

Paul M. Gould (ed.). *Beyond the Control of God?: Six Views on the Problem of God and Abstract Objects.* Bloomsbury Studies in Philosophy of Religion. New York, NY: Bloomsbury, 2014. ix+209 pp. \$120 (hbk); \$29.95 (paper).

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This volume is an excellent introduction to the current state of the debate about the relation between God and abstract objects. It is perhaps an understatement to say that theistic analytic philosophers tend to be Platonists—i.e., to hold that abstract objects such as properties and propositions exist, and that they exist independently of the things that have or think about them.¹ However, because abstract objects, traditionally conceived, are eternal, necessary, non-spatiotemporal, acausal beings, there is a *prima facie* tension in the view that both abstract objects and a “creator of all things visible and invisible” exist.

Specifically, the view that abstract objects exist ostensibly threatens a set of doctrines that Paul Gould labels “the aseity-dependence doctrine” or “AD”:

- (i) God does not depend on anything distinct from [Godself] for [God’s] existing, and
- (ii) everything distinct from God depends on God’s creative activity for its existing (2).

Insofar as abstract objects are acausal and necessary, they cannot be created, generating a *prima facie* conflict with (ii). Insofar as God instantiates properties that exist independent of God, divine aseity is threatened, generating a *prima facie* conflict with (i).

In a helpful introduction, Gould illustrates the problem by introducing the following inconsistent triad:

- (1) Abstract objects exist.
- (2) If abstract objects exist, then they depend on God.
- (3) If abstract objects exist, then they do not depend on God.

¹ For simplicity, I’m confining my attention to *pure* abstract objects, where an abstract object is *pure* iff it is not *impure*, and it is *impure* iff it has a part, constituent or member that is non-abstract. Compare Peter van Inwagen, “God and Other Uncreated Things,” *Metaphysics and God: Essays in Honor of Eleonore Stump* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2006), 7, on what he calls “free” abstract objects.

The theist must reject one of these claims: if she accepts (1), then she can only accept one of (2) or (3). In the six essays that follow, a view that rejects one of each of the above propositions is defended, with some variation regarding the form the rejection takes.

The book has a great format, which is reminiscent of the Medieval *disputatio*: each author defends his view in a lead essay, followed by a critique by each other author, and then a response from the lead author. I'll briefly discuss the essays in the order in which they appear in the volume and conclude by pointing out some shortcomings and areas for further exploration.

The authors of the first three essays accept (1): they agree that abstracta exist, but disagree about their nature and relation to God. Keith Yandell rejects (2) and defends (3) in the first essay (21-35). This seems to be the dominant view among theistic analytic philosophers. Yandell argues that Platonism is consistent with theism, and attempts to defuse the putative threats to AD by undermining the exegetical basis for (the problematic reading of) this doctrine. According to Yandell, the Biblical authors were implicitly using restricted quantifiers when claiming that God created everything, since they were not working in the framework of abstruse metaphysical theories with ontological commitment to abstract objects. (Scott Shalkowski makes a similar claim (152); Craig demurs (114-115).) Yandell claims that it is not Sacred Scripture, but perfect being theology that generates AD, leading to the conflict with Platonism. Since perfect being theology is not on a par with Scripture, Yandell argues, it's an option for the faithful theist to depart from it.

The next two essays try to reconcile the existence of abstracta with the letter, and not just the spirit, of AD. These two essays are of special interest since they offer somewhat detailed, positive proposals that attempt to revive a conception of God that is currently unpopular but was dominant for most of the history of philosophy; I will discuss them in more detail than the others.

Paul Gould and Richard Brian Davis (hereafter, "G&D") defend a view they call "Modified Theistic Activism" (henceforth, "MTA"), a hybrid of theistic activism (the view that abstracta are created by God) and platonic theism that rejects (3) (51-64). On MTA, all abstracta are created by (and hence depend on) God *except* for God's essential properties, which are metaphysical parts of the divine substance—hence, the "M" in "MTA" (62). This modification is a response to what has come to be called "The Bootstrapping Problem": in a nutshell, if one assumes both that God's nature is a property and that all properties are created by God, this entails that God creates God's own nature. But not only is this absurd, it is impossible, since God must already have the property of being a creator in order to create. G&D attempt to circumvent the Bootstrapping Problem as follows: they claim (i) that God's essential properties exist *a se* and inhere in the divine substance, in order to avoid the absurd implication that God creates God's own nature, and (ii) that the divine substance is the final cause of its essential properties, in order to avoid the threat to AD (hence the rejection of (3)—all abstracta *depend* on God, even if some are not are created) (62).

