the Judaism of John's day a bright dividing line which separates God ontologically from everything else, a bifurcation which Bauckham attempts to capture by the term "transcendent uniqueness." God's status as the sole ultimate reality comes to practical expression in the Jewish restriction of worship as properly directed toward God alone. According to Bauckham this restriction "most clearly signaled the distinction between God and all other reality."⁴

The crucial point here is that the unrestrictedness of the domain of quantification is based, not in what kinds of objects were thought to lie in the domain, but rather in the Jewish doctrine of God as the only being which exists eternally and *a se*. It is who or what God is that requires that the domain of quantification be unrestricted, whatever beings might be discovered to lie in the domain.

John himself identifies the Word (*Logos*) alone as existing with God and being God in the beginning. The creation of everything else through the divine *Logos* then follows. Bauckham calls such a view "Christological monotheism": the divine *Logos* is on God's side of the dividing line between God and the rest of reality. Indeed, given the striking similarities of John's *Logos* doctrine to that of the Alexandrian Jewish philosopher Philo (20 BC–AD 50), it is not all implausible that John, like Philo, thought that the intelligible

realm (*kosmos noetos*) of what we would today call abstract objects was contained in the divine *Logos*, so that creation comprised only concrete objects.⁵

Be that as it may, there is no reason to doubt that John believed that every existing thing apart from God had come into being through the *Logos*. To postulate an infinite plentitude of abstract objects as real as planets existing independently of God, so that the realm of concrete objects brought into being by God is literally infinitesimal by comparison, would betray Jewish monotheism and trivialize the doctrine of creation. So I think it clear that John did intend his domain of quantification to include everything apart from God, whatever idea he may have had concerning what objects lay in the domain.

The evangelist's conviction that God is the Creator of everything that exists aside from God Himself eventually attained creedal status at the Council of Nicaea. In language redolent of the prologue to the fourth Gospel and of Paul, the Council affirmed:

I believe in one God, the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth and of all things visible and invisible;

And in one Lord, Jesus Christ, the only Son of God, begotten of the Father before all ages, light from light, true God from true God, begotten not made, consubstantial with the Father, through whom all things came into being.⁶

5. The doctrine of the divine, creative *Logos* was widespread in Middle Platonism, and the similarities between Philo and John's doctrines of the *Logos* are so numerous and close that most Johannine scholars, while not willing to affirm John's direct dependence on Philo, do recognize that the author of the prologue of John's Gospel shares with Philo a common intellectual tradition of Platonizing interpretation of the first chapter of Genesis (Jutta Leonhardt-Balzer, "Der *Logos* und die Schöpfung: Streiflichter bei Philo (Op 20–25) und im Johannesprolog (Joh 1, 1–18)," in *Kontexte des Johannesevangelium*, ed. Jörg Frey and Udo Schnelle, WUNT 175 (Tübingen: Mohr-Siebeck, 2004), 309–10, cf. 318–19). A hallmark of Middle Platonism was Plato's bifurcation between the realm of static being ($\tau\acute{\iota}\ \tau\omicron\ \delta\upsilon\ \acute{\alpha}\epsilon\iota$) and the realm of temporal becoming ($\tau\acute{\iota}\ \tau\omicron\ \gamma\iota\gamma\acute{\nu}\omicron\mu\epsilon\upsilon\omicron\nu\ \mu\acute{\epsilon}\nu\ \acute{\alpha}\epsilon\iota$) (*Timaeus* 27d5–28a4). The realm of becoming was comprised primarily of physical objects, though it would also include immaterial objects like souls, while the static realm of being was comprised of what we would today call abstract objects. The former realm is perceived by the senses, whereas the latter is grasped by the intellect. For Middle Platonists, as for Plato, the intelligible world served as a model for the creation of the sensible world. But for a Jewish monotheist like Philo, the realm of Ideas does not exist independently of God but as the contents of His mind (*On the Creation of the World [De opificio mundi]* 16–25). For Philo the intelligible world ($\kappa\omicron\sigma\mu\omicron\varsigma\ \nu\omicron\eta\tau\omicron\varsigma$) may be thought of as either formed by the divine *Logos* or, more reductively, as the divine *Logos* itself as God is engaged in creating. On Philo's doctrine, then, there is no realm of independently existing abstract objects. In Runia's words, while not part of the created realm, "the $\kappa\omicron\sigma\mu\omicron\varsigma\ \nu\omicron\eta\tau\omicron\varsigma$, though eternal and unchanging, must be considered dependent for its existence on God" (D. T. Runia, *Philo of Alexandria and the "Timaeus" of Plato* (Amsterdam: Free University of Amsterdam, 1983), 138). John does not tarry to reflect on the role of the divine *Logos* causally prior to creation, but given the provenance of his doctrine it is not at all implausible that he, too, thought of the *Logos* as the seat of the intelligible realm of what we would call abstract objects.

6. Πιστεύω εἰς ἓνα Θεόν, Πατέρα, παντοκράτορα, ποιητὴν οὐρανοῦ καὶ γῆς, ὁρατῶν τε πάντων καὶ ἀοράτων.

3. Richard Bauckham, "God Crucified," in *Jesus and the God of Israel* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2008), 8.

4. *Ibid.*, 11.

At face value the Council affirms that God alone is uncreated and that all else was created by Him.

An examination of ante-Nicene theological reflection on divine aseity confirms the *prima facie* reading. At the heart of the Arian controversy which occasioned the convening of the Council of Nicaea lay a pair of terminological distinctions prevalent among the church fathers: *agenetos/genetos* and *agennetos/gennetos*.⁷ The word pair *agenetos/genetos* derives from the verb “*ginomai*,” which means to become or to come into being. “*Agenetos*” means unoriginated or uncreated, in contrast to “*genetos*,” that which is created or originated. The second word pair *agennetos/gennetos* derives from the verb “*ginnaō*,” which means to beget. That which is *agennetos* is unbegotten, while that which is *gennetos* is begotten. These distinctions allowed the fathers to hold that while both God the Father and God the Son are *agenetos*, only the Father is *agennetos*.

The ante-Nicene and Nicene church fathers, like the Arian heretics, rejected any suggestion that there might exist *ageneta* apart from God alone.⁸ According to patristic scholar Harry Austryn Wolfson,⁹ the church fathers all accepted the following three principles:

- (1) God alone is uncreated.
- (2) Nothing is coeternal with God.
- (3) Eternality implies deity.

Each of these principles implies that there are no *ageneta* apart from God.

But lest it be suggested that *abstracta* were somehow exempted from these principles, we should note that the ante-Nicene church fathers explicitly rejected the view that entities such as properties and numbers are *ageneta*. The fathers were familiar with the metaphysical worldviews of Plato and Pythagoras and agreed with them that there is one *agenetos* from which all

καὶ εἰς ἓνα Κύριον, Ἰησοῦν Χριστόν, τόν Υἱόν του Θεοῦ τόν μονογενή, τόν εκ του Πατρὸς γεννηθέντα πρὸ πάντων τῶν αἰώνων. φῶς εκ φωτός, Θεόν ἀληθινόν εκ Θεοῦ ἀληθινοῦ γεννηθέντα, οὐ ποιηθέντα, ὁμοούσιον τῷ Πατρὶ, δι' οὗ τὰ πάντα ἐγένετο.

7. For a survey of texts see the nice discussion by George L. Prestige, *God in Patristic Thought* (London: SPCK, 1964), 37–55, which I follow here. See also the references in J. B. Lightfoot's “Excursus on the Words *gennethenta ou poiethenta*,” reprinted in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, 2nd series, vol. 14, *Seven Ecumenical Councils*, ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994), 4–7.

8. Justin, *Dialogue* 5; Methodius, *On Free Will* 5; Irenaeus, *Against heresies* 4.38.3; Tertullian, *Against Praxeas* 5.13–15; Hippolytus, *Against Noetus* 10.1; Hippolytus, *Refutation of All Heresies* 10.28; Epiphanius, *Panarion* 33.7.6; Athanasius, *Defense of the Nicene Definition* 7: “On the Arian Symbol ‘Agenetos’”; Athanasius, *Discourses against the Arians* 1.9.30–34; Athanasius, *On the Councils of Ariminum and Seleucia* 46–47; Athanasius, *Statement of Faith* 3. All references to the church fathers in this note and note 10 are from *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, ed. Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, et al. (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994); and *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, 2nd series, ed. Philip Schaff, Henry Wace, et al. (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994).

9. Harry A. Wolfson, “Plato's Pre-existent Matter in Patristic Philosophy,” in *The Classical Tradition*, ed. Luitpold Wallach (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1966), 414.

reality derives; but the fathers identified this *agenetos*, not with an impersonal form or number, but with the Hebrew God, who has created all things (other than Himself) *ex nihilo*.¹⁰ If confronted by a modern-day Platonist defending an ontology which included causally effete objects which were *ageneta* and so coeternal with God, they would have rejected such an account as blasphemous, since such an account would impugn God's unique aseity and undermine *creatio ex nihilo* by denying that God is the universal ground of being. The fathers could not therefore exempt such objects from God's creative power, since He is the sole and all-originating *agenetos*.

I have belabored this point because the grounds of my rejection of Platonism are not philosophical but theological. I press no philosophical objections against Platonism; rather, rejecting Quine's epistemological naturalism, I offer theological grounds for thinking Platonism false. I thus find myself in agreement with Prof. van Inwagen, though for different reasons, that the Christian philosopher, at least, “should not believe in abstract objects unless [he] feels rationally compelled by some weighty consideration or argument. . . . a philosopher should wish not to be a platonist if it's rationally possible for the informed philosopher not to be a platonist.”¹¹ Only if anti-Platonism is rationally impossible to hold, only if there is a rationally compelling argument for Platonism, should the Christian philosopher feel torn to abandon his theological commitment to God's being the sole ultimate reality.

It hardly needs to be said that there is no such argument. The principal argument offered on behalf of Platonism comes in the various incarnations of the Quine-Putnam Indispensability Argument. Mark Balaguer succinctly formulates the Indispensability Argument as follows:¹²

- (I) If a simple sentence (that is, a sentence of the form “*a is F*”) is literally true, then the objects that its singular terms denote exist. (Likewise, if an existential sentence (for example, “There is an *F*”) is literally true, then there exist objects of the relevant kinds.

10. Athenagoras, *Plea for the Christians* 15, 24; Tatian, *Address to the Greeks* 4.10–14; Methodius, *Concerning Free Will*; Hippolytus, *Refutation* 6.16, 18, 19, 24, 43. Combining the Gospel of John's presentation of Christ as the preexistent Logos who in the beginning was with God and was God and through whom all things came into being (John 1:1–3) with Philo of Alexandria's conception of the Logos as the mind of God in which the Platonic realm of Ideas subsists (*On the Creation of the World* 16–25), the Greek apologists grounded the intelligible realm in God rather than in some independent realm of self-subsisting entities like numbers or forms. According to Wolfson, every church father who addressed the issue rejected the view that the ideas were self-subsisting entities but instead located the intelligible world in the Logos and, hence, in the mind of God. For a discussion of texts taken from pseudo-Justin, Irenaeus, Tertullian, Clement of Alexandria, Origen, and Augustine, see Harry Austryn Wolfson, *The Philosophy of the Church Fathers*, vol. 1, *Faith, Trinity, and Incarnation*, 3rd ed. rev. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1970), chap. 13, “The Logos and the Platonic Ideas.”

11. Peter van Inwagen, “A Theory of Properties,” in *Oxford Studies in Metaphysics*, vol. 1, ed. Dean Zimmerman (Oxford: Clarendon, 2004), 107.

12. *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, s.v. “Platonism in Metaphysics,” by Mark Balaguer, <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/platonism/>.

