

BEYOND THE CONTROL OF GOD?

Six Views on The Problem of God
and Abstract Objects

Edited by PAUL GOULD

Beyond the Control of God?

Bloomsbury Studies in Philosophy of Religion

Series Editor:

Stewart Goetz

Editorial Board:

Thomas Flint, Robert Koons, Alexander Pruss, Charles
Taliaferro, Roger Trigg, David Widerker, Mark Wynn

Titles in the Series

Freedom, Teleology, and Evil

by Stewart Goetz

Image in Mind: Theism, Naturalism, and the Imagination

by Charles Taliaferro and Jil Evans

Actuality, Possibility, and Worlds

by Alexander Robert Pruss

God's Final Victory: A Comparative Philosophical Case for Universalism

by John Kronen and Eric Reitan

The Rainbow of Experiences, Critical Trust, and God

by Kai-man Kwan

Thinking Through Feeling: God, Emotion and Passibility

by Anastasia Philippa Scrutton

Philosophy and the Christian Worldview: Analysis, Assessment and Development

edited by David Werther and Mark D. Linville

Goodness, God and Evil

by David E. Alexander

Well-Being and Theism: Linking Ethics to God

by William A. Lauinger

Free Will in Philosophical Theology

by Kevin Timpe

The Moral Argument (forthcoming)

by Paul Copan and Mark D. Linville

Beyond the Control of God?

Six Views on the Problem of God and Abstract Objects

Edited by Paul M. Gould

B L O O M S B U R Y
NEW YORK • LONDON • NEW DELHI • SYDNEY

Bloomsbury Academic
An imprint of Bloomsbury Publishing Inc

1385 Broadway
New York
NY 10018
USA

50 Bedford Square
London
WC1B 3DP
UK

www.bloomsbury.com

Bloomsbury is a registered trade mark of Bloomsbury Publishing Plc

First published 2014

© Paul M. Gould and Contributors 2014

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or any information storage or retrieval system, without prior permission in writing from the publishers.

No responsibility for loss caused to any individual or organization acting on or refraining from action as a result of the material in this publication can be accepted by Bloomsbury or the author.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Beyond the control of God? : six views on the problem of God and abstract objects / edited by Paul M. Gould.

pages cm.— (Bloomsbury studies in philosophy of religion)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-1-62356-541-1 (hardback : alk. paper)— ISBN 978-1-62356-365-3 (pbk. : alk. paper)

1. God. 2. Abstraction. 3. Object (Philosophy) I. Gould, Paul M., 1971- editor of compilation.

BL473.B49 2014

212'.7—dc 3

2013046264

ISBN: 978-1-6235-6748-4

Typeset by Fakenham Prepress Solutions, Fakenham, Norfolk NR21 8NN

For Ethel

... a loving wife who exemplifies in excelsis the property being patient.

For J. P. Moreland

... it is his fault I am a platonist regarding abstract objects.

For Michael Bergmann and Jeffrey Brower

*... who introduced me to the problem of God's relationship to abstract objects while in
graduate school.*

Contents

Acknowledgments	ix
Introduction to the Problem of God and Abstract Objects <i>Paul M. Gould</i>	1
1. God and Propositions <i>Keith Yandell</i>	21
Response to Keith Yandell	36
<i>Paul M. Gould and Richard Brian Davis</i>	36
<i>Greg Welty</i>	38
<i>William Lane Craig</i>	39
<i>Scott A. Shalkowski</i>	42
<i>Graham Oppy</i>	44
Response to Critics <i>Keith Yandell</i>	46
2. Modified Theistic Activism <i>Paul M. Gould and Richard Brian Davis</i>	51
Response to Paul M. Gould and Richard Brian Davis	65
<i>Keith Yandell</i>	65
<i>Greg Welty</i>	66
<i>William Lane Craig</i>	68
<i>Scott A. Shalkowski</i>	70
<i>Graham Oppy</i>	72
Response to Critics <i>Paul M. Gould and Richard Brian Davis</i>	75
3. Theistic Conceptual Realism <i>Greg Welty</i>	81
Response to Greg Welty	97
<i>Keith Yandell</i>	97
<i>Paul M. Gould and Richard Brian Davis</i>	99
<i>William Lane Craig</i>	100
<i>Scott A. Shalkowski</i>	102
<i>Graham Oppy</i>	104
Response to Critics <i>Greg Welty</i>	107
4. Anti-Platonism <i>William Lane Craig</i>	113
Response to William Lane Craig	127
<i>Keith Yandell</i>	127