A further modification of the view is that some abstracta—propositions and concepts—exist in the mind of God while others—properties and relations—exist in "Plato's heaven" (60). The motive for this bifurcation is to avoid assigning concepts the twin roles of being intrinsically intentional (i.e., being fundamentally *about*

things) and structuring reality. The latter role, G&D argue, is properly assigned to properties. They argue, however, that properties, properly construed, are not intrinsically intentional, and so cannot be identified with concepts. So, two kinds of abstract object are needed: divine concepts are the constituents of intrinsically intentional propositions, and properties are non-intentional, Platonic cookie-cutters (61).

It is not clear to me that G&D need this unlovely (as they admit) bifurcation. For it is not implausible that divine concepts can play the property-role. If the limning of the structure of reality is done by the mind that creates it—and if that mind is infinite and exists independently of us—the claim that concepts play a structuring role does not seem problematic. This is a far cry from the sort of anti-realism according to which the world is an unstructured blob that gets carved up by human concepts, with its attendant difficulties for objectivity, knowledge, and truth. In connection with this, note too that the arguments *against* properties being intentional, whatever their merits, simply do not get off the ground if we have independent reason for thinking that concepts play the role of properties. If properties just *are* divine concepts then the primary reason for denying that properties are intentional—viz., that causally inert, Platonic entities aren't, in and of themselves, *about* anything, since intentionality is a property of thinkers—has been undercut. If concepts are, by definition, intrinsically intentional, and properties are, in fact, concepts, then properties are intrinsically intentional. This is not to indicate, however, that there are no other difficulties with identifying properties with divine concepts—there are, as we will see below.

In the next essay, Greg Welty defends a view that identifies properties with divine concepts, which he calls “Theistic Conceptual Realism” (“TCR”) (81-96). On TCR, divine concepts “play the role” of abstracta: abstracta are not created by God, but constitutively depend on God by being either identical to or composed of God's concepts (82). Welty argues that, given that a convincing case can be made for the existence of abstracta, and given the constraints that they be both representational and plentiful, the best candidates for playing the role of abstracta are divine concepts. The argument, roughly, is that concepts are needed to play this role because of their intrinsic intentionality, but only the concepts of an infinite mind are plentiful enough. So, divine concepts are properties and these, in turn, are the basic building blocks of other abstracta: propositions are composed of properties, and possible worlds are composed of propositions.

Yandell, G&D, and Craig all accuse Welty of false advertising (97, 100): divine concepts, construed as constituents of the divine mind, are *mental* entities, hence, concrete. So TCR, these critics contend, does not offer a way to reconcile the existence of God with the existence of abstract objects—rather, it's a form of nominalism. Welty responds that terms like “proposition”, “property”, etc. are functional terms—they specify certain roles, and the constraints on the sorts of things we identify with propositions, properties, etc. are imposed by these roles.

It is not clear that this defense of TCR works, for although divine concepts seem to satisfy many traditional conditions for being abstract (i.e., they are necessary, non-spatiotemporal, intersubjectively available, etc.), there is at least one other impediment, in addition to being mental, to their playing the role of properties: they

are particulars, not universals. So, again, it seems like TCR ends up being a form of nominalism since particulars are not exemplifiable and *that* seems like a non-negotiable property of properties (with the obvious exception of impossible and paradoxical properties, if there are such).

In response to this, a defender of TCR might note that concepts are a special sort of particular—they apply to things, are satisfied by things. Why can't they, then, be exemplified by things? An underlying problem is that the word "concept" is polysemous: it can mean *mental particular* (i.e., *private idea*) or *object of thought* (i.e., *abstract, public, shareable content*). So it might be objected that only in the second sense can concepts apply to and be satisfied by things, and in this sense, concepts are *not* particulars, they are universals (i.e., properties). But when we talk about *divine* concepts, we are using "concept" in the first sense, and in *this* sense, concepts are particulars.

The proponent of TCR could reply, perhaps by invoking semantic externalism, that we might discover that what we call "properties" are really divine concepts, and then conclude that properties are, after all, particulars of a certain sort and so, particulars of a certain sort can be exemplified. There's an interesting but difficult issue lurking in the background, which cannot be discussed here, regarding what sorts of properties of a kind (or individual) ϕ denoted by a theoretical term t are non-negotiable—about when we've discovered that what we were aiming to refer to with t does not exist after all versus when we've discovered that the nature of ϕ s is radically different than we thought. (For example, "Vulcan" cannot plausibly be said to refer to perturbations in Mercury's orbit, but "heat" *can* be said to pick out mean molecular kinetic energy and "whale" *can* be said to pick out a kind of mammal). If this sort of strategy for defending TCR's anti-nominalist credentials has any merit, it seems like a view worth taking seriously by theists who are realists about abstracta.

