

## Can God Create Abstract Objects? A Reply To Peter van Inwagen

**Abstract** The Platonic theist Peter van Inwagen argues that God cannot create abstract objects. Thus, the quantifier ‘everything’ in traditional statements of the doctrine of creation should be appropriately restricted to things that can enter into causal relations and abstract objects cannot: “God is the creator of everything distinct from himself...that can enter into causal relations.” I respond to van Inwagen arguing that he has provided no good reason for thinking abstract objects must be uncreated. And if this is the case, then there is no good reason to think that God cannot create abstract objects.

**Keywords** Abstract Objects – Causation – Creation - Necessity - Platonism -Theism

“God is not dependent on anything that is not Himself; on anything outside Himself. He is not limited by anything outside Himself, and is not subject to any necessity distinct from Himself. On the contrary, everything that exists is dependent on His will” (Barth, 1966-1975, 560).

Since at least the time of Augustine, God’s relationship to abstract objects has been a source of concern and puzzlement for the traditional theist. If the existence of abstract objects is admitted into one’s ontology, a *prima facie* problem arises for the traditional theist. The problem is this. Abstract objects, it seems, are best understood as uncreated entities. But, if abstract objects are uncreated, then God is not the creator of everything, a view that appears unacceptable to the traditional theist constrained by Scripture and tradition.

In his essay, “God and Other Uncreated Things,” Peter van Inwagen notes this tension and argues that a traditional theist need not worry—there is no actual tension between traditional theism and the existence of abstract objects (2009).<sup>1</sup> His central claim is that 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 abstract objects cannot. I respond to van Inwagen arguing that his central claim is not justified. There is no good reason, provided by van Inwagen, to think that abstract objects must be uncreated. Further, I shall argue that sense

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<sup>1</sup> Subsequent reference to this essay will be made parenthetically in the text.

can be given to the notion of God's creating abstracta. Thus, the traditional theist may unproblematically endorse the claim that God is the creator of all distinct reality, including abstract objects.

### 1. Van Inwagen's Case Against Creatable Abstract Objects

Van Inwagen admits there is no way to *refute* the position that abstract objects are creatable (11). As far as he can tell, there is nothing logically impossible about the notion of creating abstract objects. Reflection on the meaning of words such as "God," "create," and "abstract object" does not yield any (obvious) logical contradiction. Still, van Inwagen does not think that such a state of affairs is possible.<sup>2</sup>

In order to motivate his claim that abstract objects are uncreatable, van Inwagen offers two lines of reasoning. The first relates to the fact that abstract objects are typically thought of as necessary entities, and as such, are best thought of as uncreated. Van Inwagen ponders, "Does 'x exists necessarily' entail 'x is uncreated'" (5)? He is inclined to think that such an entailment holds, but knows of no interesting argument for it, apart from, I should add, the passing comment that "anyone who said that this entailment held would be contradicted by Richard Swinburne, if by no one else" (5). In the next section I shall argue that such an entailment does not hold and thus, I happily count myself in the rarefied company of Richard Swinburne, even if on other grounds.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Van Inwagen's claim can be understood as an application of his 'modal skepticism' to the question of God's relationship to abstracta. While we can (and do) make true modal judgments in ordinary contexts (e.g., we truly judge that "the table could be moved two feet to the left"), we have reason to be less confident about our modal judgments when engaging in armchair philosophy about propositions remote from the concerns of everyday life. Even more so when we can't make sense, as van Inwagen will argue, of the claim that God creates abstract objects. See van Inwagen (1997) for more on his understanding of modal judgments.

<sup>3</sup> I shall deny the entailment by examining the concept of 'necessity' given current possible worlds semantics, whereas Swinburne denies the entailment in order to make room for the Son and Holy Spirit as created (by the Father) yet necessary beings. See Swinburne (1994, 185).

Van Inwagen does, however, consider a second line of reasoning decisive. He argues, “Creation is, in the broadest sense of the word, a causal relation, and abstract objects cannot enter into causal relations. Therefore, abstract objects are uncreated” (5). Why does van Inwagen insist that abstract objects cannot enter into causal relations? The answer is that, for all abstract objects, 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. What constitutes an acceptable completion of (S)? It seems that van Inwagen is after a causal explanation, a likely story, a plausible narrative, of *how* God creates abstracta.<sup>4</sup> Certainly a causal explanation of how God creates abstract objects is a necessary condition for the completion of (S). I don’t think it sufficient. If God causes abstract objects to exist, there is a causal dependency relationship between abstract objects and God. An adequate completion of (S) will specify the nature of this causal dependency relationship. An *account*, then, of the crucial notion of causation is needed, an account that is notoriously difficult to provide when the relata are necessary beings, as we shall see. Thus, our individually necessary and jointly sufficient conditions for an acceptable completion of (S) are as follows:

C<sub>1</sub>: a causal explanation of *how* God creates abstract objects.