(II) There are literally true simple sentences containing singular terms that refer to things that could only be abstract objects. (Likewise, there are literally true existential statements whose existential quantifiers range over things that could only be abstract objects.)

(III) Therefore, abstract objects exist.

(I) is a metaontological thesis expressing a criterion of ontological commitment. (II) is the affirmation that abstract discourse is be construed as literally true. How might the Christian philosopher respond to the Indispensability Argument? Taking mathematical objects as a case in point, figure 1 displays some of our many options.

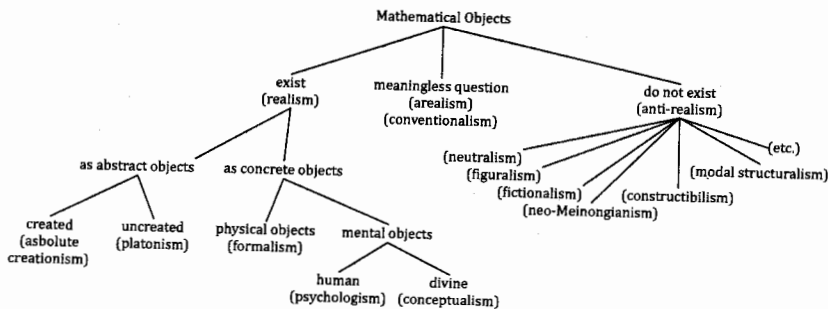


Figure 1. Some responses to indispensability arguments concerning the existence of mathematical objects.

The various options can be classed as *realist* (mathematical objects exist); *antirealist* (mathematical objects do not exist); or *arealist* (there is no fact of the matter concerning the existence of mathematical objects). Look first at the realist branch. As figure 1 illustrates, there are two brands of realism about mathematical objects: views which take them to be *abstract* objects and views which take them to be *concrete* objects. Of realist views which consider mathematical objects to be abstract, absolute creationism is a sort of modified Platonism, holding that mathematical objects have, like concrete objects, been created by God, thus safeguarding divine aseity. Concretist versions of realism can take mathematical objects to be either *physical* objects or *mental* objects, the latter either in *human* minds or in *God's* mind. The most promising concretist view is some sort of divine conceptualism, the heir to the view of Philo and the church fathers, according to which there are no mathematical objects independent of God.

Moving left to right, we next come to *arealism*, the view that there just is no fact of the matter about the reality of mathematical objects. The classic version of arealism was the conventionalism of Rudolf Carnap.¹³ No philoso-

13. Rudolf Carnap, "Meaning and Necessity": A Study in Semantics and Modal Logic (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1956), 206–17.

pher today would defend Carnap's verificationism; but his conventionalism does find an echo today in what we might call ontological pluralism.¹⁴ According to thinkers of this persuasion, certain ontological questions, though meaningful, do not have objective answers. Some nonrealists, notably the philosophers of mathematics Mark Balaguer and Penelope Maddy, would deny that the question "Do mathematical objects exist?" has an answer that is objectively true or false.¹⁵ Now at first blush arealism might seem a quick and easy solution to the challenge posed by Platonism to divine aseity. Alas, however, there is no succor for the theist here. For given God's metaphysical necessity and essential aseity, there just is no possible world in which uncreated mathematical objects exist. Hence, there most certainly is a fact of the matter whether uncreated, abstract objects exist: they do not and cannot exist. Therefore, arealism is necessarily false.

When we turn to antirealist responses to the Indispensability Argument, we find a cornucopia of different views. Neutralism rejects the criterion of ontological commitment expressed in premise (I), taking the use of singular terms and existential quantification to be neutral with respect to ontological commitments.¹⁶ Fictionalism accepts the Platonist's criterion of ontological commitment but denies that mathematical statements are true.¹⁷ Figuralism holds that mathematical discourse is true but denies that it must be taken literally.¹⁸ Neo-Heideggerianism holds that there are objects referred to by

14. See David J. Chalmers, "Ontological Anti-Realism," in *Metametaphysics: New Essays on the Foundations of Ontology*, ed. David Chalmers, David Manley, and Ryan Wasserman (Oxford: Clarendon, 2009), 77–129. I prefer the nomenclature "ontological pluralism" to "ontological antirealism." Chalmers's terminology is misleading, since antirealism on the level of ontology would involve the denial of the existence of mathematical objects. It is only on the metaontological level that antirealism is the denial that the ontological question has an objective answer.

15. See Mark Balaguer, *Platonism and Anti-Platonism in Mathematics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 151–79; Penelope Maddy, *Defending the Axioms: On the Philosophical Foundations of Set Theory* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 98. Maddy offers various characterizations of arealism.

16. See Jody Azzouni, "On 'On What There Is,'" *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly* 79 (1998): 1–18; Jody Azzouni, *Deflating Existential Consequence: A Case for Nominalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004); Jody Azzouni, "Ontological Commitment in the Vernacular," *Noûs* 41 (2007): 204–26; Jody Azzouni, "Ontology and the Word 'Exist': Uneasy Relations," *Philosophia Mathematica* 18 (2010): 74–101.

17. See Hartry Field, *Science without Numbers: A Defence of Nominalism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1980); Hartry Field, *Realism, Mathematics, and Modality* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1989); Mark Balaguer, *Platonism and Anti-Platonism in Mathematics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998); *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, s.v. "Fictionalism in the Philosophy of Mathematics," by Mark Balaguer, <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/fictionalism-mathematics/>.

18. See Stephen Yablo, "Does Ontology Rest on a Mistake?," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* (supplement) 72 (1998): 229–61; Stephen Yablo, "A Paradox of Existence," in *Empty Names, Fiction, and the Puzzles of Non-Existence*, ed. Anthony Everett and Thomas Hofweber (Stanford: Center for the Study of Language and Information, 2000), 275–312; Stephen Yablo,

abstract singular terms but takes these objects to be nonexistent.¹⁹ Pretense theory considers mathematical discourse to be a species of make-believe, so that mathematical objects are akin to fictional characters.²⁰ Paraphrastic strategies like Charles Chihara's constructibilism or Geoffrey Hellman's modal structuralism hold that we can offer paraphrases of mathematical statements which will preserve their truth value without ontological commitment to abstract objects.²¹ And so on!

In order to overcome the presumption which anti-Platonism enjoys theologically, the Platonist would have to show that all of these other positions are rationally impossible to hold, that all the informed philosophers espousing such positions are irrational in so doing. No one has even attempted so audacious a project, nor is there any reasonable expectation that it could be carried out.

Had time permitted, I should like to have shared which antirealist view (or combination thereof) I find most persuasive. For that you'll have to read the book!²² But the more important task here today was to explain why I think you should not be a Platonist and then to open up some options on how you might avoid it.

¹⁹ "Go Figure: A Path through Fictionalism," in *Figurative Language*, ed. Peter A. French and Howard K. Wettstein, Midwest Studies in Philosophy 25 (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001), 72–102.

¹⁹. See Alexius Meinong, "The Theory of Objects" ["Über Gegenstandstheorie" (1904)], trans. Isaac Levi, D. B. Tenele, and Roderick M. Chisholm, in *Realism and the Background of Phenomenology*, ed. Roderick M. Chisholm (Atascadero, CA: Ridgeview, 1960), 76–117; Richard Routley, *Exploring Meinong's Jungle and Beyond: An Investigation of Noneism and the Theory of Items* (Canberra: Australian National University Research School of Social Sciences, 1979); Kenneth J. Perszyck, *Nonexistent Objects: Meinong and Contemporary Philosophy*, Nijhoff International Philosophy Series 49 (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1993).

²⁰. See Kendall L. Walton, *Mimesis as Make-Believe: On the Foundations of the Representational Arts* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990); Kendall Walton, "Existence as Metaphor," in *Empty Names, Fiction, and the Puzzles of Non-Existence*, ed. Anthony Everett and Thomas Hofweber (Stanford: Center for the Study of Language and Information, 2000); Mary Leng, *Mathematics and Reality* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010).

²¹. See Charles S. Chihara, *Constructibility and Mathematical Existence* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1990); Charles S. Chihara, *The Worlds of Possibility: Modal Realism and the Semantics of Modal Logic* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1998); Charles S. Chihara, "Nominalism," in *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophy of Mathematics and Logic*, ed. Stewart Shapiro (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 483–514; Geoffrey Hellman, *Mathematics without Numbers* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1989); *Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, 2nd ed., ed. Donald M. Borcherth (New York: Thomson Gale, 2006), s.v. "Structuralism, Mathematical," by Geoffrey Hellman.

²². William Lane Craig, *God over All: Divine Aseity and the Challenge of Platonism* (New York: Oxford University Press, forthcoming).

A Moderate-Realist Perspective on God and Abstract Objects

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The reader will note that my solution to the problem of God and abstract objects will refer to Thomas Aquinas or to one of the philosophers working in the Thomistic tradition. My philosophical perspective is one of existential Thomism. Although Aquinas's philosophy is still regarded in areas such as philosophy of religion and ethics, it is typically ignored in metaphysics, epistemology, and philosophy of mind.¹ These latter categories are very much in play as one considers the problem of God and abstract objects. As I approach a resolution to the problem I shall do so from the Thomistic tradition.

I have two goals that I will state explicitly, one is a minimum and the other a maximum. At the minimum, I want the reader to accept that a Thomistic solution to the problem of God and *abstracta* is worthy of consideration. That is, even if one disagrees with some elements of the solution, one will agree that it is a valid response to the problem. At the maximum, I will try to demonstrate not only that the Thomistic position is valid but superior to most realist or antirealist alternatives. That is, the Thomistic account satisfies all of one's intuitions about the facts of the matter.

Before moving on I should say something about what makes for a good solution to a philosophical problem.² Imagine a ball with a board resting

ABSTRACT: On the horizon between metaphysics and philosophy of religion stands the question of God's relation to various *abstracta*. Like other contemporary philosophical debates, this one has resulted in a broadly dichotomous stalemate between Platonic realists on the one hand and varieties of nominalism/antirealism on the other. In this paper, I offer Aquinas's moderate-realism as a true middle ground between realist or nominalist solutions. What Platonists take to be *abstracta* are actually the result of intellect's abstractive work on sensible objects. Further, the Christian philosopher should be concerned as much, if not more so, by nominalism than by Platonism. Given the problems associated with either Platonist or nominalist solutions, one should be open to a Thomistic moderate-realist solution to the problem of God and *abstracta*.

1. This is evidenced by the fact that a recent text engaging with the problem of God and abstract objects includes six viewpoints, some only very subtly distinct, but no essay representing the moderate-realist position. See Paul Gould, ed., *Beyond the Control of God? Six Views on the Problem of God and Abstract Objects* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2014).

2. I note what makes for a good philosophical solution because Peter van Inwagen suggests that if a solution conforms to our pretheoretical understanding, then the solution is somehow un-

on top of it. The ball represents reality and the board some philosophical account of reality. Notice there are places where initially the surface of the ball and the board touch, but as the ball's surface curves away, the board juts awkwardly out to either side. There are positions in the history of philosophy, perhaps Berkeley's idealism or Hume's skepticism, that though they begin by tracking with reality, they follow the necessities of their philosophical account as it "juts away" from reality. A good philosophical solution is to be more like a cloth draped over the ball. In our philosophically reflective account of reality, as reality "curves away" our philosophical account should as well.³ I take it as a sign of strength that a philosophical account tracks with our common sense intuitions.

Having said something about my minimum and maximum goals and what makes for a good philosophical solution, I now want to paint some broad outlines of the debate so that I can situate the Thomistic moderate-realist position within its confines. Dr. Peter van Inwagen is a realist about *abstracta*, these are entities that exist, are eternal, causally inert, universals. Dr. Craig is a "concretist" or an antirealist about *abstracta* and denies that any such entities exist. The Thomistic moderate-realist position is that *abstracta* exist, but only as objects abstracted by the intellect and have the properties they do as a result of the way the intellect grasps its objects.

