Book Section:

God and Abstract Objects

Scott A. Shalkowski[*]

Abstract

Theological problems—such as that alleged about the co-existence of God and abstract objects—sometimes result from failures to update our beliefs and attitudes and sometimes from philosophical myopia. In this paper, I argue that each features in both the generation of and the attempted solutions to this so-called problem. I will argue, first, that at some stage of inquiry the theologically minded should have taken an "all bets are off" attitude toward the principle that helps to generate the problem. Second, I will argue that even if the theological principle is retained, the required philosophical assumptions should have been recognized as dubious enough to remove any theological urgency to the problem.

Keywords: aseity, platonism, nominalism

1 Introduction

God, according to Western monotheistic tradition, is supreme. Indeed, God is said to be so supreme that God and God's actions explain everything. Immediately, we should get a qualification from some quarters. Those maintaining that in at least some circumstances some creatures have "genuine" freewill that is incompatible with universal determination by laws of nature and "initial conditions" should query whether God and God's actions *fully* explain everything, since they maintain that free human actions are essential to some explanations. To accommodate God's supremacy—specifically infallible divine foreknowledge—and human freedom, philosophically sophisticated thinkers make distinctions where before there had been none. They distinguish soft facts and hard facts. Some facts must be soft enough to permit agency, at some level of description, the results of which are not already guaranteed by what God had set as fixed. Regarding both divine supremacy and the fixity or "necessity" of the past, reflection prompted the search for nuance, which found, say some, space to stand in an intellectually respectable manner where none had been evident.

Philosophical problems often arise when plausible principles seem to conflict with one another or seem to have implausible consequences. To generate a problem about the existence, character, or activity of God and the existence and character of abstract objects, some assumptions must be made and developed into theological or philosophical principles. The problem becomes intractable when these principles are treated as inviolable for retaining theological orthodoxy or philosophical good sense.

Dialectically, quite often one's *modus ponens* is another's *modus tollens*, with no resources to adjudicate which inference takes us to the truth. Here, I argue that neither the requisite theological nor the philosophical grounds for any puzzlement

[*]School of Philosophy, Religion and History of Science, University of Leeds, Leeds LS2 9JT, UK (s.shalkowski@leeds.ac.uk)

about God and abstract objects should have been treated as inviolable. Unnecessary generalization of a plausible principle that was extracted from the context within which it was plausible and gained acceptance will prove to be the problem-generating error.

I begin with a detour, to expose ways in which philosophical problems can be avoided by a process of stock taking and reassessment. I begin with a plausible principle about modality and a philosophical programme about its foundations. While no single response to the problem is dictated, a reassessment of the plausible principle is motivated. I maintain that a similar strategy is warranted when thinking about God and abstract objects. I conclude both that theological grounds for rejecting abstract objects are inadequate and that the existence of abstract objects is theologically unproblematic, requiring only the kind of revision to philosophical principles with which we are comfortable elsewhere.

2   A Detour Through Modalizing

Many will find plausible:

Modal Status: Every claim/proposition has modal status.

Each claim has its truth value with some appropriate modal qualifier. Each truth and each falsity is either necessarily so, or else it is contingently so. How could this not be? Things could have been different from how they are in some respect(s) or not. Countenancing the nuance that some claims are neither true nor false is no way to avoid claims with modal status. Those claims will lack truth value either necessarily or contingently. Similarly, if the appropriate values are more than two. So far, so plausible.

One prominent programme in the second half of the twentieth century was David Lewis's attempt to reduce the facts of modality to the facts of a plurality of concrete spatio-temporally isolated worlds (Lewis, 1986). Something is necessary iff it obtains or occurs at/from the standpoint of every possible world and possible iff it obtains or occurs at/from the standpoint of some of those worlds. For the ordinary claims that grab our attention such as those about whether 7 is prime or whether Churchill is prime minister of the UK in the twentieth century, there is no conflict between Modal Status and Lewis's reductive programme. Received views treat the first as necessary and the second as contingent, and Lewis's reductive theory handles each straightforwardly.

A bit of reflection, however, shows that Lewis's programme itself introduces claims into the philosophical mix heretofore contemplated by none. Consider a few.

(1) There are possible worlds.
(2) Possible worlds are concrete.
(3) There are more possible worlds than cats who have lived at 10 Downing Street.
(4) There is a possible world in which Winston Churchill is prime minister.

These claims about the possible worlds themselves and about so-called logical space (though 'logical' is not most apt) seem like they cannot have modal status. I might live in a house made of wood, or I might live in a house made of stone. Churchill might have opted for a life of leisure rather than a life of leadership. Many metaphysical theories, however, are not like theories about housing or politics. The Lewis programme either exposes the very nature of modality or it does not. If it does, it could not fail to do so.

If it does not, it could not. One cannot expose the nature of the modal beast merely contingently. Were that possible, Lewis would have exposed only what modality happens to be. None of his reasons for his claims about the plurality of worlds and of the metaphysical work he supposed them to do appeared to be in service of things merely as they are.

That way of putting things makes it look like metaphysical disputes about that reductive programme are disputes about whether Lewis's modal realism is either necessarily true or necessarily false, still preserving Modal Status. This, however, does not quite account for the nature of a reductive programme itself.