<i>Paul M. Gould and Richard Brian Davis</i>	128
<i>Greg Welty</i>	130
<i>Scott A. Shalkowski</i>	132
<i>Graham Oppy</i>	134
Response to Critics <i>William Lane Craig</i>	137
5. God with or without Abstract Objects <i>Scott A. Shalkowski</i>	143
Response to Scott A. Shalkowski	155
<i>Keith Yandell</i>	155
<i>Paul M. Gould and Richard Brian Davis</i>	156
<i>Greg Welty</i>	158
<i>William Lane Craig</i>	160
<i>Graham Oppy</i>	162
Response to Critics <i>Scott A. Shalkowski</i>	165
6. Abstract Objects? Who Cares! <i>Graham Oppy</i>	169
Response to Graham Oppy	182
<i>Keith Yandell</i>	182
<i>Paul M. Gould and Richard Brian Davis</i>	184
<i>Greg Welty</i>	186
<i>William Lane Craig</i>	187
<i>Scott A. Shalkowski</i>	189
Response to Critics <i>Graham Oppy</i>	192
Bibliography	197
Contributors	205
Index	207

Acknowledgments

Parts of this book draw from previously published works. The Introduction and the Yandell, Gould/Davis, and Craig lead essays appeared in earlier form in a symposium on “God and Abstract Objects” within the pages of *Philosophia Christi*, the journal of the Evangelical Philosophical Society (www.epsociety.org). I am grateful to the Editor of *Philosophia Christi* who has granted non-exclusive, global rights for materials by Gould, Craig, Davis, and Yandell (vol. 13, no. 2, Winter 2011) to appear in this volume.

I am grateful to all the contributors for their hard work, collegiality, and insight, as we have grappled together with the knotty question of God’s relationship to abstracta. This project is not for the faint of heart, and I have benefitted greatly from the vigorous yet irenic spirit of all participants in this book. I personally have learned a great deal, and have been challenged and pushed further than I could have hoped for at the outset in clarifying and defending my own preferred view (along with Richard Brian Davis) of God’s relationship to abstracta. I am grateful to Professor J. P. Moreland for first introducing me to metaphysics; it is his fault that I am a platonist regarding abstracta. I am also grateful to Michael Bergmann and Jeffrey Brower, two members of my dissertation committee, who presented a tight argument in the literature for the incoherence of the conjunction of two things I hold dear—traditional theism and platonism. Their sober argument provided the perfect target for me to begin exploring the problem of God and abstract objects. I am especially grateful to my friend Richard Brian Davis, my co-defender of modified theistic activism in this book. Rich has been a constant source of encouragement and joy. Finally and above all I am grateful to my wife Ethel; without her patience and support I cannot imagine this work, or much else I do, coming to completion.

Introduction to the Problem of God and Abstract Objects

Paul M. Gould

The problem of God and abstract objects did not make the cut in Bertrand Russell's 1912 *The Problems of Philosophy*. The Lord Russell knows that abstract objects are problem enough by themselves.¹ Of course, Russell did not believe in God, so it goes without saying that there is no problem of God and abstract objects for him.² It is only a problem for those philosophers who are also theists. Minimally, the problem is one of specifying the relationship between God and abstract objects. But, as we shall see, the problem runs much deeper. In this introduction, I shall attempt to bring clarity to the debate related to God and abstract objects by first explicating as precisely as possible the problem of God and abstract objects and then by imposing some order into the debate by classifying various contemporary answers to the problem, answers that are rigorously set out and debated in the interactive format of this book.

Statement of the problem

What exactly is the problem of God and abstract objects? The term "God," as traditionally understood, signifies a personal being who is worthy of worship. Stipulate that terms and predicates such as "property," "proposition," "relation," "set," "possible world," "number," and the like belong to the class "abstract object." Suppose there are objects that satisfy the above terms and predicates. God exists and so do abstract objects. *Prima facie*, there is no problem here. So, we dig deeper: As a being worthy of worship, God's non-existence is reasonably thought impossible. That is, God is best understood as a necessary being. But, it is natural to think of abstract objects as necessary beings as well. Again, no obvious problem here—God is a necessary being and so are the members of the platonic horde.