While it is true that the Thomist position occupies a middle ground between the realist and antirealist, that does not of itself make the position stronger than these others. I take it, for example, that theistic evolution is in a middle position between full-blown creationism and atheistic evolutionism. But as a middle position, theistic evolution merely compounds weaknesses rather than purging them. What we should see here, however, is that not only does the Thomist occupy a middle position, but his solution possesses the strengths of both realism and antirealism, while retaining none of their weaknesses. As such it is the superior position. What, then, are the strengths and weaknesses of Platonic realism and nominalist antirealism?

toward. Regarding Amie Thomasson's view of fictional characters (*ficta*), van Inwagen writes, "Thomasson's theory respects what we are naturally inclined to believe about fictional entities, but it achieves its intuitive character by, as it were, brute force: by postulating objects that have the features we are naturally inclined to think fictional entities have" ("Existence, Ontological Commitment, and Fictional Entities," in *Existence: Essays in Ontology* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 114-15). I, on the other hand, see such conformity as an indication of a position's strength.

3. This word picture is based on the following from Etienne Gilson: "Let the man thus enriched by this mutual interpenetration of sense and intellect immerse himself in his experience; let him leave to his understanding the task of expressing what it has just become. Then we will see old concepts narrow their scope as to express this new object and become supple so as to fit its contours until finally a suitable word will flow forth from the depths of thought" (*Thomistic Realism and the Critique of Knowledge* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 2012), 190-1).

Realism and Nominalism

One of the strengths of the Platonist position is that it has a way of making sense of attribute agreement in a more or less direct way. That is, when I say, "The tomato is red" and "The apple is red" there is something that the tomato and the apple have in common, namely, their redness. They have this attribute in common because there is numerically one "redness" which is an abstract object that is exemplified by both the tomato and apple. One of the great weaknesses of Platonism is its so-called two-world ontology. Van Inwagen has commented on this writing,

Platonists, therefore, must say that reality, what there is, is divided into two parts: one part we belong to, and everything in this part is more like us than anything in the other part. The inhabitants of the other part are radically unlike us, much more unlike us than is anything in "our" part, and we can't really say much about what the thing in the other part are like. It seems to me evident that it would be better not to believe in the other part of reality, if we could manage it. But we can't manage it.⁴

Besides the weakness of the two-world ontology, Platonism has another weakness of particular interest to the Christian philosopher, namely, that it commits him to a realm of entities existing eternally alongside God without being caused to exist by God. Such a position does seem to violate a straightforward understanding of the doctrines of aseity and sovereignty. Since William Lane Craig elaborates on this weakness of Platonism for the Christian philosopher, I will avoid the redundancy of addressing it further. Van Inwagen admits that "a philosopher should not wish to be a Platonist if it's rationally possible for the informed philosopher not to be a Platonist."⁵ He believes, however, that the only alternative to Platonic realism is nominalism, which cannot possibly be made consistent; hence, we are stuck with whatever the consequences are of Platonism, no matter how counterintuitive they may be.

While I agree with van Inwagen that there are reasons one should not be a Platonist, I do not see Platonism as unavoidable or nominalism as the only alternative. I believe the moderate-realist account can meet van Inwagen's challenge of being a rationally informed alternative. One might think that in rejecting Platonism, the most obvious philosophical position would be nominalism or antirealism, the rejection of abstract objects. This position, however, has strengths and weaknesses of its own.

One strength of antirealism is that it avoids the Platonist's two-world ontology, and so gives us a philosophical view of reality that is much simpler or "cleaner" than that offered by the Platonist. One weakness of antirealism,

4. Peter van Inwagen, "A Theory of Properties," in *Existence*, 158.

5. *Ibid.*, 153.

obviously enough, is that it has to give an account of things like attribute agreement (of red tomatoes and apples) without positing abstract entities. It can do this in a variety of ways (for example, metalinguistic nominalism or trope theory), but even if these responses are sufficient, which no Platonist would allow, there is still a dilemma in the neighborhood for the Christian philosopher who espouses antirealism. Craig has posed a theological objection to Platonism and so it is only fair to point out a similar problem for the nominalist.

The dilemma is set in motion by an insight from van Inwagen, he writes:

What reasons are there for believing in the existence of properties (qualities, attributes, etc.)? I think it is fair to say that there are apparently such things as properties. There is, for example, apparently such a thing as humanity. The members of the class of human beings, as the idiom has it, "have something in common." This appears to be an existential proposition. . . . And, of course, what goes for the class of human beings goes for the class of birds, the class of white things, and the class of intermediate vector bosons: the members of each of these classes have something in common with one another⁶

I think van Inwagen is correct here. One's treatment of "humanity" is similar to one's treatment of all general classes (for example, "whiteness"). Craig writes, "The Nominalist rejects the Platonist's ontological assay of things. Fleet feet and brown dogs exist, but the brownness and the fleetness are purely fictitious entities."⁷ If one's ontological treatment of attributes like "whiteness" or "brownness" parallels one's ontological treatment of natural kinds like "humanity," then Craig is committed to a fictional view of "humanity."

Given this, Craig runs into the following dilemma for the Christian nominalist: One either allows for the common nature "humanity" or one does not. If one does, then as van Inwagen has asserted, one lets into one's ontology if not all, a good portion of the Platonic horde that the nominalist typically wants to bar. If one *does not* allow for the common nature "humanity," then, for the Christian philosopher, it becomes much more difficult to give a coherent account of (1) original sin, (2) the Incarnation, and (3) redemption. After all, if there is nothing that makes me metaphysically the same kind of thing as Adam, then how does Adam's disobedience affect me? If there is no common nature between Adam and Christ, then how can Christ be the "Last Adam" or "take on human nature"? Finally, if there is no common nature between Christ and me, then how does Christ's death redeem my "humanity"?

6. Ibid., 158–9.

7. William Lane Craig, "A Nominalist Perspective on God and Abstract Objects," *Philosophia Christi* 13 (2011): 305–18.

Thomistic Realism

These then are the strengths and the weaknesses of the realist and antirealist positions related to the problem of God and *abstracta*. What remains to be seen is how the moderate-realist position retains the strengths and avoids the weaknesses. In the following somewhat lengthy quotation, Thomistic philosopher Edward Feser explains how the moderate-realist view of universals/*abstracta* differs from Platonism, nominalism, and conceptualism. He writes:

Consider a universal like "animality" (i.e. the feature of being an animal) . . . animality cannot be said to exist as a substance or thing in its own right; that is to say, it cannot be said to be a Platonic form How does it exist then? In the real, mind-independent world it exists only in actual animals There is animality in Socrates, but it is there inseparably tied to his rationality, and specifically to his humanness. And there is animality in Fido, but it is there inseparably tied to non-rationality, and specifically to dog-ness. Animality considered in abstraction from these things exists only in the mind.

The senses observe this or that individual man, this or that individual dog; the intellect abstracts away the differentiating features of each and considers the animality in isolation, as a universal. This is not nominalism, for it holds that universals exist. Nor is it conceptualism, for while it holds that universals *considered in abstraction from other features* exist only in the mind, it also holds that they exist in the extramental things and that the abstracted universals existing in the intellect derive from our sense experiences of these objectively existing things, rather than being free creations of the mind [as in conceptualism].⁸

Notice that although similar, the Thomistic position is not identical to conceptualism. What Feser has just explained in a concise way, is that what the Platonist takes to be entities existing outside the mind in some Platonic realm, are actually features of things in the world that, when abstracted by the intellect, take on those features in intellection that the Platonist attributes to *abstracta*.⁹

Thomas Aquinas, writing on the same issue, comments:

8. Edward Feser, *The Last Superstition: A Refutation of the New Atheism* (South Bend, IN: St. Augustine's, 2008), 61.

9. To be more precise, the Thomist can give a diverse account of putative abstract objects. That is, natural kinds and attributes are known according to this abstractive process and apprehension of the mind, but other *abstracta*, e.g., propositions, are considered mental constructs following on the second act of the mind (judgment), and numbers are considered mental aggregates whose ontological ground is in the real, but whose completed being is in reason. For more, see Joseph Owens, *An Interpretation of Existence* (Houston, TX: Center for Thomistic Studies, 1985), esp. chap. 2; and Jacques Maritain, *The Degrees of Knowledge* (South Bend, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1959), esp. chap. 4.

Plato strayed from the truth because he believed the form of the thing known must necessarily be in the knower exactly as it is in the thing known. Now he recognized that the form of the thing understood in the intellect in a universal, immaterial, and unchanging way Thus Plato concluded that the things understood must exist in themselves in the same way, namely, in an immaterial and unchanging way [The] intellect receives material and changeable species of material things in an immaterial and unchanging way, in accord with its nature; for things are received in a subject according to the nature of that subject.

We must conclude, therefore, that the soul knows material things through the intellect with a knowledge that is immaterial, universal and necessary.¹⁰

What Aquinas is saying is that the human knower has two knowing powers: sensation and intellection. This idea of the intellect obtaining its objects in a mode different from the way they exist in reality should be familiar to us from an analogy with sense perception: We say, for example, “the stick looks bent in the water but it really isn’t really bent” or “it only looks that small because we’re so far away.” Via sensation, the human comes into contact with a concrete particular. Via intellection, the human abstracts features from things that they have in common and grasps them in an immaterial and universal way.¹¹ Notice, however, that these are two knowing powers of a unified person not two different knowledges. Fredrick Wilhelmsen writes, “sense and intellect are not distinct entities at war with each other. They are powers of a single knowing subject, and through their mutual interpenetration the intellect ‘sees’ the universal in the singular.”¹²

Though most philosophers are aware that sensation can give us a false impression of reality (for example, sticks bent in water), some contemporary philosophers pay little attention to how it is that an object known under the conditions of an abstracting spiritual intellect can also give false impressions

10. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I, q.84, a.1, *responsio*.

11. Here there may be some confusion. The term “universal” has come to just mean what the Platonist means by “universal,” namely, an abstract entity that is able to be multiply instantiated. Aquinas, of course, does not mean that the object of the intellect is a universal in this sense, for the intentional being (*esse intentionale*) of the concept, say “humanity” in a person’s intellect is still a “concrete” object. Max Herrera clarifies, “There seems to be some ambiguity [in Aristotle] as to whether universality is referring to the *mode of being* of a thing or to the *extension* of that thing. E.g., if a universal is to exist in a human mind, it would be a particular in terms of its mode of being, yet it would be a universal in terms of its extension because it would existentially denote all the particulars of which the universal may be predicated” (Max Herrera, “Arabic Influences in Aquinas’s Doctrine of Intelligible Species” (PhD dissertation, Marquette University, 2010), 52). There is no such ambiguity in Aquinas, for *esse* (real or intentional) is always a principle of individuation and so the “universal” for him must refer to *extension* and not the concept’s mode of being in the intellect.

12. Frederick Wilhelmsen, foreword to *Thomistic Realism and the Critique of Knowledge*, by Gilson, 19.

or become false metaphysical data. This, so Aquinas thinks, is what is going on for the Platonist regarding *abstracta*. It is the intellect’s unique way of grasping things that it abstracts universals from individuating material conditions. The intellect, as it were, “strips out” the intelligible species that, in things, are metaphysical principles of its being (substantial and accidental forms) but in the mind are grasped apart from the conditions of individuation and considered “in abstraction.”