Reducing the mental to the physical is to root all of mentality in what is not by its nature mental. Perhaps mentality "arises" from the physical suitably arranged, but if it is mentality "all the way down", then we have not the reduction of the mental, but its utter pervasiveness. Panpsychism is quite the opposite of a reduction of the mental to the non-mental, since panpsychism entails the emptiness of the non-mental. Indeed, one might be led to panpsychism precisely because it is just too hard to see how mentality could result from rearranging non-mental stuff. Similarly with the modal. If claims about the plurality itself have modal status, then we have not a reduction of modality, but panmodalism—or just modalism, even if spread across a plurality of worlds—quite the opposite of the Lewis programme. Indeed, this is a position Lewis took pains to resist when the focus was on the likes of Churchill and his prime ministership.

Thus is the dispute over "advanced" or "extraordinary" modalizing. Alert to the issue, John Divers sought to preserve something like Modal Status by way of a disjunctive semantics for the modal expressions (Divers, 1999, 2006, 2014; Divers and Parry, 2018). When dealing with ordinary affairs, modal expressions in the Lewis framework function as they were routinely explained as matters of either universal or existential generalizations over the plurality of worlds. When, however, these expressions qualified the peculiar claims about the plurality itself, the expressions are redundant, semantically vacuous. Sam Cowling demurred, advocating instead amodalism, according to which the peculiar claims about the plurality have no modal status (Cowling, 2011), despite acknowledging ways to preserve Modal Status.

The Divers strategy saves the principle, though perhaps it is better to say that it saves the *form* of the principle. Modal expressions are still permitted as prefixes to any claim, but the substance of any occurrence is not independent of the content to which it is prefixed. The content of the modalized claim determines whether the substantive or the redundant interpretation is appropriate. Technically, there is nothing amiss with this disjunctive account of '□' and '◊', as Cowling readily acknowledges. Philosophically, though, amodalism reflects better the intellectual point of the Lewis programme. Some things are not properly modally qualifiable and those things serve as the ultimate substance of the modal qualifications of other things. While it is tempting to treat this as a pragmatic matter, it is philosophically more useful to treat amodalism as capturing the spirit of the reductive project, leading to philosophical insight that the technically unimpeachable rescue of Modal Status does not. We have, then, Modal Status as an initially plausible principle. Lewis and defenders have made good attempts at making modal reduction plausible. The spirit of the latter requires the rejection of the former. What's a philosopher to do? Here are some options.

(1) **Keep the principle; reject the programme**. Retain the face value of **Modal Status** and forsake reductive ambitions. Learn to live with pan-modalism. Re-

duction of the modal to the non-modal requires that there be something(s) non-modal, which is inconsistent with the principle.

(2) **Keep the programme; reject the principle**. The principle, after all, was an intuitive principle, the plausibility of which arose from considering "ordinary" modalizing. Waxing philosophical about the non-modal foundations of modality shows the principle to be limited in scope.

(3) **Reconciliation**. Reinterpret either the principle or the programme, in a "have your cake and eat it, too" strategy. Divers' disjunctive semantics for modal expressions is just this.

(4) **Agnosticism** about both the principle and the programme. Further reflection may yield no good way of selecting either of the first two options while exposing reconciliation as preserving the spirit/intent of neither principle nor programme.

While my own preference is for none of these options, having argued only that modality is not reducible, which does not entail Modal Status, I recommend option (2) to those whose philosophical sympathies lie with Lewis. It exposes the philosophical point of his project. It is a fact of philosophical life that there will be intellectual inconveniences. Cowling exposed ways of blunting the force of those inconveniences.

3 God and Abstract Objects

3.1 Preamble

To be perfectly explicit from the start, I have no truck with platonism. I find the grounds given for it unconvincing and that ontological construals of some forms of words to be overgeneral. Platonists typically fail to provide an account of how, if reality is as platonists maintain it to be, we could come to know the existence and details of that reality. Having noted that, theistic platonists at least have a fighting chance of filling the lacuna. If they can account for how God would know about such matters, then divine design could account for our own reliability. I do not suggest that establishing the antecedent of that conditional is straightforward, but divine creativity might do duty beyond its normal domain.

Having said that, I find it hard to see how any of God's independence is compromised in any meaningful way, if it turns out that metaphysical matters are not of God's choosing or even arising from God's being (Shalkowski, 2014). We may talk of limits on God if there are metaphysical constraints and/or objects not of God's making, but 'limit' and its like in this context call to mind improperly fences or walls beyond which there is something off limits.

There are, of course, no metaphysical fences precisely because there is nothing "beyond" those constraints, despite our ability to use constructions that appear to convey ontological significance, such as "There are things that God cannot do." Those constraints make off limits only what is not possible. I am limited because it is possible to do some of what I cannot do. You might well be able to do some of them. Those are real limitations of mine. For our purposes here, God is unable to do only what cannot be done, which is to say that if we must take the ontological turn, there is no there there. There is nothing "beyond" those metaphysical limits.

Anyone complaining about God's inability to do the impossible removes from their own arsenal—no doubt unwittingly—the prospect of using impossibility as a theological guide. Insisting that God can do the unqualifiedly impossible or can be

some absolutely impossible way removes impossibility as grounds for concluding that God has not done it, or is not that specific way.