But, as we dig deeper problems begin to surface. As a being worthy of worship, God, a necessary being, is typically thought to exist *a se*. That is, God is an *independent* and *self-sufficient* being. Further, God is typically thought to be supremely sovereign over all distinct reality in this sense: All reality distinct from God is dependent on God's creative and sustaining activity. Thus, a *traditional theist* will endorse the following aseity-sovereignty doctrine AD:

AD: (i) God does not depend on anything distinct from Himself for his existing, and (ii) everything distinct from God depends on God's creative activity for its existing.³

But the view that there are abstract objects that also exist necessarily seems to be a repudiation of AD. The reason is this. It is natural to think that if something exists necessarily, it does so because it is its nature to exist. Thus, abstract objects exist independently of God, which is therefore a repudiation of AD and traditional theism.

Call the view that there exists a realm of necessarily existing abstract objects *platonism*. For many contemporary analytic philosophers, platonism offers a theoretically attractive way to understand the relationship between mind, language, and reality. Interestingly, platonism also continues to be the ontology of choice among many contemporary analytic representatives of traditional theism. Yet, as we can now see, there is a tension between traditional theism (which includes AD) and platonism, a tension that has been noticed since at least the time of Augustine.⁴ To state the tension explicitly, consider the following three jointly inconsistent claims (setting aside sets with contingent members):

INCONSISTENT TRIAD

- (1) Abstract objects exist. [platonism]⁵
- (2) If abstract objects exist, then they are dependent on God. [from AD]
- (3) If abstract objects exist, then they are independent of God. [platonist assumption]

All three claims can be independently motivated, but they form an inconsistent set. At most only two of the three claims in INCONSISTENT TRIAD can be true. Which claim should go? This question is difficult because the rejection of any of (1)–(3) leads to further problems. If (1) is rejected, the best solution (to many) to the problem of universals is abandoned and the age-old nominalism-realism debate ensues. All is not the same however. With the inclusion of God as an entity on the ontological books, the debate is pushed further along and familiar objections to either view lose some of their original force. Brian Leftow, who defends a view he calls theist concept nominalism, argues “if there were a God, this would have dramatic implications for the problem of universals. In particular, it would (I believe) blunt the force of all standard arguments for realism” (2006, 325). Others are not so sure. Professor Weaver blames the fourteenth-century theist, William of Ockham and his nominalism as the root of contemporary culture's decline: “the defeat of logical realism in the great medieval debate [on universals] was the crucial event in the history of Western culture; from this flowed those acts which issue now in modern decadence” (1984, 3). So, the rejection of (1), that is, platonism, is difficult for many contemporary analytic philosophers of religion: Platonic entities do all sorts of work and (to many) seem to be required for the best theory of the mind-world-language relationship. Thus inclined, the theist will want to be a platonic theist. Thus, the platonic theist can either reject the common understanding of traditional theism (that is, reject (2)) or reject a common platonist assumption regarding abstract objects (that is, reject (3)).

Claim (2) is well motivated given AD. If abstract objects exist and God is not an abstract object (that is, God is distinct from abstract objects), then it is natural to think

God is the creator of abstract objects as well. And if God is the creator of abstract objects, it follows that abstract objects are dependent on God. Claim (2) also allows for abstract objects to exist as uncreated yet dependent entities, as long as they are not “distinct from” God. If “distinct from” simply means something like “not external to God’s borders,” then one might consistently endorse (2) and argue that abstract objects are uncreated entities that are somehow part of God. Such abstract objects would be dependent on God in some way, (say) perhaps a kind of constituent dependency, and AD is preserved. Alternatively, the platonic theist can reject claim (2) by arguing that traditional theism does not require the strong aseity-sovereignty doctrine AD. Perhaps the notion of God creating abstract objects is incoherent or impossible. Or perhaps AD is not entailed by the teachings of Scripture, or it does not apply to abstract objects. Of course, the platonic theist could simply opt to be a nontraditional theist as well in her rejection of claim (2).

But, if claim (2) is rejected, the platonic theist runs into another problem, call it the *ultimacy problem*. Consider one kind of abstract object, property. If properties exist independently of God, and God has properties essentially, then God’s nature is explained by some other entity, and God is not ultimate.⁶ But, as Leftow states, “theists want all explanations to trace back *to* God, rather than *through* God to some more ultimate context” (1990, 587; cf. Plantinga 1980, 31–3). The same problem surfaces when considering other platonic entities as well. On the platonic story (for example), possible worlds exist independently of God and God’s existence is necessary because in each possible world, God exists. But then “this threatens to make God’s existence derive from items independent from Him: The worlds are there independently, that He is in all of them entails God’s existence” (Leftow 2009, 27). It seems that the platonic theist must bite a bullet and admit that God is not ultimate in explanation or existence if claim (2) is denied, yet this thesis appears to be a core intuition of the theist’s conception of God.