“White” in things is a particular quality. But in the intellect “white” is taken up not as a particular quality inhering in a substance but it is taken up as “whiteness.” Under the conditions of the intellect it becomes a “universal” even though that is not what it is “in the world.” The same is true of “humanity.” There is a difference in the philosopher having a stone in his mind, and, say, Goliath having a stone in his head. The stone, to be grasped by the intellect, must be grasped immaterially and, apart from its material constraints, it takes on the feature of universality.

The Thomist can, therefore, affirm with the staunchest nominalist that the only things that exist outside the mind are concrete particulars, while also recognizing that in two white things or human things there is a common nature, which is a formal identity that is individuated materially and existentially.

It is the intellect’s role in human knowing to “strip forms” from reality. Only a philosophy of mind, epistemology, and philosophy of nature that integrates these elements of the human knower with an eye to “how things look to the intellect” can resolve the conflict between the Platonic realist and the nominalist antirealist. This moderate-realism will recognize the contributions to human knowing that are unique to sensation and intellection. The position is able to account for the common nature between all humans (or other natural kinds) without there being *abstracta* as separately existing entities. Without a moderate-realist philosophy of nature, philosophy of mind, and epistemology, I don’t see how much of the contemporary debate can be resolved. With them, I can see how it can easily be resolved.

Since Thomistic moderate-realism is not a form of nominalism, van Inwagen could admit that it is a “philosophically informed alternative” to Platonism, while still maintaining that nominalism is inconsistent. Craig, since he is open to other antirealist solutions such as conceptualism, could admit that moderate-realism is a viable candidate for a solution to the problem of God and abstract objects. I think the Thomist solution to this problem should have that feeling of “the cloth laid over the ball.” At least, it should have enough of this sort of appeal for me to have accomplished the minimal goal of defending the viability of the Thomist position, and perhaps going a step toward showing the superiority of it.

Did God Create Shapes?

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I am going to discuss abstract objects. In particular, I am going to discuss *shapes*. I choose shapes because, if for no other reason, they are rarely mentioned in ontological debates and people may therefore have fewer preconceptions about shapes than they have about, say, attributes or numbers or propositions. I will use phrases like “the ball” and “the cube” and so on to name shapes. I do not mean to suggest by this choice and this terminology that shapes constitute a *sui generis* ontological category. It may be, for example, that the shape I call “the cube” is nothing other than the property of being cubical. And, moreover, if phrases like “the ball” and “the cube” sound in any way suspicious to you, feel free to replace them with phrases like “the shape a thing has if and only if it’s spherical” or “the shape a thing has in virtue of being cubical.”

I will first defend the thesis that there are, or at any rate could be, shapes nothing has. Consider the five Platonic solids—regular convex polyhedra (convex polyhedra all of whose faces are of the same size and shape and all of whose edges are of the same length). Among them is the cube, a regular convex polyhedron with six faces, each of them a square. A less familiar Platonic solid is the icosahedron, a regular convex polyhedron which has twenty faces, each an equilateral triangle. That there are exactly five Platonic solids was proved by Euclid if by no earlier mathematician. It is not easy to make an icosahedral artifact, and there was obviously a time when none had yet been made. For all I know, none had been made when Euclid published his *Elements*. Let’s suppose so. (It happens that there *are* naturally occurring icosahedral objects—certain viruses, for example—but none that an ancient Greek could have known of.)

Let’s suppose that we’re in Alexandria in 270 BC and we hear a critic say to Euclid, “Euclid, you’re wrong. You say that there are five Platonic solids, among them the icosahedron. But nothing is icosahedral, and the icosahedron is a shape, and it’s absurd to suppose that there’s a shape and that

ABSTRACT: I defend the thesis that at least some abstract objects are uncreated. I choose to discuss a rather neglected category of abstract object, *shapes*. I choose to discuss shapes because I think the members of my audience may have fewer metaphysical preconceptions about shapes than about, e.g., numbers or propositions or attributes.

there's nothing of that shape—a shape that nothing *has*. Therefore, there are at most *four* Platonic solids.”

Let's suppose we agree with the Critic that there can't be a shape that nothing has. Nevertheless, we know that there is no mistake in Euclid's proof, and we must therefore believe that there is *some* proposition that is consistent with there being nothing icosahedral *and* can be said to be what he proved. Well, we might insist that since there are no shapes that nothing has, and Euclid's conclusion is true, there must be icosahedral objects somewhere. We might contend, that is, that Euclid's theorem is an *a priori* proof of the existence of physical things of a certain shape. But I really don't think that the following is a very persuasive argument: “Since Euclid's conclusion is true and there can't be shapes that nothing has, there must be icosahedral objects somewhere—perhaps they're too small to see or they're very far away. Or maybe they exist as undetached parts of various things, in the way that the Cnidian Aphrodite already existed as a part of a block of marble before Praxiteles chipped away the rest of the block.”

Might someone say then say that, although there are no *actual* icosahedral things there are nevertheless plenty of icosahedral things, namely, *possible* icosahedral things (that is *merely possible* icosahedral things), icosahedral things that, although they don't *actually* exist, would have existed if history had taken a slightly different course? But to say that *there are* possible icosahedral things is to say that possible icosahedral things *exist*. And to say that possible icosahedral things exist is to say that there exist icosahedral things that might have existed but in fact don't exist. And that implies that things that don't exist do exist—an obvious contradiction.

Well, how about this, then? “We *can* use the idea of the merely possible to reconcile the validity of Euclid's proof with our conviction that there are no shapes that nothing has—even if we can't do it in the way set out in the previous suggestion. We can state Euclid's conclusion as follows. Begin by defining the predicate ‘is Platonic,’ a predicate that applies to tangible physical objects. I won't give the definition, but here are some examples to give you a general idea of what the predicate means. Cubical blocks of stone are Platonic, and so are ordinary dice. If some great craftsman were to make an icosahedral object, that artifact would be Platonic. Having this predicate of physical things at our disposal, we may state Euclid's conclusion as follows:

It is *possible* for there to be five distinct physical objects each of which is Platonic and each of which is shaped differently from each of the others; it is *not* possible for there to be *six* distinct physical objects each of which is Platonic and each of which is shaped differently from each of the others.

Now this is a very powerful suggestion. In *some* sense this statement seems to say everything about the world that the statement “There are exactly five Platonic solids” says—and it does not assert the existence of *anything*

(and thus does not assert the existence of a shape that nothing has). What this fact illustrates is that it is sometimes possible to translate a statement that implies, or at least appears to imply, the existence of abstract objects into a statement that seems to say everything those who do not believe in the existence of abstract objects think is “right” about the original statement and which does not even *seem* to imply the existence of abstract objects. Or let us call the philosophical thesis that there are no abstract objects nominalism. We can then say that sometimes it is possible to replace a nominalistically unacceptable statement with a nominalistically acceptable paraphrase of that statement.

A powerful suggestion, yes, but not ultimately a workable one. Here's the reason why: While Euclid's theorem about the Platonic solids can—I concede—be given a nominalistically acceptable paraphrase, not every step in his *proof* of it can. (I can't go into this within the scope of the talk.) And no one knows of any other proof of his conclusion every step of which can be given a nominalistically acceptable paraphrase. Now cases like this have led some philosophers to adopt a position called *mathematical fictionalism*,¹ a position that would imply that although there are *intermediate steps* in Euclid's proof that are false statements—those that imply the existence of abstract things like shapes—we should nevertheless regard it as really being a *proof*. We should treat those intermediate steps as involving a kind of useful fiction—useful for drawing true conclusions from true premises but requiring the employment of some of the members of a certain stock of statements that are literally false to reach those true conclusions. In my opinion, mathematical fictionalism is a nonstarter.²

All right. You can't go through and accept each step of Euclid's *proof* of the theorem “There are exactly five Platonic solids” without asserting the existence of shapes (or something very much like them, things that a nominalist is not going to like any better than shapes—“possible” shapes, shape properties, descriptions of possible shapes, *ways* of constructing a description of a shape from more basic elements . . .). Finally, if there are shapes at all, there is such a shape as the icosahedron. And that shape is a shape that (as far as we can tell back here in 270 BC) nothing has.

Okay, enough of the pretense that we are back in 270 BC. Let's return to the present. Today we can't argue that there is a shape nothing has because nothing is icosahedral owing to the inconvenient fact that today we know that it's false that nothing is icosahedral. But if there are shapes at all, there must be shapes nothing has. If I have a lump of clay in my hand, there exist

1. See, e.g., Mark Balaguer, “Fictionalism in the Philosophy of Mathematics,” in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta, <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2015/entries/fictionalism-mathematics/>.

2. See my essay “Fictional Nominalism and Applied Mathematics,” *The Monist* 97 (2014): 479–502.

vastly many shapes I *might* work it into with my fingers and almost all of them are shapes that nothing will ever have.

What I have said implies that a shape can exist if nothing has it. But there is more: a shape not only *can* exist if nothing has it, it *must* exist if nothing has it. Every shape must exist whether anything has it or not, for every shape is *necessarily* existent. Suppose, for example, that someone suggests that the shape “the cube” might not have existed. If that’s right, there’s a possible world in which there’s no such shape as the cube. I don’t mean a world in which there’s nothing *of* that shape—that is, a world in which there are no cubes. Of *course* it’s possible for there to be no cubes. I mean a world in which there’s no such shape for a thing to have. In such a world the existence of cubes wouldn’t even be a possibility. In such a world an artisan couldn’t say, “I’ve thought of a very elegant shape. It’s the shape a thing would have if it were a regular convex polyhedron with six faces, all of them squares. I’ll make something of that shape next week.” For in that world, by definition, there’s nothing for the phrase “the shape a thing would have if it were a regular convex polyhedron with six faces, all of them squares” to refer to—a phrase that, if it refers to anything, refers to the shape more succinctly referred to as “the cube.” In a world in which the shape “the cube” did not exist, this actual state of affairs in which we find ourselves would not even exist as a *possibility*—for, in this actual state of affairs, there are cubes. And the proposition “It is possible for there to be cubes” can’t be true unless “the cube” is a possible shape. And it can’t be even a possible shape if it’s not there at all. So if the shape “the cube” fails to exist in some possible world, this state of affairs we find ourselves in not only might not have been *actual* (everyone but Spinoza concedes *that*), it might not even have been *possible*. If the shape “the cube” could have failed to exist, then this actual state of affairs could have been impossible. But I affirm as a metaphysical axiom that if a state of affairs is actual, its being a *possible* state of affairs is one of its essential features: if a state of affairs is actual then it’s necessarily at least possible.

Or think of matters this way. According to orthodox Christian theology, God might have chosen not to create anything: he had absolute free will in the matter of creation. Well, suppose God had chosen that option. Then there would have been nothing besides himself. Since God is obviously not himself cubical, there would then be nothing cubical. Still—let us shift to the indicative mood—God knows about cubical things as possibilities. That is, he knows that he has the power to create a universe some of whose constituent objects are cubes. So he must know about the shape “the cube.” He *must* contemplate that shape and form the consequent judgment “I could have created things of that shape”—for the simple reason that if he did not contemplate that shape and form that judgment, he would not be fully aware

of every aspect of his power. And, of course, if God contemplates a shape, there *is* a shape that he is contemplating.

Now let us ask: did God create the shape he is contemplating—the cube? Well, obviously not if he has not created anything. And we are imagining a state of affairs in which he has not created anything. But let us leave that difficult case to one side and ask whether he created the cube in *our* world, in the actual world. Note that I’m not asking whether he created *cubes*. Of course he did—all of them. I’m asking whether he created the shape itself. Well, it’s certainly hard to conceive of God or any being *deciding* whether to create a shape. If the shape doesn’t exist, what is it that he’s deciding whether to create? And, in any case, it’s hard to see what it could mean to speak of creating a shape—as opposed to creating things *of* that shape. “Creation” after all, is a causal relation, and shapes can’t enter into causal relations. (Of course, the fact that a physical thing is *of* a certain shape can *figure in* causal explanations of the behavior of that thing; for example, an orange on a level table can be moved in every horizontal direction with equal ease because it’s a ball. But it’s things that *have* shapes that enter into causal relations. The shapes themselves don’t.) I conclude that shapes are not created things.