With that great deal of throat clearing out of the way, what of God and abstract objects? First, let us concede that this is a philosopher's problem, not one of ordinary believers. Only when a philosophical theory is brought to bear on Western monotheistic belief does any apparent problem about God and abstract objects arise. Once in the grip of a theory that explains by way of abstract objects, say, predication, attribution, common characteristics, number, or semantic content, the question of how God is related to abstract objects can arise. If reasons given for thinking that abstract objects serve one or more of the functions said to require them also serve to show that these objects exist necessarily as does God, then the theological relevance of the explanation of necessities becomes apparent. To get to any theological problem pertaining to God and abstract objects, one must be rather far beyond the understanding of or participation in Western theistic traditions by ordinary believers.

William Lane Craig presents an accessible but sufficiently thorough case for the thesis of his Cadbury lectures, that "God [is] over all" (Craig, 2016). The main issue as he sees it is that the platonist thesis that there exist "heavyweight" self-existent abstract objects such as numbers, propositions, or properties conflicts with the doctrine of divine aseity. For now, I am happy to follow Craig's understanding of divine aseity.

> God alone is self-existent; everything else is dependent for its existence upon something else. Thus, the doctrine of divine aseity is closely related to the doctrine of creation. According to that doctrine, everything that exists (other than God) has been created by God. So everything that exists other than God is a created thing. Such things are therefore not self-existent, but are dependent for their existence upon God, their creator (Craig, 2016, pp. 1–2).

While I have much sympathy for his rejection of platonism, I find unconvincing his case for the theological centrality of this construal of divine aseity and the attending theological problem that platonism is supposed to create. We join company in thinking that the cases for alternatives (absolute creation, divine conceptualism, and mathematical fictionalism) to be underwhelming, we part company because I find his own case for his preferred position to be similarly underwhelming. Craig presents three broad bases, finding support in:

(1) Biblical teachings
(2) teachings of early Church fathers
(3) perfect being theology.

I will discuss each in turn, urging more caution about the implications of (1) and (2) and that 'perfect' is insufficiently fixed to push all the way to Craig's preferred position.

3.2   Biblical Teaching and Tradition

Unsurprisingly, Craig numbers himself amongst those who think it appropriate to find orthodox Christian belief in warranted readings of biblical texts and that those beliefs should inform his own Christian philosophy. I register no complaint with the general framework, save to note that each portion is rather plastic. All biblical texts, not written originally in either English or in contemporary contexts, are subject to assumptions regarding proper translation and, when translated, to assumptions

regarding suitable interpretation and application, thus sometimes providing grist of uncertain kind and texture to our intellectual mills. Linguistics might lead us to translations exposing authors' framing matters in terms of their contemporary culture(s) that permit accurate enough communication to their contemporaries but which, when treated straightforwardly, lead *us* astray. Too, charity might lead us to forgive an outmoded conceptual framework to convey ideas that we would articulate differently. Religious, scientific, and philosophical elements of the biblical writings might be set aside in the interest of finding truths expressed in terms not of our own choosing or preferences.

3.2.1 John's Prologue and Paul's Epistles

Craig begins his presentation of the biblical basis for banishing abstract objects from Christian philosophy with the prologue to John's gospel, homing in on John's first chapter, verse 3: "All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being", the "him" being the λόγος/*logos* who was with God from the beginning (Craig, 2016, pp. 13–24). Taken from the New Revised Standard Version, verse 3 certainly appears to entail that nothing—not even numbers or propositions—has any existence independent of God's creative activity.

The NRSV is a convenient choice. A good majority of texts typically used by English speakers, however, are not so straightforward in their implication. Many begin with an initial sentence affirming that the *logos* was instrumental in the making of "all things", but then follow with a sentence omitted from the NRSV, some variation of the King James Version's "and without him was not anything made that was made." These variations can be found in the Amplified Bible ("and without Him not even one thing was made that has come into being"), the Common English Bible ("and without the Word nothing came into being"), the English Standard Version ("and without him was not any thing made that was made"). Others include: American Standard Version, Contemporary English Version, Christian Standard Bible, Darby's Translation, Douay-Rheims, Geneva, Good News Translation(s), Holman Christian Standard, New American Standard Bible, New International Version, Revised Standard Version, Wycliffe, World English Bible, and Young's Literal, all of which seem to limit the scope of John's claim, strictly speaking, to created items that came into being. Nothing that came into being did so without God. Why, exactly, should the philosopher stop John 1:3 where the NRSV does and not with the apparently restricted implications of other versions?

Platonists can certainly live with the restricted implication with the reminder of the inapplicability of any claims about creation, since the objects about which they are platonists were never to be numbered amongst those created. Craig himself, quite rightly, on pain of internal textual contradiction, observes that the scope of the quantifier could not be wholly unrestricted, lest John claim that God too be numbered amongst God's own creations (Craig, 2016, p. 15). Not stated by the text itself, it is left to the reader to use conversational common sense to insert the implicit 'other than God'. It is hardly a stretch to think that further limitations are implicit.

I make here no definitive judgement about whether the NRSV is best for dropping an otiose phrase or whether the many other versions more accurately parse the text with the apparent restriction. I note, however, that Craig is not in a good position to insist that the NRSV is definitive. He concludes *God Over All* by declining to render a firm judgement about exactly where the platonist-friendly Indispenability Argument fails, contenting himself with the observation that many reject one key premise or

another. The lack of even an approximate philosophical consensus on the matter suffices for the verdict that "no view can plausibly commend itself philosophically to the exclusion of all others" (Craig, 2016, p. 207). Likewise here, I think, for the NRSV's more streamlined presentation.