The authors of the final three essays all reject Platonism, though only Scott Shalkowski and Graham Oppy explicitly reject (1). William Lane Craig argues that the existence of *uncreated* abstracta is incompatible with traditional theism, but leaves open the possibility that created abstracta exist. Scott Shalkowski and Graham Oppy argue that, even if abstracta were to exist, this would make no difference to traditional theism.

Craig argues that there is ample Biblical evidence for a reading of AD that is in stark conflict with Platonism (e.g. 1 Cor. 8.6, 1 Cor 11.12, Rom 11.36, Jn 1.1, 3)—this reading also finds support in the Nicene Creed and patristic tradition. According to Craig, the ante-Nicene fathers all interpreted Scripture to entail that nothing is co-eternal with God, and this clearly rules out abstracta in the Platonist's sense (114-115).

Craig calls his view "Anti-Platonism", and is careful to distinguish it from nominalism—it is simply that "uncreated abstract objects do not exist" (116). He goes on to argue that, notwithstanding its conflict with Scripture and tradition, the philosophical case for Platonism is weak. According to Craig, the most powerful argument for Platonism is the Indispensability Argument, which relies on what he thinks is a dubious criterion of ontological commitment, viz., that the truth of a literal use of an atomic sentence containing a singular term t requires the existence of the object denoted by t and that the truth of a literal use of a sentence existentially

quantifying over *F*s requires the existence of at least one *F*. Following Jody Azzouni, Craig rejects the view that ontological commitment is carried by any particular form of language (viz., existential quantifiers and singular terms), and so thinks that apparent quantification over and reference to abstracta is not indispensable after all.²

Shalkowski also thinks that the case for Platonism is weak, but argues that even if Platonism were true, it would not conflict with theism in general or AD in particular. Shalkowski's main point is that, since abstract objects (as the Platonist conceives them) are necessary, it does not impugn God's sovereignty to claim that God does not create them or that God is in any way limited by them (e.g., by being unable to make water that is not H₂O). First, Shalkowski argues that if abstracta are necessary, then they are "end points for explanation", and so there is no need to explain how they came to exist (153). Second, Shalkowski argues that the "limits" abstracta place on God are not worrisome, since it is no real limitation to be unable to do or be what it is impossible to do or be—there *is* nothing such that God is not able to do or be it.

Finally, Oppy frames his discussion around the notions of Abstract Reality and Causal Reality: abstract objects such as numbers, properties, and propositions (if there are such things) belong only to the former; concrete objects belong only to the latter (171). Oppy thinks, based on the weakness of arguments for abstracta, that Abstract Reality is empty; but even if it were not, this would make no difference to either theism or naturalism, since the only fundamental difference between these two views is their account of Causal Reality, and (Pure) Abstract Reality is completely independent of Causal Reality (175).

Let me now point out a couple of minor shortcomings of the volume and an area for further exploration. First, it seems to me that the range of issues being discussed is perhaps too ambitious for a volume of this length. I think it would have been better to limit the views discussed to those that accepted both the existence of God and of abstract objects (or things that play the role of abstracta), leaving aside the evaluation of arguments for the existence of either. The latter are extremely interesting issues, but they deserve a book-length treatment each. It seems to me that the problem of the co-existence of God and abstracta is deep and tangled enough on its own.

Second, I thought it somewhat surprising that there was no discussion of the doctrine of divine simplicity among the authors—it is not even listed in the index of the book. Though some of the views endorsed in the volume seem pretty clearly in conflict with this doctrine (e.g., G&D's view that God has "metaphysical parts" (185)), this was never raised as a worry or possible objection. Perhaps all of the relevant authors reject the doctrine—if so, it would have been helpful if this were at least mentioned.

Finally, with all of the focus on propositions throughout the volume, one avenue for fruitful further exploration would be to connect this debate with the recent, important work on propositions by Peter Hanks, Scott Soames, and Jeffrey King, who reject the traditional (Platonist) conception of propositions for a

² See Jody Azzouni, "Ontology and the Word 'Exist': Uneasy Relations," *Philosophia Mathematica* 18 (2010).

conception according to which propositions derive their representational properties from minds.³ The arguments they give in support of their views are similar (surprisingly, given that they are naturalists) to those that G&D and Welty give in support of the view that propositions are divine thoughts.

Despite these minor shortcomings, this is an excellent and engaging volume. It will be required reading for those working at the intersection of philosophical theology and the metaphysics of abstract objects for years to come.⁴

³ See, e.g., Peter Hanks, *Propositional Content* (Oxford University Press, 2015); Jeffrey King, *The Nature and Structure of Content* (Oxford University Press, 2007); and Scott Soames, *Rethinking Language, Mind, and Meaning* (Princeton University Press, 2015).

⁴ Special thanks to John Keller and Tim Pawl for helpful discussion.