I am perfectly comfortable with saying both that shapes are uncreated *and*, as I do every Sunday, “We believe in one God, the Father, the Almighty, maker of heaven and earth, of all that is, seen and unseen,” and, a moment later (speaking of Jesus Christ) the words, “Through him all things were made.” I am comfortable affirming both that shapes are not brought into being by God *and* my allegiance to these words from the prologue to the fourth Gospel: “All things came into being through him and without him not one thing came into being.” I am comfortable with both my thesis and these words from creed and scripture for essentially same reason I am comfortable both with affirming, along with almost every other Christian philosopher and theologian, each of the following two theses.

There are many things God cannot do: he cannot create something that is simultaneously a ball and a cube; he cannot change the past; he cannot break a promise he has made (“If we are faithless, he remains faithful, for he cannot disown himself” (2 Tim. 2:13)); he cannot bring his own existence to an end.

and the proposition that the following Gospel passages are inerrant scripture:

For human beings such a thing is impossible, but for God everything is possible (Matt. 19:26)

... nothing whatever that God ordains shall be impossible (Luke 1:37)

No less a theologian than St. Thomas Aquinas has said, “Nothing that implies a contradiction falls under the omnipotence of God”³—and this statement certainly implies that, for example, God cannot create something that is simultaneously a ball and a cube. I think it would be absurd to say that these words imply that St. Thomas contradicted the words of Jesus—the words “For God everything is possible.”

Consider this analogous case. Suppose you heard a shopkeeper say, “What a day! We sold everything in the store.” And suppose you replied, “Oh, I don’t think you should have sold the counter and the cash register. How are you going to get along without those?” You would (if you got any reply but an odd look) almost certainly get a reply along the lines of, “I wasn’t talking about those. They weren’t for sale. I meant I sold everything that was for sale.” You would simply be being tiresome if you responded by saying, “But you said everything in the store, and *they’re* in the store. If you meant everything in the store that was for sale, why didn’t you say that?” In a similar vein, when Jesus said, “For God all things are possible,” he wasn’t talking about things like making a self-contradictory statement true or changing the past. He was, I presume, talking about things that would be of some interest to those of us who live in the Christian faith and hope.

In my view, when we say that God is the creator of all things, we are talking about things like seas and mountains and storms and the sun and the moon and galaxies and space and time and electromagnetic radiation and neutrinos and dark energy and angels and human souls. I don’t think that we mean—at any rate that we *have* to mean—that he is the creator of *abstract objects*, of things like propositions and attributes and numbers . . . and shapes.

Dr. Craig will try to convince you that that we have to mean just that. If he convinces you of this, I will try to unconvince you.

Response to Bridges and Van Inwagen

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I take it that the first five-sixths of Peter van Inwagen’s paper targets Bridges’s so-called moderate realism, while the final sixth is directed at my theological critique of Platonic realism.¹ Since I think that van Inwagen has still not seriously engaged the biblical and patristic texts undergirding that critique, we can dispense quickly with his remarks on that head and spend most of our time on his defense of Platonism.

Theological Acceptability of Platonism

Basically, van Inwagen just reiterates his earlier claim² that there is no inconsistency in affirming both that “God has created all things” and “There are things uncreated by God” because these quantified statements assume different domains. This situation is illustrated by the compatibility of Jesus’s statement “God can do everything” and the statement “There are things God cannot do,” statements whose quantifiers plausibly range over different domains. While I am tempted to comment on van Inwagen’s provocative illus-

ABSTRACT: Bridges’s “moderate realism” is really a misnomer, since Aquinas’s view was that mathematical objects and universals are mere *entia rationis*, making Bridges’s view antirealist. The metaphysical idleness of properties on van Inwagen’s view ought to motivate reexamination of his presumed criterion of ontological commitment. Regarding paraphrastic strategies, one can meet van Inwagen’s challenge to provide a nominalistically acceptable paraphrase of Euclid’s proof of exactly five Platonic solids. Concerning fictionalism, van Inwagen should allow the anti-Platonist to treat *abstracta* as he treats supposed composite, inanimate objects. Finally, van Inwagen too quickly dismisses the absolute creationist view that *abstracta* can be effects, if not causes.

1. See William Lane Craig, “God and Abstract Objects,” *Philosophia Christi* 17 (2015): 269–76; J. Thomas Bridges, “A Moderate-Realist Perspective on God and Abstract Objects,” *Philosophia Christi* 17 (2015): 277–83; and Peter van Inwagen, “Did God Create Shapes?,” *Philosophia Christi* 17 (2015): 285–90.

2. Peter van Inwagen, “God and Other Uncreated Things,” in *Metaphysics and God*, ed. Kevin Timpe (London: Routledge, 2009), 19.

tration, to do so would be a distraction. For at most it is just *an illustration* of how a universal affirmative and an opposing existential negative statement can both be true if they have different domains, which we already knew. This goes no distance at all toward showing that the domains assumed by the biblical and patristic writers in the texts I cited were restricted. Indeed, it was partially van Inwagen's original claim in this regard that motivated me to undertake a serious exegetical study of the biblical and patristic texts and their respective backgrounds in order to determine whether these authors did intend the domain of their quantifiers to be unrestricted, once God is exempted. The would-be Christian Platonist now needs to get serious about these texts.

One final correction before we move on: I emphatically do not claim that "when we say that God is the creator of all things, . . . we mean—at any rate that we *have* to mean—that he is the creator of *abstract objects*."³ For, first, as I explained, the biblical writers may have had no conception of abstract objects, in which case their statement "God is the creator of all things" did not mean, even if it implied, that God is the creator of abstract objects. Second, more importantly, to say that "God is the creator of abstract objects" is to endorse absolute creationism, and I certainly do *not* think that we must do that! Rather, when we affirm with the biblical writers and ante-Nicene church fathers that God is the creator of all things, we mean that simply nothing exists, apart from God, which is uncreated by God.

Argument for Platonism

Let us turn now to van Inwagen's argument that there are shapes which nothing has. I take it that the target of this argument is a sort of immanentism, usually associated with Aristotle, which affirms the reality of abstract universals but denies that unexemplified universals exist. Universals are not, as in Platonism, transcendent, nonspatiotemporal realities but exist immanently in the things which exemplify them. For the immanentist, there are no uninstantiated shapes. I suspect that van Inwagen believed that Bridges advocates such a realism and so goes after it.

Bridges's Thomism

Unfortunately, Bridges greatly misleads his reader by characterizing Thomism as a form of "moderate realism." For "moderate realism" is already employed in the literature to designate immanentism regarding abstract universals.⁴ But Thomas rejects moderate realism, as Bridges himself explains.

3. Van Inwagen, "Did God Create Shapes?," 290.

4. See Marilyn McCord Adams, "Universals in the Early Fourteenth Century," in *The Cambridge History of Later Medieval Philosophy*, ed. Norman Kretzmann, Anthony Kenny, and

Once one frees oneself of the misimpression that Bridges affirms that abstract universals exist immanently in things, it becomes quite clear that for Bridges universals "exist only in the mind" and "the only things that exist outside the mind are concrete particulars." Thomas Aquinas is thus what moderns would call a nominalist.⁵ Ed Feser bristles at the suggestion: "This is not nominalism, for it holds that universals exist." But in what sense? Only in the mind! What does that mean? Is this a sort of quasi-existence, a sort of Meinongian watered-down existence?⁶ Being quasi-existent makes about as much sense as being quasi-pregnant: either one is or one is not. "Existing only in the mind" seems to be just another way of saying that something does not exist even though one can have thoughts of such a thing. Every antirealist agrees that properties, numbers, and other *abstracta* exist in that sense.⁷ Bridges is therefore correct to surmise that I would find his Thomist perspective theologically unobjectionable, for it just is another form of antirealism that one might add to my figure 1.⁸

Before we return to van Inwagen's argument, it is worth noting that due to his denial of immanent universals, Bridges cannot claim for his view any advantage based upon a supposed common nature in Adam, Christ, and ourselves. For on Thomism natures are multiplied by particulars: you and I do not have the identical human nature, even though we have two qualita-

Jan Pinborg (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 411–39, esp. 422–34; Marilyn McCord Adams, *William Ockham*, 2 vols. (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1987), 1:30. She lists three features of the moderate realism of a theologian like Walter Burleigh: (1) a universal is a thing that exists in reality as a metaphysical constituent of particulars; (2) the universal exists in many particulars simultaneously without being numerically multiplied itself; (3) the universal is really distinct from particulars and other universals.

5. Jeffrey E. Brower, "Aquinas on the Problem of Universals," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* (forthcoming), in agreement with Frederick Copleston and Brian Leftow. Brower holds that Aquinas is not a nominalist in the medieval sense because he holds that distinct things belong to the same kind in virtue of their having nonidentical, individual natures that are intrinsically similar but individuated by matter. Nonetheless, Brower recognizes that Aquinas denies the existence of universals and so counts as a nominalist in the modern sense. Armand Maurer explains that Aquinas treated mathematical objects just as he treated universals: they are *entia rationis* devised by the mind as a consequence of our knowledge of the world. "Nothing like them exists in the external world" (Armand Maurer, "Thomists and Thomas Aquinas on the Foundation of Mathematics," *Review of Metaphysics* 47 (1993): 59). I'm grateful to J. T. Bridges for sharing these articles with me.

6. Meinong notoriously resorted to a sort of *depotenzierte Existenz* in order to explain why objects which exist in the understanding like *the existing x* do not actually exist (Alexius Meinong, *Über Möglichkeit und Wahrscheinlichkeit: Beiträge zur Gegenstandstheorie und Erkenntnistheorie* (Leipzig: Verlag von Johann Ambrosius Barth, 1915), 282). For a comparison of scholastics' *entia rationis* with Meinong's nonexistent objects, see Daniel D. Novotny, "Scholastic Debates about Beings of Reason and Contemporary Analytical Metaphysics," in *Metaphysics: Aristotelian, Scholastic, Analytic*, ed. Lukas Novak et al. (Frankfurt: Ontos Verlag, 2012), 11–24. According to Novotny "*ens rationis*" was for the scholastics a term for a nonexistent, merely intentional object.

7. See, e.g., Mark Balaguer, "Realism and Anti-Realism in Mathematics," in *Philosophy of Mathematics*, ed. Andrew D. Irvine (Amsterdam: North Holland, 2009), 82.

8. See Craig, "God and Abstract Objects," 274.

tively similar natures. Neither can similarity be explained in terms of things' having an identical metaphysical constituent, for there is no such thing. By abandoning immanentism, Thomism gives up the supposed advantages of historic moderate realism. No great loss, however; for to explain, for example, the similarity in color of an apple and a tomato, one can explain why the apple is red in scientific terms, for example, its absorbing and reflecting certain light spectra, and then simply repeat the account when it comes to the tomato.

Ontological Commitment and Neutralism

I am inclined to agree with van Inwagen that "if there are shapes at all, there must be shapes nothing has." But why think that there are shapes at all? Sure, there are things that are (approximately) cubical and spherical and icosahedral, but why think that in addition to these objects there also exist (in a metaphysically heavy sense) things like *the cube* and *the sphere*?