Such caution about conversational assumptions accommodates Craig's claim that to focus on what early First Century thinkers might have had in mind explicitly is to limit the import of John's claims unduly. Neutrinos and black holes not having yet been discovered are plausbily captured by John's claim. Germane to which restrictions to countenance would be the theological tasks of John and others following the Hebrew tradition.

One key burden of the Hebrew Bible's claims about creation was to put some distance between Hebrew beliefs and other Near Eastern traditions. The Babylonian creation myth found in the *Enūma Eliš* tells of Marduk creating the earth and sky from the body of the vanquished Tiamat and the Tigris and Euphrates from her tears. The broad biblical tradition's task was to deny co-equal status of any to the God of creation, who used no pre-existing material for creation. There are no other divine beings and creation was *ex nihilo*. Seeing John and other New Testament writers as continuing this religious project leaves plenty of room for thinking that Plato's ontological concerns were not theirs. One is permitted to think that John is blending claims about the *logos* into the Genesis affirmation that God created the heavens and the earth and all that *they* comprise. I, therefore, recommend the more cautious interpretation of John's prologue, treating it as insufficient for any New Testament distancing from platonism.

Pressing the matter, "the question is whether he intends his domain of quantification, once God is exempted, to be unrestricted" (Craig, 2016, p. 16). Perhaps John did so intend things. If so, the matter is akin to the issues surrounding Modal Status, which was rightly treated as plausible prior to the construction of metaphysical claims purporting to articulate realities so fundamental that they would account for modality, if true. Completely forgivable is the philosopher who, upon being apprised of issues of modal metaphysics, mimics Homer Simpson with "D'oh!" as a reaction. Such peculiar claims might well have escaped one's attention because the focus was elsewhere: conditions of moral responsibility, whether Nixon might never have resigned, or whether information can escape from black holes. Similarly, if John's agenda was to extend the Hebrew religious tradition with its evolving monotheism and hopes for divine sovereignty and mastery of human history, then the ontological foundations of mathematics or correct predication may well have escaped notice. Religiously speaking, nothing is lost regarding belief and practice bearing on salvation, if John could have been apprised of all matters Greek and if he, upon reflection, restricted his domain of quantification. We have no way of settling what John's intentions would have been were he fully apprised of our concerns. I, thus, think that we should doubt what Craig finds doubtless (Craig, 2016, p. 18).

As is common in discussion of John's prologue, John's use of '*logos*' is said to derive from Middle Platonism, notably from Antiochus of Ascalon, Eudorus, and Philo of Alexandria. I take that as sufficiently established. What I do not yet take to be sufficiently established is that the "chain of custody" between those figures and John is preserved sufficiently to assure us that all and only what Middle Platonists meant by their uses of '*logos*' carried over into John's. We may concede many similarities, but since scholars of John's gospel are unwilling to claim direct dependence of John's writing on Philo (Craig, 2016, p. 20), the rest of us should think the matter insufficiently warranted to settle issues of John's meaning. It is not uncommon for language to be

appropriated without all of its implications being imported. The temporal, geographic, and cultural distances should, at minimum, give us pause.

Similar remarks apply to St. Paul's use of universal quantifiers in Romans 11:36 ("For from him and through him and to him are all things."), 1 Corinthians 8:6 ("from whom are all things . . . through whom are all things"), 11:12 ("all things come from God"), and Colossians 1:15–16 ("by him all things in heaven and on earth were created . . . all things have been created through him and for him"). Certainly, the quantifiers appear to be unrestricted. What is not, though, obviously settled is what Paul took to be numbered amongst the things in heaven and on earth. Paul may well have used a "totalizing idiom" (Craig, 2016, p. 26). That, though, fails to settle the content of the totality. The aforementioned tacit exclusion of God in heaven shows that there is totalizing and then there is totalizing. The texts do not really settle the matter we confront and their appearance of being utterly unrestricted is already conceded to be mere appearance.

3.2.2 Church Fathers

We get *somewhat* more straightforward guidance from post-biblical figures and creedal statements. The Nicene Creed begins "I believe in one God, the Father, Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth of all things visible and invisible." I defer to those who see here claims taken from John and Paul. Perhaps writers of the creed intended something as "totalizing" as Craig finds in those writers. Ambivalences about the actual and counterfactual import of John's and Paul's remarks simply transfer to the creeds.

In the interests of space, I limit myself to a few remarks, rather than repeat in several cases where the above observations apply. First, Church Fathers may be respected without taken to be definitive. Hardly any would treat their proclamations as instances of divine revelation, even if as instances of genius. Second, each is working within philosophical traditions using tools that we hardly take to be definitive elsewhere in our intellectual endeavours. To be perfectly clear, I here register no objection to either Platonic or Aristotelian frameworks, but only the observation that the best tools of the time, if indeed they were the best at the time, need not limit contemporary religious thinking on these matters (Shalkowski, 1997). Third, sometimes the evidence adduced from Church Fathers does not really seem quite to hit the mark. Consider just the appeal to Origen.

> It is difficult for us to explain this other world; and for this reason, that if we did so, there would be a risk of giving some men the impression that we were affirming the existence of certain imaginary forms which the Greek call 'ideas'. For it is certainly foreign to our mode of reasoning to speak of an incorporeal world that exists solely in the mind's fancy or the unsubstantial region of thought; and how men could affirm that the Saviour came from thence or that the saints will go thither I do not see. (*On First Principles* 2.3.6, quoted on (Craig, 2016, pp. 35–6).)