What about a rejection of claim (3)? Perhaps platonic entities depend on God in some way for their existence and nature. If so, a question that naturally arises is, How is the dependency relation to be understood between two kinds of necessary beings? The dependency relation cannot be mere logical dependence, where the existence of x entails the existence of y , but not vice versa. To see why, consider two necessary beings, x and y . Given that necessary beings could not fail to exist, then (necessarily) x exists and y exists are mutually entailing, in which case it is impossible for y to asymmetrically depend on x (again, if the dependency relation is merely a logical relation). Rather the relation between x and y is one of mutual logical dependence. Call this the *dependency problem*.⁷

The dependency problem has led some contemporary philosophers to the view that it is logically impossible for any necessary being to asymmetrically depend on another.⁸ But, asymmetrical dependence need not be cashed out solely in terms of logical entailment. Taking our cue from AD, perhaps abstract objects are created by God.⁹ The fact that creation is a causal relation suggests the following dependency relations: Abstract objects are *causally* dependent on God. This causal dependency between God and abstract objects seems to be just what we are looking for—an

ontologically significant, asymmetrical or one-way relation of dependence running from each nondivine object to God. So, the platonic theist can maintain that God, as the creator of all distinct reality, eternally creates (that is, causes) abstract objects to exist and does so of necessity. Of course, in making this move, a hornet's nest of issues arises: Is it metaphysically possible for God, or anything else, to create abstract objects? Assuming that abstract objects are everlasting, is the notion of eternal causation coherent? Does co-eternality render God somehow less ultimate? What sense can be given to the notion of one necessary being (God) creating another necessary being? What analysis of causation is required to give sense to the notion of God creating abstract objects?

Worse, even if the above questions could find acceptable answers, it appears that the resultant platonic theism, as many have suggested, is hopelessly incoherent, succumbing to the *bootstrapping worry*. Typically, the worry is advanced as follows: "God has properties. If God is the creator of all things, then God is the creator of His properties. But God cannot create properties unless He already has the property of *being able to create a property*. Thus, we are off to the races, ensnared in a vicious explanatory circle."¹⁰ These questions and worries, and many more, reveal the apparent intractability of the dependency problem specifically, and the problem of God and abstract objects in general.

The problem of God and abstract objects is multilayered. Philosophy pushes many to platonism regarding abstract objects. Theology pushes many to endorse a strong reading of the aseity-sovereignty doctrine AD. The conjunction of platonism and traditional theism results in the tension described in INCONSISTENT TRIAD. Attempts to resolve the tension of INCONSISTENT TRIAD lead to additional problems:

- Reject claim (1) and the *problem of universals* is of central concern;
- Reject claim (2) and the *ultimacy problem* is of central concern;
- Reject claim (3) and the *dependency problem* and *bootstrapping worry* are of central concern.

Thus, the deliverances of theology and philosophy threaten to wreck the (would-be) traditional theist, or alternatively, the (would-be) platonist, on the shoals of unorthodoxy or anti-realism. For the traditional theist, it seems that realism must be rejected. For the platonic theist, it seems that theistic orthodoxy must be redefined or rejected. It is not clear that anyone will be happy in the end. Still, hope dies hard. There have been a number of prominent contemporary attempts to navigate the waters of the problem of God and abstract objects. In the next section, I shall survey the contemporary literature and highlight recent efforts to place a stake in the sand on our central problem and its ancillary issues.

Some contemporary answers to the problem

Depending on which claim of INCONSISTENT TRIAD is rejected at least four views can be discerned and advocates of each view ably defend themselves in this book. The first

three views are realist (maybe even platonist if abstract object realism is endorsed), although for clarity, I shall only label the first view as platonism proper. The fourth view is nominalistic and anti-realist.