It is evident that van Inwagen takes for granted some instance of Balaguer's Indispensability Argument schema. In particular, he assumes the criterion of ontological commitment expressed in premise (I). Although van Inwagen interacts with a number of anti-Platonist perspectives in his paper, it is noteworthy that he never thinks to discuss neutralism's challenge to that criterion, without which the whole rationale for realism collapses. If neutralism is right, as I think it is, then we may affirm mathematical truth without commitment to mathematical objects.

Van Inwagen would do well to reconsider his adherence to premise (I). He has elsewhere characterized Quine's metaontological theses as a set of rules or a strategy for settling ontological disputes. So why should we think that those theses are true rather than merely useful or effective in settling disputes? Van Inwagen rejects a constituent ontology which takes properties to be metaphysical constituents of things. He also rejects any attempt to appeal to exemplification of properties as an explanation of why a particular is as it is or of why particulars resemble one another. It is no wonder, then, that van Inwagen would rather not be a Platonist! For his abstract objects are not doing any metaphysical work. They are just idle components of his worldview which he is stuck with because of his adherence to Quine's metaontological theses, particularly the criterion of ontological commitment. In light of this fact, why not, with the neutralist, reject one or more of those theses and rid oneself of these unwanted freeloaders?

Paraphrastic Strategies

Alas, instead, van Inwagen considers paraphrastic strategies to rid oneself of shapes. Unfortunately, he does not consider, for example, the paraphrases which Charles Chihara's constructibilism or Geoffrey Hellman's modal structuralism might offer for Euclid's proof of exactly five Platonic solids. With his customary chutzpah, van Inwagen just asserts that "no one knows of any other proof of his conclusion every step of which can be given a nominalistically acceptable paraphrase."

Well, how about this?

- (1) It is not possible to construct a solid angle with two triangles.
- (2) It is possible to construct the angle of the cube with three squares.
- (3) It is possible to construct the angle of the pyramid with three triangles, the angle of the octahedron with four, and the angle of the icosahedron with five.
- (4) It is possible to construct the angle of the dodecahedron with three pentagons.
- (5) It is not possible to construct a solid angle with six or more plane angles, for the six angles would be equal to four right angles, which is impossible, since any solid angle is comprised of angles less than four right angles.
- (6) Therefore, "it is *possible* for there to be five distinct physical objects each of which is Platonic and each of which is shaped differently from each of the others; it is *not* possible for there to be *six* distinct physical objects each of which is Platonic and each of which is shaped differently from each of the others." QED.

Van Inwagen cannot protest that this proof commits us to the existence of possible geometrical objects, since the modal operator forms an intensional context into which one cannot quantify.

Oddly enough, however, van Inwagen appears to do precisely this in his proof that every shape exists necessarily, or that there are no contingent shapes. The key line in his argument is: "'the cube' is a possible shape. And it can't be even a possible shape if it's not there at all."⁹ Van Inwagen apparently infers from "Possibly, there is some x such that $x = \text{the cube}$ " to "There is some x such that, possibly, $x = \text{the cube}$." He seems to be assuming the Barcan formula, $\diamond \exists x \varphi(x) \rightarrow \exists x \diamond \varphi(x)$. But then he will find himself ontologically committed to *possibilia*, which he earlier seemed to reject.¹⁰ Absent

9. Van Inwagen, "Did God Create Shapes?," 288.

10. The Barcan formula and the specter of necessitism (the view that nothing exists contingently) provide additional motivation for a neutralist view of first-order quantification. For discussion see Takashi Yagisawa, critical notice of *Modal Logic as Metaphysics*, by Timothy Williamson, *Notre Dame Philosophical Reviews*, October 15, 2013, <http://ndpr.nd.edu/news/43612-modal-logic-as-metaphysics>. Necessitism illustrates the sort of metaphysical debacle which the assumption of Quine's criterion of ontological commitment helps to generate.

the Barcan formula, he has no justification for thinking that because it is possible that something is the cube, there is something that is possibly the cube. The cube could be a contingent shape.

Fictionalism

Van Inwagen also rejects fictionalism, a view which accepts Quine's criterion of ontological commitment but which holds that sentences quantifying over mathematical objects are false. He does so because he thinks that a proof of a nominalistically acceptable conclusion requires the truth of all the argument's premises. But a fictionalist may hold that some of the premises are to be treated merely instrumentally but can be relied upon to yield nominalistically acceptable conclusions. Van Inwagen regards such a position as a nonstarter because it leaves unanswered the question: *why* is mathematics reliable?¹¹ This is the question of mathematics' applicability, which, it seems to me, the theist, be he realist or antirealist, is best positioned to answer.¹² God has imbued the physical world with a certain structure such that the standard model of arithmetic can be counted on to deliver reliable conclusions.

Van Inwagen is himself a fictionalist when it comes to the existence of chairs and other inanimate composite objects. If so bold a thesis is acceptable, why not similarly allow fictionalism about abstract objects? When van Inwagen denies that chairs exist, he has said that he is not speaking ordinary English, but Tarskian, the language of the metaphysics seminar. So why not accord the same privilege to the fictionalist antirealist? He, too, can allow that when we say, "The number of Martian moons is two," we make a true statement in ordinary language, even if this sentence is false in Tarskian.

Absolute Creationism

Van Inwagen is intolerant not only of antirealism. He is equally unsympathetic to non-Platonic realism. He criticizes absolute creationism on the grounds that (1) it is hard to make sense of God's deciding to create a shape, and (2) creation is a causal relation, and shapes cannot enter into causal relations. With respect to (1), absolute creationists (unless they are radical

11. Peter van Inwagen, "Fictionalist Nominalism and Applied Mathematics," *The Monist* 97 (2014): 486; cf. 495–6.

12. On the one hand, the theistic realist can argue that God has fashioned the world on the structure of the mathematical objects. On the other hand, the theistic antirealist can claim that God has created the world according to a certain blueprint which He had in mind. Thus, the theist—whether he be a realist or an antirealist about mathematical objects—has the explanatory resources to account for the mathematical structure of the physical world and, hence, for the otherwise unreasonable effectiveness of mathematics—resources which the naturalist lacks.

theistic activists) do not typically root mathematical necessities, including geometrical truths, in God's will but in God's nature.¹³ Hence, though shapes depend ontologically on God, they are not the result of His deciding. As for (2), while *abstracta* have no causal powers and so cannot be causes, why can they not be effects? Indeed, most of those philosophers of aesthetics who are, like van Inwagen, realists about fictional characters take them to be created by their authors.¹⁴ I carry no brief for absolute creationism, but van Inwagen's cursory dismissals do not do this viewpoint justice.

Conclusion

We have noted van Inwagen's claim that one should not want to be a Platonist unless there is some rationally compelling argument for Platonism. Does he really think, then, that his argument for abstract objects is rationally compelling? Does he really think that all those antirealist philosophers like Jody Azzouni and Charles Chihara and Geoffrey Hellman and Mark Balaguer and Penelope Maddy and Stephen Yablo are irrational in rejecting that argument? His objections to absolute creationism, paraphrastic strategies, and fictionalism, as well as his silence concerning neutralism, make it hard to believe that that bar has been reached.

13. See Thomas V. Morris and Christopher Menzel, "Absolute Creation," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 23 (1986): 360. Cf. Brian Leftow, *God and Necessity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012). Among theistic modal theories, Leftow distinguishes between theories which ground modality in God's nature and theories which ground modality in God's activity. Leftow endorses a partial activist view but even so grounds necessary truths of logic and mathematics in God's nature, not His activity.

14. Christy Mag Uidhir, "Introduction: Art, Metaphysics, and the Paradox of Standards," in *Art and Abstract Objects*, ed. Christy Mag Uidhir (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 7.

A Reply to Craig

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I present here some rather disjointed thoughts on William Lane Craig's contention that the position I defended in my essay "God and Other Uncreated Things"¹ contradicts the traditional Christian understanding of the doctrine of creation (and, in particular, contradicts the Nicene Creed and the writings of the fathers).²

I am afraid I must begin by saying that Craig's exposition of my views, despite copious—and, I concede, generally well-chosen—quotations, are, well, very far from reliable. But I can hardly demonstrate this, since any paragraph in that exposition I might try to convict of that charge would require five paragraphs or more of discussion for me even to make a start on the project of convincing you that he has misunderstood me. (And, anyway, nothing is more boring than a scholar's closely reasoned point-by-point defense of the proposition that some other scholar has misrepresented his views.) Fortunately, nothing in the present paper is relevant to the points on which (in my view) Craig has got me wrong. I will also note that Craig seems bent on requiring that I *prove* things, and frequently points out that I have failed to do so.³ I can only reply that I am a philosopher and not a mathemati-

ABSTRACT: In "God and Other Uncreated Things," I defended the position that at least some properties (attributes, qualities, and so forth) are uncreated. I argued that this thesis does not contradict the creedal statement that God is the creator of all things, visible and invisible, because that statement presupposes a domain of quantification that does not include (the things that I call) properties. William Lane Craig has contended that this defense of the consistency of my position with the Nicene Creed fails, owing to the fact that there are clear patristic statements to the effect that the domain of quantification presupposed in the Nicene Creed must be understood as absolutely unrestricted. In this paper, I grant his premise but present reasons for doubting whether his conclusion—that the proposition that there are uncreated properties contradicts the Nicene Creed—follows from it.

1. In Kevin Timpe, ed., *Metaphysics and God: Essays in Honor of Eleonore Stump* (London: Routledge, 2009), 3–20.

2. See William Lane Craig, "Van Inwagen on Uncreated Beings," <http://www.reasonable-faith.org/van-inwagen-on-uncreated-beings>. A shorter version of the same paper was published as "Nominalism and Divine Ascency," *Oxford Studies in Philosophy of Religion* 4 (2011): 44–65.

3. The charges that I have failed to prove my conclusions are addressed to my arguments for Platonism and are at most only indirectly relevant to the charges of unorthodoxy (if not heresy) to which I attempt to reply in the present paper.

clan and that in philosophy there are no proofs of any positive, substantive philosophical thesis. I doubt whether any philosophical argument for any important philosophical position whatever has been found convincing by more than 30 percent of the philosophers who have encountered it. I am also aware that he thinks that most of my arguments not only fail to be proofs but are bad arguments. I disagree—I've read what he's said about them, and find no reason in those writings to be less satisfied with them than I was when I first formulated them. In everything he has written about my work in ontology I can find only one just criticism: that in one place I misstated the views of Richard Routley. In this he is right, and I have no defense—I simply got the guy wrong, and I apologize to his shade. In any case, there is no need to defend the cogency of my arguments in this paper, for it concerns what Craig has said about my conclusions, and not what he has said about the arguments that led me to those conclusions.

For a long time, I wasn't able to see why Craig found my views about abstract objects so objectionable. (The central thesis of "God and Other Uncreated Things" was that abstract objects—numbers, propositions, attributes—cannot enter into causal relations, and thus, since creation is a causal relation, are uncreated.) My memory is unclear on this point, but it is possible that I had not read the printed version of his paper carefully; perhaps I merely skimmed it, and was reacting to his conclusions without having considered his arguments. On those occasions on which I tried to articulate my bewilderment, I said things along the following lines:

There are very clear biblical, and in fact Dominical, statements, which, if taken absolutely literally, imply that God is able to do anything. And yet few people if any have accused St Thomas of contradicting the Gospels when he said that nothing that implies a contradiction falls under the omnipotence of God. Or for saying that God cannot lie or break his promises or change the past. And most Christians—at least if they were philosophers and had the relevant concepts—would be willing to say that both the biblical statements and Thomas's statements were true but that the domain of quantification of the biblical statements was restricted (perhaps to things of practical concern to people living in the Christian faith and hope) and Thomas's statements were not. But if the evangelists can be said to have been employing a restricted domain of quantification, why is it so obvious that the bishops who declared,

We believe in one God, the Father almighty, creator of heaven and earth and of all things visible and invisible . . .

weren't employing a restricted domain of quantification? (Well, in one respect, of course they must have been: God himself was excluded from the domain of 'all things invisible'—for God is uncreated. When I speak of a restricted domain of quantification in connection with the statements about Creation contained in the document commonly

called the Nicene Creed, I shall mean a domain of quantification *more* restricted than the domain 'everything besides God'.)