It is not perfectly obvious how this bears on the modern question of God's aseity and contemporary platonism. Origen seems led astray by the label 'ideas'. Modern platonists maintain the objective, heavyweight existence of abtracta, without any implications about their existence "in the mind's fancy" or in a "region of thought" (though thought may be how we have access to the region) and they need make no representation at all regarding from where the Saviour might have come and where the saints might end up. Those issues are all beside the main platonist point. Any wishing

to conflate the region of divine and saintly existence with the domain of mathematical objects have no less and no more work to do than those who wish to distinguish them. Platonists, even Christian platonists, can remain silent on the matter.

I conclude 3.2 with the judgement that platonists, Christian or otherwise, should be underwhelmed by the case for mandatory distance between both biblical and early Christian thought and platonism.

3.3   On Being Stuck with Platonism

3.3.1   A Thought Experiment

Suppose that I am wrong and that biblical writers really did intend their universal quantification to be wholly unrestricted save for the *sotto voce* "except for God". If we treat seriously the thought experiment of what said writers would now say were they apprised of modern physics and the implications of their pronouncements for neutrinos and black holes, perhaps we should probe just a bit more about why they might think platonists' abstract objects are just as troubling as are the heavens and the earth, more narrowly construed, were they to exist uncreated. Having no powers of counterfactual mindreading, I limit myself to arguing that they should be untroubled by the prospect.

Indulge yet another detour, this time through human creativity. Suppose I embark on two weeks of minimalist bushcraft. I take rucksack, sleeping bag and pad, a small axe, a cooking pot, and not much else. During the fortnight I decide to make the best wood and tile dwelling that I can. Those who join me at the appointed place after the fortnight marvel at the detail and sophistication of my structure, noting that it took thousands of years of human history for there to be any evidence of such sophisticated structures. One visitor asks how I managed to construct such a marvel in short order, since I am not known to be a survivalist. Consider two forms of answers that I might give.

Scenario 1: I declare that I just sat for a while thinking about wood, stone, clay, fire, and axe. I experimented for a day with the wood and axe to find useful joinery, I mixed clay and soil, firing various mixtures. In the end, I "came up" with the ideas and implemented my plans for the structure we see. The proper assessment of this, I think, is that I turned out to be very creative, having found myself in an unfamiliar environment with tools and materials with which city slickers tend to have little facility.

Scenario 2: I confess to having indulged the adulation of my friends a bit too long. Yes, I had no help in the finding and manipulation of tools and materials, but I pull out detailed instructions and drawings for how to construct in this part of the world a structure like the one in which we stand. While my skill with axe and wood as well as my ability to follow instructions and architectural drawing may still be rightly praised, my creativity should not be, since it extends no further than thinking the project itself a good idea.

When the independent existence of abstract objects is thought to compromise God's own independence and creativity it might result from how some of these objects are characterised, especially to those only just becoming acquainted with the denizens of Plato's heaven. Those figuring most prominently in Plato's dialogues are the forms. What forms are and their significance not being perfectly and immediately obvious to modern students, we might take different tacks to help students to understand.

Justice was a major concern of Plato's *Republic*. How to explain the Form of Justice to a modern reader? We might say that the Form of Justice is the very idea of justice itself, rather than the approximations that we observe in human history. Not to confuse the idea of justice with any particular mental representation of justice that any might have, we might well say that Plato had in mind the *ideal* of justice.

When thinking, however, about the Form of Rose, we might find reference to an ideal less than useful. An ideal rose? Were there to be any such there would need to be an ideal size and hue. An ideal rose plant would need to have an ideal time of development from seed to shoot to mature plant to bud, to flower, to rosehip. In due course, perhaps one could be persuaded of such ideals, but anyone trying to make Plato's ideas plausible should start elsewhere. Better might be to think of the Form of Rose as, well, a form, a structure, a pattern. Roses are easily distinguished from tulips, even when both are red, and from carnations and many others. If the Form of Rose is more like a pattern that we might give to children during a craft session to aid them in their drawings or paper sculptures, then questions about ideal roses drop away. All manner of variation is permitted amongst fair dinkum roses.

A theological concern might be that were there independently existing forms, they serve as patterns of the world (Craig, 2016, pp. 20–24). God's creative activities would always be reduced to consulting those patterns. Much like my own consulting instructions and drawings, God's consultations would reduce divine creativity to taking instruction from elsewhere. God has no choice to make roses according to the Form of Rose.

I deny the reality of this problem. Note how when trying to make sense to ourselves of the forms, we had to weasel around a bit. When thinking about the Form of Justice, think of an ideal. When thinking about the Form of Rose, think of a pattern. That such shifting is required to make sense of the platonic framework belies the fact that we have little useful access to any such domain. Reduced to shifting metaphors, we should be troubled by the suspicion that we do not really grasp the doctrine to which we adhere or from which we wish to distance ourselves.