According to (the view I shall call) *platonic theism*, at least some abstract objects exist wholly distinct from God and are independent of God. Keith Yandell and his defense of theistic propositionalism is in this category, hence Yandell rejects (2). The defender of *theistic activism* argues that the platonic tradition can accommodate abstract objects being necessarily created by God, and thus dependent on God. Paul Gould and Richard Davis argue for a version of theistic activism, called modified theistic activism (MTA), and thus reject (3). The defender of *divine conceptualism* identifies abstract objects with various constituent entities of the divine mind which are uncreated yet dependent upon God. Greg Welty defends a version of divine conceptualism called theistic conceptual realism (TCR), and also (along with the theistic activist) rejects (3). The defenders of *nominalism*, in this book, William Lane Craig and Scott A. Shalkowski, reject claim (1)—there are no abstract objects, only concrete objects. Of course, one may argue, as Graham Oppy does, that the existence or nonexistence of abstract objects is irrelevant—it makes no philosophical difference—to God’s existence. If abstract objects exist, they do so independent of God (and claim (2) is rejected). If they do not exist, then there are no abstract objects (and claim (1) is rejected). Either way, there is no problem of God and abstract objects.

In order to provide as broad a framework as possible for the reader to navigate the contours of the debate, I shall survey the contemporary literature with respect to these four views, highlighting arguments in their favor and attempts at resolving the resultant problems. Once completed, I shall describe in more detail the position of each of our six lead essays, thus setting the stage for what follows.

Platonic theism

The distinguishing feature of platonic theism is that there is a realm of abstract objects that exist independently of God. Some also exist wholly apart from God. Consider properties. Assuming an abundant theory of properties and a unified theory of predication (where all atomic sentences of the form “*a* is *F*” denote a particular “*a*” and a property “*F*”) then there will be two domains, or realms, of abstract objects: (Within the) divine substance and Plato’s heaven. Or again, consider propositions. According to the platonic theist, propositions exist wholly apart from God and are not to be identified with ideas in the divine mind. On this picture, to have a propositional thought, say a belief, is to stand in a certain special relationship to a specific proposition (Jubien 2001, 47). The platonic theist rejects claim (2) of INCONSISTENT TRIAD and those abstract objects wholly distinct from God are understood as independently existing beings.

Arguments against claim (2) and in support of platonic theism fall into three broad categories: (a) attempts to identify a token abstract object that *in fact* exists distinct

from and independently of God; (b) attempts to show the impossibility or undesirability of created abstract objects; and (c) attempts to undercut the motivations for AD and thus show that the traditional theist is within the bounds of orthodoxy in denying claim (2).

In his 1970 book, *On Universals*, Nicholas Wolterstorff attempts to motivate the view that some properties must be excluded from God's creative activity. He suggests that there exist properties such as *being either true or false* that are neither possessed by God nor created by God (that is, a category (a) type argument). And if so, there are (at least some) abstract objects that exist distinct from God and independently of God and claim (2) ought to be rejected. Wolterstorff begins:

Consider the fact that propositions have the property of *being either true or false*. This property is not a property of God. But is it presupposed by the biblical writers that not all exemplifications of this property were brought into existence by God, and thus that it was not brought into existence by God. For the propositions 'God exists' and 'God is able to create' exemplify *being true or false* wholly apart from any creative activity on God's part; in fact, creative ability on his part presupposes that these propositions are true, and thus presupposes that there exists such a property as *being either true or false*. (1970, 292)

Thus, alethic properties are, according to Wolterstorff, problematic for the defender of claim (2)—they are distinct from God and exist apart from God's creative activity.

It seems the defender of claim (2) is not without a response. It could be argued that propositions (the possessors of alethic properties) are either uncreated but not distinct (from God) or distinct (from God) but created. Either way, claim (2) is upheld. On the first story, alethic properties are uncreated, yet always and only possessed by propositions, now identified as divine thoughts. If so, then alethic properties (at least) are not distinct from God's being.¹¹ As Plantinga puts it: "truth is not independent of mind; it is necessary that for any proposition *p*, *p* is true only if it is believed, and if and only if it is believed by God" (1982, 68). So, even if the properties had by propositions (now construed as divine thoughts) are uncreated, they are not distinct from God. On the second story, it could be argued that alethic properties are distinct from God, yet eternally created by God. If so (and assuming the notion of eternal causation coherent), then it seems reasonable to think that the truth of *God exists* and *God is able to create* is necessarily coextensive with the existence of the properties *being true* and *being either true or false*. But then it is not clear that we have a clear case of a property (or abstract object) that requires the denial of claim (2).