C<sub>2</sub>: an *account* of causation.

In “God and Other Uncreated Things,” van Inwagen concerns himself with C<sub>1</sub> only. He argues that there is no acceptable completion of (S) since there is no plausible causal explanation for *how* God creates abstract objects. For however God’s creative activity is understood, there still

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<sup>4</sup> In a more recent paper, van Inwagen claims that all causal discourse is to be understood in terms of *causal explanations*, explanations that answer questions that begin with ‘how’ such as “How did Winifred die?” or “How did the lion escape from its cage?” See van Inwagen (2012).

remain some “free” abstract objects—objects free “of ontological involvement with particular concrete objects” (7). And, we are told, free abstract objects are uncaused, at any rate, “it is very hard indeed to see what the ‘creation’ of [free abstract objects] might consist in” (11). Since any account of the creation of abstracta will leave some abstract objects “free” and thus uncreated, we are left without an acceptable account of God’s creation of abstracta—God cannot create abstract objects.

In the remainder of this section, I shall consider van Inwagen’s suggested completions of (S) and argue that he has not shown them inadequate, and thus, has not shown that no sense can be given to the notion of divinely created abstract objects. In Section 2, I shall return to the main question of this paper, Can God create abstract objects?, first by considering whether necessary beings can be created, and finally, by exploring our second condition,  $C_2$ , for providing an adequate completion of (S). I shall argue that there is an account of causation, an account van Inwagen may even subscribe too, that is plausible, enjoys independent support, and which clears the way for a satisfactory completion of (S).

Van Inwagen considers two possible completions of (S). The first is as follows:

(S<sub>1</sub>) For all  $x$ , if  $x$  is an abstract object, God caused  $x$  if  $x$  is a constituent of a concrete object created by God.

The so-called *Aristotelian*, who thinks that all abstract objects exist *in rebus*, that is, in concrete objects, could thus make sense of divinely created abstract objects. According to (S<sub>1</sub>), God creates abstract objects *by* creating concrete things. But, argues van Inwagen, it is not the case that all abstract objects exist *in rebus*—there are properties of properties and properties of other abstract objects that cannot be properties of concrete things (e.g., “The number 510 has such properties as being an even number and having irrational square roots...and the property ductility has the property of being instantiated and the property of entailing the property solidity”

(10)). Thus, *Aristotelianism* cannot be employed to help make sense of the claim that God creates abstract objects since it is false that all abstract objects are *in rebus*—some are free.

All van Inwagen has shown is that given an abundant theory (or something near enough) of properties—the view that every predicate designates a property—God can't create abstract objects since there are properties of properties that aren't "in" concrete things. But, the defender of (S<sub>1</sub>) need not endorse an abundant theory of properties. Perhaps properties are sparse such that there are no properties of properties that aren't "in," or bottom out "in," concrete things.<sup>5</sup> If so, then (S<sub>1</sub>) may be an acceptable completion of (S) after all. This route comes at a cost however, for now abstract objects (setting aside God's abstract objects, if he has any) are to be understood as contingent existents, coming into being at the moment of their concrete objects creation,<sup>6</sup> and we are left without a unified theory of predication. Still, van Inwagen has not ruled out such a possibility. I conclude that (S<sub>1</sub>) is a possible completion of (S). While a possible completion, it is not one I shall pursue since I think it best to endorse the claim that, setting aside sets with contingent members, abstract objects exist necessarily.<sup>7</sup>

But, there is another strategy, popular both historically and contemporarily, that might be able to make sense of the claim that God creates abstract objects. This is the thesis that *ante res*

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<sup>5</sup> That is, all properties are exemplified by concrete objects, or, for properties of properties, a descending chain of properties that bottoms out in a concrete object.

<sup>6</sup> Assuming all concrete objects other than God are contingent beings.

<sup>7</sup> See McCann (2012) where he argues that in fact God does create abstract objects by creating the concrete objects in which they are exemplifications: "all of creation is produced in one fell swoop, and the natures of things, along with the entire Platonic menagerie implicit in them, are created *in their exemplification*—that is, as manifested *within* the concrete reality that is the temporal world" (2012, 201). McCann endorses a near cousin of (S<sub>1</sub>):

(S<sub>1</sub>\*) For all x, if x is an abstract object, God caused x if x is (i) a nature of a concrete object created by God, or (ii) an implication of a nature of a concrete object created by God.

I shall not pursue (S<sub>1</sub>\*). It is an improvement over (S<sub>1</sub>) since it does not require a sparse theory of properties, still abstract objects are contingent on this account, hence I set it aside.

abstract objects and all other abstract objects are thoughts or beliefs or ideas in the mind of God created *by* the activity of thinking.<sup>8</sup> Thus, (S) could be completed as follows:

(S<sub>2</sub>) For all x, if x is an abstract object, God caused x if x is a constituent of God's mind brought about by the activity of thinking.