To generate the theological concern we end up treating God as less creative than I am, when we each do essentially the same thing. In the more creative **Scenario 1**, I just thought about what I wanted to do and "came up" with the ideas to construct a building of a given sort and to solve engineering problems as they arose. To be fair, none of my friends who marvelled at my handiwork were thinking about Plato's forms. Suppose, though, that I do my best to talk them through reasons, both ancient and modern, for thinking that Plato was right that for each kind of thing there is a form that each individual of that kind exemplifies its form by bearing a relation to it. That just is what it is to be a building like this, or a rose like that. Upon becoming card-carrying platonists, my friends think me no less creative than they did before. The metaphysical story about what it is to be something of a given kind makes no difference to the independence of my thought and reduces not one whit the difference between my independence of thought in **Scenario 1** and my having first raided a filing cabinet in **Scenario 2**.

The theological problem begins to get traction when we fall into thinking that were there to be independently existing abstract objects God would inevitably be reduced to a divine version of **Scenario 2**. Unable to invent what already exists, God could only "look to" the forms for instructions, as it were, about how to make a cosmos, or even roses. What is not yet in evidence anywhere, so far as I can tell, is that God's situation with forms is any different from mine, even on the assumption of platonism. Why am

I creative but God a mere hack when all we each do is think about our circumstances, "come up" with ideas, consider our priorities, develop and then implement a plan?

There is, of course, the difference that I am both concrete and embodied and, thus, no part of Plato's heaven. Anti-platonists take this to present a challenge regarding how concrete and embodied thinkers can by way of thinking have access to Plato's heaven. I make nothing of the challenge, save to note that those with theological worries have not yet given any reason to think that God's situation is usefully different from my own. Not being abstract, God is concrete. God is an agent. God is not a part of Plato's heaven of eternal, independently existing *abstract* objects. Has any reason ever been given for thinking that just by virtue of being eternal and independently existing God both inhabits the same domain as abstracta and that those abstracta are any more open to consultation by God than they are to me? For the problem to take hold, we are owed more than that both God and abstracta are timeless, necessarily existing beings. We need some account with details of *how* God might "interact" with abstracta in ways that I cannot, and that account must then feed into something more detailed about exactly how *that* kind of "interaction" might compromise God's independence and creativity in a way that compromises divine greatness. Noting my embodiment does not suffice.

To reprise concern that partisans hardly know of which they speak, what is the meaning and relevance of 'domain' in this context that might make it the case that God and abstracta inhabit a common domain in ways that I and abstracta do not? I am aware that logicians and mathematicians use the term freely and for now I register no objection to their usage. Theirs does not require that all objects in a domain share a space, have contact with each other, or know about each other. This particular route to the theological worry, however, seems to require something like what logicians and mathematicians do not.

If the philosophical use of 'domain' is to provide a wedge to open the door to theological compromise that any should find troubling, it must mean something akin to its use in spatio-temporal contexts, along with a further account of how it is that an eternal, independently existing, non-physical concrete being is forced to consult the eternal, independently existing, non-physical abstracta in the shared domain. If the anti-platonist puzzle is driven by how *concrete* objects could consult abstract objects, then their worry carries over here, making a distinctly theological problem obscure.

If concreteness is beside the point and the theological concern is to arise because both God and abstracta are eternal, independently existing, and non-physical, the theologian owes us an account of exactly how these shared attributes force an interaction that renders God less creative than am I, by virtue of being "imprisoned" with abstracta whereas I am not, despite my inability ever to be completely rid of them. Merely citing shared characteristics is inadequate to demonstrate a problem. Those searching here for theological reasons to reject platonism have unfinished business.

3.3.2 Perfect Being Theology

… the requirements of sound systematic theology include the affirmation that God is the source of all things apart from Himself. For divine aseity is a fundamental requirement of perfect being theology. …. God would be diminished in His greatness if He were the cause of only some of the other things that exist (Craig, 2016, p. 41).

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To perfect being theologians, I urge caution. The plausibility of this reasoning depends on what else is in play. The God of Western theism does seem to be greater than Marduk, if Tiamet was also to be an independent existent, in no small part because Tiamet was vanquishable. For the sake of brevity, conflate mortality with contingent existence. Marduk, not being the creator of all contingent existents, may well fail to be the greatest being possible. Platonists, though, maintain that abstracta are unlike Tiamet in exactly this regard. They are necessary existents. As such, being their cause is an impossibility. No being, no matter how great, *could* be their creator.

Perfect being theologians now find themselves in the position of some students I have taught. Having listened to a lecture on the so-called logical problem of evil, some were inclined to object that theists were conveniently making their own lives too easy. God should not be limited by "logical possibility". God, if deserving of divine status, should be able to accomplish the impossible. Full stop. No qualifications. I urged caution. Were God to be able to accomplish the impossible as wished, then critics of religious belief (as these students always were) would be unable to demonstrate God's non-existence by locating an internal contradiction—perhaps with a paradox of the stone—or an external contradiction—perhaps with the existence, character, or pervasiveness of evil. By their own insistence, they would have empowered God, as it were, to do the very things that were supposed to demonstrate God's impossibility. Their initial insistence on widening the scope of God's alleged power was not a good dialectical move. I warned them to be careful what they wished for.

Similarly here. Insisting both that God is a perfect being and that being a perfect being demands that God account for all other existents, provides the basis for a platonist rejection of theism and anything entailing it, such as Christianity. To the degree that any think some platonist arguments successful, they have now been facilitated in rejecting the cornerstone of Craig's Christian belief.