Whatever may have been the case in the past, *now*—having read the longer, online version of the paper—I see that Craig's answer to my question is that the evangelists, and Our Lord himself, in their statements about what God had the power to do, were *obviously* employing a restricted domain of quantification, and that, whatever may have been the intention of the bishops responsible for what we loosely call the Nicene Creed, this was not the case with many of the fathers of the church. Those of them who address such matters at all insist that God created everything besides himself—and *no exceptions*. Unlike the biblical writers, the fathers, when they say that God created everything besides himself make it clear, or at least very often make it clear, that they intend this universal quantification to be unrestricted.

I am not entirely sure *why* Craig thinks it obvious that texts like Matthew 19:26 ("For human beings such a thing is impossible, but for God everything is possible"—the words are spoken by Jesus) and Luke 1:37 ("Seeing that nothing whatever that God ordains shall be impossible"—words spoken by Gabriel to Our Lady during the Annunciation) *obviously* fail to imply that God is able to create round squares or to change the past or (the example is adapted from Descartes) to create two adjacent mountains that have no valley between them. I don't see how such a judgment could be justified on textual or theological grounds. True, both the Dominical *logion* and Gabriel's statement are spoken in response to a reference to a particular, well, feat. In Matthew, Jesus had just made a well-known remark about a camel and the eye of a needle, to which the disciples have reacted by saying, "Who, then, can be saved?" In Luke, the reference is to the pregnancy of the elderly and barren St. Elizabeth, and by extension to the virginal pregnancy ordained for Mary. After all, Jesus *could* have said, "For human beings such a thing is impossible, but for God it is possible," and Gabriel *could* have said, "Don't doubt the power of God; he is able to cause a virgin to conceive." And yet they both chose to say—if we take them literally—that with God *everything* is possible. If Descartes had used these as proof texts for his thesis that God was not bound by the laws of logic or arithmetic, there would have been no textual or theological grounds on which to oppose his understanding of them. I myself oppose that understanding on philosophical grounds: I believe that there is such a thing as absolute, unqualified possibility and impossibility (as opposed to various other kinds of possibility and impossibility, such as physical possibility and impossibility), and I believe that the existence of an agent who is *able* to bring about an absolutely impossible state of affairs (or who is able to turn an absolute impossibility into a possibility) is itself an absolute impossibility. And since I think the two biblical pronouncements must have expressed truths in the contexts in which they were delivered, I postulate that those contexts induced restricted quantification—that the range of

the Greek quantifiers *panta* and *pan* did not extend to such items as creating round squares. Descartes would not be moved by this argument, since he rejects its philosophical premises. But if *Craig* thinks that the texts do not imply that God is able to create a round square, his grounds, like mine, can only be philosophical—and, I would suppose, much like mine.

Nevertheless, there is this point. If there are no textual grounds for reading *panta* and *pan* in the Gospel texts as either restricted or unrestricted quantifiers, the same is not true of *pantōn* (“creator of . . . all things visible and invisible”) and *panta* (“through whom all things were made”) in the creed. For the fathers insist that these universal quantifiers are unrestricted. And when they make similar statements in their own works, they intend *their* universal quantifiers to be unrestricted.

I think *Craig* is very likely right when he tells his readers that when the fathers made statements like “God is the creator of all things” (always excepting himself—and I leave questions about the ontology of evil out of the discussion), they meant their use of the universal quantifier to be absolutely unrestricted. Still, it’s not as obvious as it might appear at first glance to be what lesson to draw from this. Let me explain what I mean by this by telling a story, a sort of parable.

A certain liberal theologian of our time is a fervent proponent of the sacramental validity of same-sex marriages. He can point to several clear statements in the fathers to the effect that *all* marriages recognized as valid by the law of a particular jurisdiction, even if that jurisdiction is a pagan kingdom, even if the marriage ceremonies mandated by its laws incorporate prayers to pagan gods, are sacraments and true marriages in the sight of God—provided only that the law forbids coerced marriages. (These patristic statements were made in opposition to certain heretics who held that, after the day of Pentecost, only marriages presided over by a Christian priest were true, sacramentally valid marriages—a doctrine that implied that it was now impossible for pagans and even non-Christian Jews to commit adultery.) The fathers further maintain that even if the law of a certain jurisdiction incorporates a false conception of marriage, even if it permits divorce, even if it recognizes polygamy or polyandry, *certain* marriage ceremonies performed in that jurisdiction will be valid. As one of them wrote, “If a man takes a wife, in accordance with the laws of his city, and later takes a second wife, and finally divorces the first, the original marriage ceremony is valid and effective; the second ceremony and the divorce are neither valid nor effective.” The liberal theologian enlists these fathers in his cause—for, after all, at least in many jurisdictions of the present day, same-sex marriages are recognized by law.

So goes the parable. Now we ask, when our imaginary fathers contended that *all* marriages valid according to the laws of any jurisdiction were sacramentally valid (provided neither party was coerced or already married), did they mean their quantifiers to be unrestricted? I will so stipulate. But then I would ask, what if they were to learn that there would one day be jurisdictions whose law recognized the possibility of the marriage of two people of the same sex—which explicitly ordained that two men or two women might be legally married in exactly the same sense of “legally married” as a man and a woman? I find it hard to imagine that they would continue to say that *all* first marriages not involving coercion that were valid according to the laws of any jurisdiction were sacramentally valid. I would expect them to say that they had never even *thought* of the possibility of a state that would legally establish the validity of marriage between two persons of the same sex.

Now you may want to quarrel with the details of this example. Maybe a person of their time to whom this possibility was mentioned would continue to endorse the unqualified “all” statement and insist that same-sex marriages are not even *legally* possible, since the very *concept* of marriage implies that only a man and a woman can be married to each other. But surely its lesson is true even if there is some feature of the particular example that unfits it for teaching this lesson. And the lesson is that a person may endorse a certain “all”-statement, mean it to hold without any possible exception, and, nevertheless, *would have* admitted that there were possible exceptions to it if certain possibilities he had not thought of were brought to his attention.

I am happy to concede that if any of the fathers whom *Craig* quotes could have slept to the present day—not in the sleep of death, but in some such way as people sleep in Arthurian legend—and had been awakened, and had learned English, and *Craig* had then said to him, “Van Inwagen over there thinks that properties are necessarily existent and are, moreover, uncreated,” he would say something along the lines of, “This van Inwagen is a heretic.” I, however, do not find this thing I’m happy to say very interesting. I do not find it interesting because I do not think that our awakened father would have any idea, not the least, what I mean by “property” or what my reasons are for thinking that there are such things as the things I call “properties.” Similarly, if a present-day physicist said to him, the awakened father, that a boulder sitting on the top of a hill was capable of doing work, he would suppose that she was mad. Slaves and horses and oxen are the sorts of thing that do work, he would protest, not inanimate objects. And in the sense he would give to the English word “work” (this sense being a joint effect of his experience in the ancient world and his recent English lessons), he would be dead right. But that wasn’t the sense in which the physicist was using the word. The two senses are not entirely unrelated—as are the senses of the phonetically and orthographically identical words “bank” and “bank” when

we use them to talk of financial institutions, on the one hand, and rivers, on the other—but neither are they the same sense.

I obviously cannot produce a proper argument for the conclusion that the concept I express by the word “property” (or any concept even remotely resembling it) was wholly unknown to the fathers. I cannot even present a proper argument for the conclusion that they never explicitly mentioned that concept. (For all I know, none of the fathers ever explicitly mentioned the concept “tacking against the wind” or the concept “dactylic hexameter,” but I’m fairly confident that they all *had* those two concepts.) I could not do the latter even if I were far more learned than I am, for my space is limited. But I will give one example in aid of this contention. Consider this passage:

... without [body, color] has no existence (not as being part of it, but as an attendant property co-existing with it, united and blended, just as it is natural for fire to be yellow and the ether dark blue) . . .

Craig has quoted these words from the *Plea for the Christians* of the ante-Nicene father Athenagoras of Athens, a second-century philosopher who was converted to Christianity and thereafter wrote apologetical works.⁴ (I don’t know what word has been translated as “property.” If someone were for some reason to undertake to translate my “A Theory of Properties”⁵ into patristic Greek, I’d counsel using *hē poiotes* for my word “property”—the word Plato invented for the “whatness” of a thing; Cicero would later coin the Latin word *qualitas* to translate it.⁶) I would certainly say that if colors could not exist apart from bodies but coexisted with them, not as parts of them but united and blended with them, then it would indeed be heretical to say that colors existed but God had not created them. But *my* colors, that is, the properties of physical things I call “colors,” are nothing at like Athenagoras’s colors (or, rather, nothing at all like the things Athenagoras *supposes* colors to be)—just as David Lewis’s possible worlds are nothing at all like Saul Kripke’s possible worlds. Within my metaphysical system, it makes no more sense to say that the color green is united and blended with a shamrock than it does to say that the number three (or, as it may be, the number four) is united and blended with the shamrock. God has indeed created shamrocks and has ordained that the number of their leaves shall be three or four; it does not follow that he created the numbers three and four.

4. Craig, “Van Inwagen on Uncreated Beings.”

5. Van Inwagen, *Oxford Studies in Metaphysics*, vol. 1, ed. Dean Zimmerman (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 107–38.

6. And I would counsel against using Aristotle’s coinage *to katholou*—usually translated “universal.” (A noun he formed by contracting the adverbial phrase *kata holou*. I once heard C. D. C. Reeve say in a lecture that the following was the *very first* appearance of “universal” in its philosophical sense: “But come now, try to keep your promise to *me*, and tell me what virtue *as a whole* (*kata holou*) is; and stop making many things out of one, as the wags say every time someone breaks something; rather leave virtue whole and sound, and tell me what it *is*” (*Memo* 77a)).

I will also contend that, whatever metaphysical concepts may have been available to the fathers, my concept of “property” was quite unknown to Plato or Aristotle or to the Hellenistic philosophers. If I am wrong about this, it would suffice to show it if one could point to a passage in which one of those philosophers mentions or expresses this concept.

But let us return to our father who has slept and been awakened in the present day. What I *would* find an interesting question is this: Suppose he were willing to enter into a couple of months of dialectical exchange with me about the contents of the various metaphysical categories. Would he finally say, “Ah, now I see what you mean by ‘property.’ It’s quite different from anything I or my contemporaries had ever thought of. But you’re still a heretic if you say they’re uncreated”? Or would he say, “Ah, now I see what you mean by ‘property.’ It’s quite different from anything I or my contemporaries had ever thought of. It’s perfectly all right for a Christian who believes in such things to say that they are uncreated. Go in peace to love and serve the Lord”? I don’t think I know which of these things the awakened father would say in those circumstances—although I am, as I have said, confident that the metaphysicians and theologians of his day had no concept that resembled the concept that I express by the word “property.” I can say only this. I see reason to think that my metaphysical views are true. I see no reason to think that they contradict the faith of the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church of which I am a committed member. If I did see or thought I saw a reason to believe this (and a proof that they contradict the writings of venerable Christian texts like the writings of the fathers would certainly be a reason to believe this) I would immediately cease to hold those metaphysical views.