More recently, Peter van Inwagen (2009) has argued for the stronger (and more general) claim that God, nor anyone else, can create abstract objects (that is, a category (b) type argument). Thus, if abstract objects are dependent upon God, it can't be because God creates them. Abstract objects, says van Inwagen, are not the kind of things that can enter into causal relations. Thus, the quantifier "everything" in the statement "God is the creator of everything distinct from himself" should be restricted to things that can enter into causal relations and the traditional theists need not endorse AD (or claim (2)). van Inwagen insists that abstract objects cannot enter

into causal relations because no *sense* can be made regarding the notion of divinely created abstract objects. What he is after is the completion of

(S) For all x , if x is an abstract object, God caused x if ...

in order to show what makes the causal fact both true and accessible enough for us to understand. van Inwagen considers two possible completions of (S), the so-called Aristotelian view, which endorses the claim that all abstract objects exist *in rebus* and are created when God creates the concrete object in which they are a part; and the theistic activist view, which endorses the claim that abstract objects are caused by the divine activity of thinking. Since, according to van Inwagen, neither of these completions are successful, there is no acceptable completion of (S).

Is it the case that there is no acceptable completion of (S) or that abstract objects cannot enter into causal relations? Plantinga thinks that abstract objects can enter into causal relations. When considering the epistemological objection to abstract objects, Plantinga suggests that if "propositions are divine thoughts," then

these objects can enter into the sort of causal relation that holds between a thought and a thinker, and we can enter into causal relation with them by virtue of our causal relation to God. It is therefore quite possible to think of abstract objects capable of standing in causal relations. (1993, 121)

Still, it is one thing to suggest how abstract objects could possibly stand in causal relations and quite another to provide an adequate completion of (S). Yet, even *that* seems possible, and the defender of created abstracta, such as the theistic activist, is prepared to argue that it is in fact actual. For if causation is fundamentally about production, then God's production of abstract objects is no more mysterious than God's production of the concrete universe, or so it seems.¹²

Finally, need the traditional theist accept AD? Does Scripture, and because of Scripture, tradition, require the traditional theist to endorse AD? Wolterstorff provides arguments for thinking that the biblical writers did not endorse a wide scope reading of the doctrine of creation, where God is the creator of everything distinct from himself full-stop (that is, a category (c) type argument). Wolterstorff advances two lines of thinking to undercut the motivation toward a wide scope reading of the doctrine of creation. First, he suggests that it cannot "plausibly be supposed that the biblical writers ... had *universals* in view in speaking of 'all things'" (1970, 293). He rhetorically suggests that were universals in view, then they would have been mentioned. Wolterstorff's second approach is to claim that the creator-creature distinction is invoked in Scripture for religious reasons and not theoretical, or metaphysical, reasons and thus it does not rule out a narrower understanding of the doctrine of creation.

How strong are Wolterstorff's arguments? Regarding the first, I have some sympathy with the suggestion. But, as Matthew Davidson (1999, 278–9) puts it, the biblical writers probably did not have quarks (or to use the most recent example, the strings of string theory) in mind when they addressed the subject of divine creation, still no traditional theists denies that quarks, or strings, if they exist, are distinct from God and created by God.

But does such reasoning require that the theist ought to think the biblical writers had a wide scope in view, or merely that they *may* think it in view? Scott Davison thinks that this stronger (ought) claim is problematic since all the entities mentioned by Davidson are contingent physical things and we know how the biblical authors would respond if asked whether they should be included, but with respect to abstract objects, “there is no way to know exactly what they would say in response to this query” (1991, 488).

Davison’s agnosticism might be a bit too convenient. A look at the article “all” (Greek: *panta*) in Kittel’s *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* shows that while the meaning of “all things” is indeed religious, as Wolterstorff thinks, still its religious meaning seems to be dependent on the complete inclusion of all things whatsoever (1967, 5: 886–96). Thus, *prima facie*, the most natural, simple, and theoretically unified reading of the all things passage seems to favor a wide scope reading and AD.¹³ Still, I do not see how the relevant Scripture passages require such a reading.¹⁴

Theistic activism

Theistic activism locates the platonic horde within the mind of God as created, and thus dependent, entities. Properties and relations are identified with divine concepts, and the rest of the platonic apparatus is built up from there. Propositions are just divine thoughts. Numbers, sets, and possible worlds are also explicated in terms of properties and relations (that is, divine concepts) and propositions (that is, divine thoughts). Importantly, God creates all reality distinct from God, including the entire platonic horde.