Were it shown, contrary to my own expectations, that platonists are correct in their ontological claims for abstracta, a better option would be to ask: what is lost? How compromised is God's perfection, if some abstracta turn out to be necessarily existing independent objects? Pretty much nothing is lost. Since *arguendo* it is impossible for those abstracta to be created, it is no blemish on God's creative ability to be unable to create them any more than it is a blemish to produce any other impossibilities, such as humans that are not mammals, iron that is not metal, or composite objects with no parts. If there really is some stone genuinely impossible to create, then it is no compromise of God's creative power to be unable to create it. The problem lies with what is to be created, not with the would-be creator. And, for the lifting as well. *My* creative and lifting powers are limited precisely because there are createable and liftable objects beyond my abilities, especially very big stones. Whilst I might take steps to increase my capacities, it would be a fool's errand *par excellence* to pursue the ability to create an uncreateable stone or to lift an unliftable stone.

'Perfect being' is a term of art. With the best wills in the world, philosophers and theologians try to dress our rough and ready understanding of perfection in intellectually rigorous and respectable garb. I have given no reasons that even I take to be persuasive for rejecting perfect being theology. My resistance throughout has been with the details within that framework, if it is embraced. It may be that Craig is more prescriptive about the details of the framework while I am less so. He finds unambiguous weight in biblical texts, Church fathers and councils that I cannot. Mine is more tentativeness than rejection. Origen, Augustine, Aquinas, et al. were giants that Western theists should take seriously. If pew sitters wish to take any of their declarations over my arguments here, I do not fault them. They have other fish to

fry and from any kind of distance, perhaps the smart money goes on those with long-standing reputations. Still, I think that there are unrecognized nuances here to give contemporary working philosophers and theologians pause. Neither perfect being theology nor orthodoxy are genuinely threatened by anything raised here.

The refrain is not unfamiliar. In matters of practice, the religiously-minded might agree on the value of loving enemy no less than self. What counts as loving sufficiently in any particular context may not be perfectly obvious. On the one hand we should be mindful of This, but we must also not forget That. With both This and That in mind, how much of This and how little of That should we apportion to the actions we do or do not? For all that I have argued here, perfect being theology can stay. Just as the precise implementation of loving enemies as self is not always perfectly obvious, so the precise formulation of perfect being theology is not perfectly obvious. If abstracta prove to be impossible, then we are free to interpret the relevant biblical quantifiers to be unrestricted bar one. We may treat divine aseity in the most straightforward manner.

If the jury is out regarding platonism, then the jury should stay out about the straightforwardness of the details of divine aseity. If the jury returns with a positive verdict for platonism, then aseity is not threatened; it must just be more nuanced than some might have hoped. Nothing significant is lost, other than a simple, straightforward presentation of one or more theistic doctrines. There is no shame in this, nor does it involve some religious "compromise", even if others wished to hang the label 'heretic' on those who embraced what I call nuance. There was a neatness to ancient cosmology with circular orbits. We have traded that neatness for another. We should beware the seductions of intial forms of neatness.

Craig thinks that he's identified a bridge too far, one that inevitably takes us beyond any plausible interpretation of 'perfect being'. The realities for which God is responsible, if platonism is correct, is "infinitesimal", far outnumbered by abstracta (Craig, 2016, p. 18). It sounds even worse on p. 41: "The physical universe which has been created by God would be an infinitesimal triviality utterly dwarfed by the unspeakable quantity of uncreated beings."

This is a different worry than we have seen so far. If John, Paul, Church Fathers, and writers of creeds really intended their quantifiers to be unrestricted bar one and if they took deviation to signal heresy from which would-be believers should shrink, then the most minimal falsification of their "totalizing" claim is devastating. We require some reason for thinking that God's creation being "utterly dwarfed by the unspeakable quantity of uncreated beings" would make the falsification even worse. There is, for instance, an unstated assumption that God has, at most, created countably many things. Still, suppose 'utterly drawfed' is accurate. What of it?

Perfect being theologians must commit to God being unique in some respects for God to be uniquely worthy of worship. Not in every respect, though. God is not the only concrete entity, nor the only with moral capacity and significance, nor the only with power. There are many more of us with these characteristics than the unique God. We are forced to live with many ways in which God is not at all unique. If philosophical push came to theological shove, perfect being theologians can still make their peace with God (and creation, if need be) being outnumbered in ways demanded by platonism. They would make their peace with it just as they make their peace with many other things. There would, in the envisioned dialectical circumstance, be no other choice available, the alternative being genuinely impossible. To do otherwise would be to rage pointlessly into the metaphysical night.

Finally, are considerations adduced by Brian Leftow (Leftow, 1990), (Leftow, 2012, pp. 234–5), and adopted by Craig (Craig, 2016, p. 43). First, on the platonistic story about property possession, God's being divine depends upon exemplifying the relevant divine-making forms. Second, since unique independent existence is one of the divine-making properties, God could not be divine, since if platonism is true, the one we label with 'God' does not exist *a se*.

As in other stages of my discussion, I concede the form of the problem but not its force. Begin with dependence. There is the wholly uncontroversial fact that for every necessary existent, there is a fashion in which the existence of each counts as a necessary condition for any other thing, whether individual, event, or state of affairs. For any fact, F, and any necessary object, NO, variations on the material conditional '$F \rightarrow NO$' hold.