Response to Van Inwagen and Craig

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The first thing one might note from the title is that I plan to respond to both Dr. van Inwagen and Dr. Craig in this paper.¹ This may seem strange given that van Inwagen has spent the entirety of his reply responding to Craig's charge of heresy. So be it. I will, in a manner not too removed from the Thomistic tradition, supply van Inwagen an objection he would have likely raised, had he deemed the Thomistic position worthy of formal response. Having responded to the conjectured voice of van Inwagen, I will then reply to the stated concerns of Craig.

Reply to Van Inwagen on Existence

At least one possible objection to Thomism which arises from van Inwagen's work would be an objection to the notion of existence employed by the existential Thomist. Regarding Aquinas's notion of existence, van Inwagen is somewhat misinformed in lumping Aquinas in with later existentialist thinkers like Heidegger and Sartre. In discussing the differences between "thick" and "thin" concepts of being van Inwagen adds the parenthetical note "The continental philosophy of being is, I believe, rooted in Thomism."² This is an understandable mistake, but a mistake nonetheless. Jacques Maritain clarifies just this sort of confusion:

ABSTRACT: One thing that becomes apparent in this exchange is that each of the positions emerges based on differences in fundamental philosophical commitments. An existential Thomist has a very well-defined and sufficiently "thick" view of being at the heart of his metaphysical system. Van Inwagen rejects such views of being in favor of a "thin" view. This issue is addressed and clarified. Craig takes issue with the way the term "moderate-realism" has been explicated, whether or not the idea of existence in the intellect is coherent, and whether the Thomistic solution offers any real advantages over nominalist ones. In this response, I continue to demonstrate the cogency and advocate the superiority of Aquinas's position.

1. See Peter van Inwagen, "Did God Create Shapes?," *Philosophia Christi* 17 (2015): 285–90; and William Lane Craig, "Response to Bridges and Van Inwagen," *Philosophia Christi* 17 (2015): 291–7.

2. Peter van Inwagen, *Ontology, Identity, and Modality: Essays in Metaphysics* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 4.

Let it be said right off that there are two fundamentally different ways of interpreting the word 'existentialism'. One way is to affirm the primacy of existence, but as implying and preserving essences or natures. . . . This is what I consider to be authentic [Thomistic] existentialism. The other way is to affirm the primacy of existence, but as destroying or abolishing essences or natures and as manifesting the supreme defeat of intellect and of intelligibility. This is what I consider to be apocryphal [continental] existentialism.³

Though mistaken in this historical connection, van Inwagen is certainly correct that Aquinas espouses a "thick" view of existence and not the more Quinean "thin" view. I raise the former as merely a point of clarification for a common confusion. If one is going to find Aquinas's version of existentialism objectionable, then one should find it objectionable for the right reasons.

Van Inwagen certainly finds "thick" views of existence objectionable. One reason is that he finds the notion of an "act of being" objectionable. Van Inwagen's discomfort should be raised and assuaged. Van Inwagen writes,

Many philosophers distinguish between a thing's being and its nature. These philosophers seem to think of, e.g. Socrates' being as the most general activity Socrates engages in From the point of view of the Quinean meta-ontology, this is all wrong If there is a most general activity that a human being (or anything else that engages in activities) engages in—presumably it would be something like "living" or "getting older"—it is simply wrong to call it 'being'. And it is equally wrong to apply to it any word containing a root related to 'être' or 'esse' or 'existere' or 'to on' or 'einai' or 'Sein' or 'be' or 'am' or 'is'. One cannot, of course, engage in this most general activity (supposing there to be such an activity) unless one *is*, but this obvious truth is simply a consequence of the fact that one can't engage in any activity unless one is: if an activity is being engaged in, there has to be something to engage in it. . . . Sartre and Heidegger and all other members of the existential-phenomeno-logical tradition are, if I am right, guilty of ascribing to the "being" of things features of those things that should properly be ascribed to their natures. That is why they deny that being is the most barren and abstract of all categories. That is why they have, so to speak, a "thick" conception of being—as opposed to the 'thin' conception of being that I believe to be the correct conception of being.⁴

This is definitely a point against Aquinas if it is right. After all, can existence be the most general activity of a thing if the thing must *be* to engage in it? Here is where the former point about not reading Aquinas through the lens of Sartre/Heidegger becomes more substantial. For Aquinas, the act of being/

3. Jacques Maritain, *Existence and the Existent* (Garden City, NY: Image, 1956), 13.

4. Peter van Inwagen, *Existence: Essays in Ontology* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 54–6.

existing is precisely *not* a kind of general activity of a thing, but is an effect received from God, who is existence essentially. Here John Wippel explains,

Being (*ens*) is predicated of God alone essentially, and of every creature only by participation; for no creature is its *esse*, but merely has *esse*. Thomas [Aquinas] then notes that when anything is predicated of something by participation, something else must be present there in addition to that which is participated. Therefore, in every creature there is a distinction between the creature which has *esse*, and *esse* itself.⁵

This is Aquinas's doctrine of participation. Every moment of a creature's existence it receives existence from God; whatever act of being a thing has it is not an activity of the thing but is an effect of God's present causal activity. Whatever van Inwagen's original objection to the thick conception of being in Sartre/Heidegger, this is an entirely *different* thick conception of being. However, since van Inwagen objects to thick conceptions of being and to the distinction between a thing's being and its nature, he will object to Aquinas's view of being as well. Whether we think Aquinas's view is acceptable or not, let us at least be clear about it.

Reply to Craig

Craig has raised three objections to my position: (1) the use of the term "moderate-realist" to describe Aquinas's position, (2) the type of existence enjoyed by a thing in the intellect, and (3) that the superiority of the moderate-realist position over nominalism regarding some theological concerns is illusory. At the risk of writing a boring paper, I'll respond to Craig's points in order.

Forms versus Universals

If we recall that Plato's theory of ideas is also called his theory of forms it allows us a better handle on the question of terminology raised by Craig. Plato thinks that forms are objective and exist extramentally; this is the heritage of contemporary Platonists and their views on *abstracta*. Aristotle thinks that what makes a thing what it is is its form, but these forms are immanent in things (as one of two fundamental metaphysical principles; the other being matter). What does Aquinas think? Here Aquinas is decidedly Aristotelian. Aquinas believes that the sensible thing is a composite of form and matter. The form in the individual thing is a particular metaphysical con-

5. John F. Wippel, *The Metaphysical Thought of Thomas Aquinas: From Finite Being to Uncreated Being* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2000), 105.

stituent; when abstracted in the mind it takes on the qualities of necessity and universality; it becomes a universal. This is the heritage of moderate-realism regarding the objective existence of forms.

Given the above, the question "Does Aquinas believe the universal is immanent in things?" can be confusing. One could answer yes if one is focused on the objective ground of the universal, which is the thing's form. Or no if one is being a bit more precise as to the nature of the universal itself (which for Aquinas is only in the intellect). So Craig is right that in the context of the contemporary debate, Aquinas can be considered a type of nominalist/antirealist regarding universals. But this is not the only context in which to situate his thinking. Given Aquinas's belief in the objectivity of forms, he looks like a moderate realist, but given his rejection of Platonism, he looks like a nominalist.⁶

Cognitional Being

Besides the above terminological dispute, Craig has some serious misgivings about the way in which a thing (specifically a universal) exists in the intellect. What type of existence could this be? He asks, "Is this a sort of quasi-existence, a sort of Meinongian watered-down existence? Being quasi-existent makes about as much sense as being quasi-pregnant: either one is or one is not."⁷ Craig is certainly right, if cognitional being is a type of half-way being, then it is truly an absurd notion. Fortunately, Craig is not right and there is nothing bizarre about the notion of cognitional being. Here Joseph Owens provides a fairly direct response to Craig's concerns, he writes:

In saying that a thing exists only in the imagination, one means that it does exist there, even though it does not exist in the real world. Quite correctly, the phrasing "exists only in the imagination" or "exists only in thought" implies that cognitional existence is a lesser type of existence than real existence. . . . But both are genuine ways of existing. Neither is a "half-way" stage of existence at all. Each, though in its own characteristic way, has all the significant difference between existing and not existing. Each is a whole-way existing in its own order. . . . In every case it [existence] sets a thing apart from nothing, and in that fashion is a whole-way stage of existence. . . . The objection seems to imply that cognitional existence is a lesser grade of real existence, and is trying unsuccessfully to ape real existence. But cognitional existence is not a grade of real existence at all. It is genuine

6. Jeffrey E. Brower, "Aquinas on the Problem of Universals," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* (forthcoming). Here Brower points out that there is no single classification of Aquinas's position, and there is confusion because there are at least two relevant contexts: (1) the medieval context and (2) the present contemporary debate.

7. Craig, "Response to Bridges and Van Inwagen," 293.

existence in cognition, and in no way, let alone half-way, is it real existence. It is an authentic existence of a radically different kind.⁸

Far from being unintelligible or absurd we need to have, in what might be called our "ontology of knowledge" a place for cognitional being. The reason is that it plays at least one crucial explanatory role. Among other things it explains the difference between knowledge and ignorance. Frederick Wilhelmsen writes, "This act whereby the knower becomes the known, whereby the known exists for the knower, is what Thomists call the act of intentional existing. This act is knowledge itself."⁹

Formal Identity versus Universality

In my main paper I did not keep clearly in mind the distinction between "form" and "universal," and this caused some confusion. But here at the last objection we can see that Craig does not have this distinction in mind when saying that Aquinas's position offers no theological advantages over more austere forms of nominalism. If we recall that Aquinas believes that every concrete particular is a composite of form and matter, then we'll see that his position does offer us a way of understanding the Fall, the Incarnation, and redemption in a way that is superior.

For Craig, only if Adam, Christ, and I have a numerically identical human nature or some numerically identical metaphysical constituent does Thomism offer an advantage theologically. Since it is clear that different humans do not share this numerical identity, then Thomism offers no theological advantages. The problem here is that numerical identity is not the only metaphysically worthwhile type of identity. For the Thomist whether or not two things are formally identical is something of great metaphysical interest.

Here a van Inwagen-like parable should suffice: Say I am sitting down for tea in some genteel setting. Instead of the mundane bowl of sugar, there is a bowl of sugar cubes. I place one in my hot tea and stir it in. Naturally, it dissolves in the liquid. What happens if I place a second sugar cube in my tea? Obviously, it also dissolves. If it did not dissolve or if it exploded instead we would immediately think, "That second cube wasn't a sugar cube at all." What is the point? The two cubes are formally identical substances. Their identity, while not numerical identity, does tell us something important about them, namely *what* the thing is. And knowing what a thing is, formally,

8. Joseph Owens, *An Interpretation of Existence* (Houston, TX: Center for Thomistic Studies, 1985), 38-9. The incautious reader might mistake the beginning and end of Owens's quotation as contradictory. So there is no confusion: cognitional being is a lesser *type* of being but it is not a *grade* of real being.

9. Frederick D. Wilhelmsen, *Man's Knowledge of Reality: An Introduction to Thomistic Epistemology* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1956), 80.

tells us about the ways it can act or be acted on in the world (its “powers and dispositions”).

There are not numerically identical universals immanent in individuals, but individuals can be formally identical while being individuated by matter. These forms have their ultimate common ground in the divine idea as their exemplar cause.¹⁰ On an Ockham-type nominalism no such move is available. For someone like Ockham natures are not common, they are as individually distinct as any concrete particular. The Thomistic position maintains a theological advantage here.

Conclusion

I hope that in representing the existential Thomist position I have at least maintained my minimal goal in showing that the position is a reasonable response to the problem of God and *abstracta*. Far from raising objections that are unanticipated or fatal, my interlocutors have merely provided a platform for displaying the richness of the Thomistic position and the fruit that it can bear when applied to problems that defy solution in contemporary analytic terms.

Articles

10. For more on this, see Gregory T. Doolan, *Aquinas on the Divine Ideas as Exemplar Causes* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2008).