The most prominent version of theistic activism is that of Morris and Menzel. In their view, called absolute creationism, “all properties and relations are God’s concepts, the products, or perhaps better, the contents of a divine intellective activity... . Unlike human concepts, then, which are graspings of properties that exist ontologically distinct from and independent of those graspings, divine concepts are those very properties themselves” (1986, 166).¹⁵ Thus, divine creation of abstract objects is understood as eternal, necessary, and absolute: God necessarily and eternally creates all abstract objects whatsoever. Further, since God exemplifies a nature, understood as a bundle of essential properties, absolute creationism entails that God creates His own nature.

Not many have been willing to follow Morris and Menzel down the activist road, or at least completely down the activist road. Perhaps the closest thing to an endorsement of theistic activism is from Plantinga, a theist and platonist *par excellence* who has cautiously endorsed the view hinting that if something like it were true, then “abstract objects would be necessary beings that are nevertheless causally dependent upon something else” (1992, 309). More recently, David Baggett and Jerry Walls (2011) have appropriated the insight of the activist to specify God’s relationship to goodness, and Paul Gould and Richard Davis argue in this book for a kind of limited activism

with respect to concepts and propositions, but not properties and relations. Most who consider it seem to think that theistic activism suffers from at least two minor problems and one major problem.

The first minor worry relates to the notion of creating eternal beings. Intuitively, creation seems to involve bringing something into being, and bringing something into being seems to involve temporal becoming, or an absolute beginning of existence. Plantinga shares this intuition: “a thing is created only if there is a time before which it does not exist” (1974, 169). I too share this intuition when contingent beings are in view. However, my intuition is not as clear when considering necessary beings, which, if they exist, exist at all times (or timelessly exist). In general, to prove that one necessarily existent being could not asymmetrically depend on another would be a difficult task (van Inwagen, 1993, 108). Perhaps there are two notions of creation that need explication: One for contingent beings and one for necessary beings. An explication of creation for necessary beings should not concern itself with issues related to coming into being (since God is not temporally prior to abstract objects and vice versa), but rather it should be causal or explanatory: For example, God is the eternal generating cause of abstract objects. For the activist, God is the eternal generating cause in virtue of the divine intellect.¹⁶ This first worry can be set aside.

The second worry for the activist concerns the *necessity* of creation. It is argued, for example by Bill Craig, that if

we expand the meaning of creation so as to make any dependent being the object of God’s creation, then we have radically subverted God’s freedom with respect to creating... His freedom is restricted to creation of the tiny realm of concrete objects alone. The vast majority of being flows from him with an inexorable necessity independent of God’s will. (Copan and Craig 2004, 175–6)

Simply stated, the objection is that if we expand our explication of creation to include necessary beings, then God’s freedom in creation is *seriously* hindered. But this is not so clear. Perhaps, as Gould and Davis argue in their defense of modified theistic activism (MTA), God freely (and eternally) thinks up all possible creatures and all possible states of affairs. In this creative act, God delimits all modal facts—all possible individuals and possible worlds are set—in virtue of God’s intellectual activity. Concepts are divine ideas; propositions (and possible worlds) are divine thoughts. Here is the interesting part: In addition to God’s spontaneous creation of all possible creatures via His producing divine concepts and thoughts, God creates, of necessity, a platonic horde of properties and relations that will play the role of structure making in any actual concrete universe God creates. This creating of the platonic horde is logically posterior to the Biggest Bang, and sets the stage for the Big Bang (that is, the creation of the actual contingent universe). If so, divine freedom is preserved (or so it seems) since in the first logical moment of the Biggest Bang, God spontaneously creates all possibilities even if He creates the corresponding properties and relations of necessity in virtue of the divine will.

Alternatively, the activist could maintain that God is *not* free with respect to the creation of abstracta, and argue that, still, this is not a problem the traditional theist

should care about. Morris states, “the traditional view is that God is a free creator of our physical universe: He was free to create it or to refrain from creating it; he was free to create this universe, a different universe, or no such universe at all” (Morris and Menzel 1986, 170). Craig assumes without argument that the traditional account of divine freedom to create extends to all existent entities other than God, not just contingent entities. It should be no surprise that divine freedom is interestingly different than human freedom, and perhaps one of these interesting differences is that God is not free with respect to one aspect of His creation, that is, the necessarily existing abstract objects. God is not free with respect to the creation of abstract objects, but as creator, He is responsible for their existence. Still, Craig’s claim that these beings flow with an “inexorable necessity independent of God’s will” does seem problematic since it is natural to think that the causal buck in creation stops with the divine will, not the divine intellect. This worry does not appear insurmountable for the activist—for the intellect and will are tightly integrated in God—still, it might serve to steer the theist toward other accounts of divine creating (e.g. where God is the creator of abstract objects in virtue of the will)¹⁷ or divine conceptualism (where abstract objects are uncreated yet dependent on God).