This minimal manner of expressing necessary conditions should not detain us. There is dependence and then there is dependence. There are necessary conditions and then there are necessary conditions. According to platonism, the existence of any of the necessarily existing abstract objects is a necessary condition for anything else. Were they not to exist, the other item in question would not either. That all of those abstracta are to be inert and that some are uninstantiated renders this kind of dependence uninteresting. Since nothing bears the relevant instantiation relation to those uninstantiated abstracta, nothing actually depends on them, even when matters are construed as Leftow wishes. So, this kind of dependence/necessary condition should be set aside as a limitation of the expressive resources of the material conditional.

Leftow insightfully zeroes in on those abstracta that God does instantiate, according to platonism. Were there no abstract property that God does instantiate, God could not have that property. Correct. For the theologically minded to be troubled, however, we must expand the scope of 'dependence' beyond concerns over whether God is creator or created. The mere existence of the abstracta has no implications for God being counted amongst the created. *Ex hypothesi*, these abstracta are to be inert, so they cannot be causally efficacious and forcing God to be amongst the created or even to compel God to be one way rather than some others.

To see what is peculiar about what is supposed to be troublesome, think about more ordinary objects. Admiring roses, you wish to construct one in a laboratory. You gather raw materials and begin assembling them. The flower you produce will depend upon you in many ways. In particular, its color will depend upon you mixing the right chemicals and placing the mixture in the right places. The red mixture goes in the petals, while the green goes in the stem. That is clear dependence of the flower upon you and your actions, not only for its very existence but also for its character. Were another heavenly being related to God as you are to your flower, then we have a problematic dependence. Had you not done what you did, there would be no rose. After a fashion, you are creator and the rose the created. That nothing at all like this story is implied by platonism removes any practical religious concern. Amongst persons, none is greater than God. Amongst the eternal and independently existing, there is still none greater. No other has the key divine attributes. No other brings God into existence, and no other compels God to have all of those, or any other, properties.

You still worry that there are infinitely many uncreated things? Fear not, since religiously-relevant grandeur is not a matter of numerosity. You worry that God can neither create nor destroy any of these infinitely many things, thus compromising divine omnipotence? Fear not, since there are no fewer necessities that God is unable to alter, even according to anti-platonism. Non-contradiction? Bivalence? Gödel results? God is stuck with them no less. If the necessities of your favorite logic and

your favoured metaphysical theories do not compromise God's omnipotence, why do the platonist's favourite entities? They neither create nor compel God. God still is self-existent and the abstracta compel no divine actions.

Finally, to what might be thought to be Leftow's *pièce de résistance*: God cannnot even be divine, if platonism holds. Contra my finding flexibility in 'perfect being', Leftow finds rigidity in divinity, which demands unique independent existence. Any divine attribute, according to platonism, involves both particular and independently existing abstract object. So, God cannot be divine, since not the sole independent existence.

Whilst I grasp that one's account of divinity is more streamlined without dealing with platonist troubles, the theological trouble is still not apparent. Were we to become convinced of platonism, all that is required is that the same hard work and sophistication that was wielded when thinking about omnipotence or the trinity (three persons, one substance; begotten, not made) need be employed here. An uexpected turn? Not really. Plenty saw that the *straightforward* account of *aseity* could not be maintained alongside platonism. That, though, is no reason to think that we have the basis for rejecting platonism, any more than we have grounds for rejecting the central necessities of our favored logic simply because a theory of omnipotence is so much easier to formulate. We may prefer to have no need to complicate our theories, but the complications are merely pragmatic inconveniences, not indicators of falsehood (Bueno and Shalkowski, 2020).

Leftow's real *pièce de résistance* lies elsewhere (Leftow, 2012, 2020). Lewisians think that the plurality of worlds underwrites modality, since the plurality constitutes so-called logical space. Leftow finds this function in God. He may reject Modal Status as a natural consequence of his own account of modality. This does not, however, undercut the import of my earlier considerations. Leftow maintains modal orthodoxy. God cannot but act in accord with logical, mathematical, and metaphysical truths (Leftow, 2020, p. 54), so there are still modal "constraints" on anything God might do or be. Leftow's is a different way of massaging the problem. I found oddness in 'constraint'. He generates oddness because on his account, God is the source of these so-called constraints. Perhaps some back-and-forth would expose weaknesses in one way of identifying the oddness that would convince those inclined to the other. Be that as it may be after more philosophical work, there is still no there there when it comes to things "now" off limits in ways articulated by correct logic, mathematics, or metaphysics. My platonist-friendly calming of theological waters remains despite Leftow's option. Better to have my option available, since it is hard to know when any philosophical theory will crash and burn.

4   Conclusion

The "problem" of God and abstract objects is, I think, not much of a problem. This paper's ambitions are very limited. Whilst my sympathies are with anti-platonists, nothing here rests on those sympathies. I care only that theists—even perfect being theologians—recognize options that are not immediately apparent. If things go against my philosophical sympathies, no great theological calamity befalls any. Adjustments can be made in good conscience.

I have attended to the reasons adduced for thinking that proper, serious Christian philosophy must, in effect, provide grist for the anti-platonist mill. For each kind of consideration, I sill find myself unmoved. Unmoved, perhaps because the history of

all manner of intellectual developments have involved finding sense where none was thought to be. Space and simultaneity still seem to many of us like they should be absolute and not relative. We have learned to make our peace with the unfamiliar and the unwelcome. Here, in my relative ignorance of how platonism/anti-platonism disputes will play out, I find theological space for either result. That may not be everything, but it's not nothin'.

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