The main problem with Morris and Menzel’s theistic activism is that it appears logically incoherent. In short, it succumbs to the bootstrapping worry. Many (including myself) think this problem fatal for the absolute creationism of Morris and Menzel. But I am baffled by their failure to take an obvious way out of the incoherency charge. Why not hold that it is only properties distinct from God that are created by God? On this suggestion, all of God’s essential properties (that is, divine concepts) exist *a se* as a brute fact within the divine mind, and it is only those properties that are not essentially exemplified by God (that is, necessarily satisfied in God) that are created by God. Morris’s answer is that “aside from the fact that no such selective exclusion would work in the first place, this move would amount to scrapping the whole project of theistic activism and abandoning the view of absolute creation” (1986, 172). But, why would no such selective exclusion of God’s properties work in the first place? Craig makes this objection a bit more perspicuous when he claims that the move under consideration “would introduce an *ad hoc* selectivity concerning what properties are or are not created by God (especially evident with respect to properties shared by contingent beings)” (Copan and Craig 2004, 176).

Yet it seems that this move would be *ad hoc* only if there were no independent motivations for thinking abstract objects exist. Now, if there are independent reasons to think platonism true and one is also a traditional theist, then it is not *ad hoc* to modify one’s account of platonism (that is, platonic theism) in light of problems that arise in an initial formulation of the theory (nor is it *ad hoc* to modify one’s understanding of traditional theism either). This move is similar to those made in theory construction in science where new evidence leads to theory modification. Usually, the newly modified theory is isomorphic to some part of the original, modified in such a way as to maintain the virtues of the old (often the bulk of the old theory) while still accommodating the new evidence. At any rate, it is certainly not *ad hoc* to think that God does not create His own nature given the commonsensical assumption that no

being is, or can be, responsible for the nature it has (Rowe 2004, 151–2). As I have argued elsewhere, the bootstrapping worry can be avoided for the platonic theist (who is a theistic activist) if the following two claims are endorsed: (a) God’s essential Platonic properties (that is, divine concepts that necessarily apply to God) exist *a se* (that is, they are neither created nor sustained by God, yet they inhere in the divine substance, the divine mind even); and (b) substances are Aristotelian (Gould 2011, 56–7).

In summary, while the activist view has few adherents, it is still a viable option as long as the position of absolute creationism is abandoned. And it was never required, even for Morris and Menzel—as they repeatedly (and rightly) noted—it is only everything “distinct from” God that exists as a result of God’s creative activity.

Divine conceptualism

According to divine conceptualism, abstract objects are identified with various constituent entities of the divine mind and are uncreated yet dependent upon God. Just how the dependency relation is to be understood is an open question. As uncreated, abstract objects do not depend on God for their existence or nature. Still, taking our cue from what has been said above, it could be argued that the divine substance is the final cause of its constituent parts and thus abstract objects do causally depend (in one sense) on God. Or alternatively, abstract objects (understood as divine ideas or whatever) could simply be understood as constitutently dependent on God.

One interesting version of divine conceptualism is the theistic conceptual realism (TCR) of Greg Welty.¹⁸ According to Welty, abstract objects are those constituent entities of the divine mind that perform a certain function within the created order. For example, the concept of a “universal” is the concept of a thing that plays the ontological role of explaining attribute agreement and grounding the truth of atomic sentences of the form “*a* is *F*” (Welty 2004, 57). The concept of a “proposition” is the concept of a thing that plays the role of bearer of truth values and is what is asserted by the standard use of declarative sentences. Thus, realism holds at the human level and conceptualism at the divine level. That is, relative to finite minds, abstract objects exist as realistically as any platonic entity—they exist apart from us and enjoy multiple-instantiability. But abstract objects do not exist realistically for God, in the sense that they exist apart from or over and above God. Rather, their existence is purely conceptual.

Considerations related to some kinds of abstract objects seem to push the theist toward endorsing divine conceptualism, whereas consideration of other kinds of abstract objects seem to push in the direction of platonic theism. As noted above, a common intuition is that truths are somehow connected to minds, and this fact pushes in the direction of thinking that propositions and possible worlds are best thought of as divine thoughts (or groupings of divine thoughts). As Plantinga says, the idea that abstract objects exist independently of minds and their noetic activity is “realism run