Van Inwagen pursues this line of thinking a bit, engaging in a brief discussion of the metaphysics of thoughts, events, and propositions. His conclusion is that however thoughts, ideas, and beliefs are to be understood, they provide no help in making *sense* of the thesis that God creates abstract objects by thinking: “in the end, I see no way in which abstract objects of any sort can be identified with God's thoughts or beliefs or ideas—no way, at least, that can lend any sense to the idea that God creates abstract objects” (18). To be sure, God's thoughts may *involve* abstract objects, but he does not create any of these objects by thinking. Thus (S<sub>2</sub>) is not an acceptable completion of (S).

In response, van Inwagen is clearly begging the question against (S<sub>2</sub>). The proposal in (S<sub>2</sub>) is that abstract objects are the product of divine thinkings. What does van Inwagen, at rock bottom, say? Only that if God thinks, he'll enter into various relations with abstract objects, but not produce them. The existence of “free” mental properties is a brute fact (we are told, without fanfare)—these abstract objects would exist “even if God had not created anything, even if (if this were possible) there had been no concrete existents at all” (15). Really? On what basis is this claim justified? He doesn't seriously engage (S<sub>2</sub>) at all, but merely dismisses it on the way—it's the ‘Taxi Cab’ fallacy. Van Inwagen admits as much. He thinks “God is the creator of the ideas in his own mind” is false because “in my view, no one, not even God, could be the creator of an abstract object” (17). Fair enough, but he has assumed from the outset what he claims to have established. He has *asserted* his thesis—along the way sending the reader down some knotty

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<sup>8</sup> An attempt to refurbish this line of thinking using the tools of contemporary metaphysics and logic has been set forth in Thomas V. Morris and Christopher Menzel (1987).

(and interesting) metaphysical rabbit trails—but not *shown* that no sense can be given to the claim that God can create abstract objects via divine intellectual activity. Further, other philosophers who have considered (S<sub>2</sub>), *inter alia* Davis (2011) and Plantinga (1993 and 2011), see no problem in giving *some* sense to the notion of God creating abstract objects via divine intellectual activity.<sup>9</sup> It is my judgment that van Inwagen has done nothing to undermine the coherence and straightforward sense of (S<sub>2</sub>).

But, perhaps the impossibility of God creating abstract objects is due to their necessity, not their abstractness. That is, if “x necessarily exists” entails “x is uncreated”, then (S<sub>1</sub>) and (S<sub>2</sub>) are not acceptable completions of (S) for the simple fact that there is no possible completion. In the next section, I shall argue that the Platonic theist *can* accept the whole Platonic horde, Plato’s heaven and the like, and still endorse the claim that “God is the creator of everything distinct from himself” full-stop. Along the way, we’ll need to get clear on the notion of necessity and the relevant account of causation when one necessary being is said to cause another.

## 2. Can God create abstract objects?

I shall assume that God exist necessarily. In order to show that God (i.e., one necessary being) can create abstract objects (i.e., other necessary beings), I shall first deal with the issue of whether or not necessary existence entails uncreatedness. I shall argue that it does not. Part of the difficulty in providing an account of God’s creating abstracta is that most abstract objects necessarily exist. As such, I take it upon myself to give some sense to the notion of God creating

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<sup>9</sup> Thus Davis: “Propositions are mental effects....propositions have parts, those parts are best construed as ideas, and their being properly related (that is, “fitted into” truth claims) requires a mental arranger....God *produces* [propositions]; for indeed, they are his Thoughts” (2011, 298 & 303); And Plantinga, regarding propositions: “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). See also Plantinga (2011, 32).

a necessary being. Once accomplished, I shall revisit the challenge of finding an adequate completion of (S).

### *2.1 A Discussion of Necessary Being*

Typically, it is thought that “x exists necessarily” entails each of the following propositions:

- (1) “x is uncreated”
- (2) “x cannot not exist”
- (3) “x is everlasting”
- (4) “x is independent”

But, if “x exists necessarily” entails each of (1)-(4), then it would be impossible for God to create necessarily existing abstract objects. Van Inwagen notes the entailment between “x exists necessarily” and (1), but even if that entailment doesn’t hold, it still might be the case, given some other entailment such as (2)-(4), that God cannot create necessarily existing abstract objects (proposition (4) e.g., obviously entails that God cannot create necessary abstract objects as well). In this sub-section, I shall consider the following question: is it possible, given contemporary modal discourse, to deny the claim that “x exists necessarily” entails any of (1)-(4)?

Philosophers typically treat the modal operators “necessarily” and “contingently” as quantifiers over possible worlds, where a possible world is a “maximal” or “complete” *way things could have been*.<sup>10</sup> Thus, to say “x exists necessarily” asserts “x exists in all possible worlds.” That is, x’s non-existence is impossible. I shall understand possible world semantics as follows:<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> See Plantinga (1974, 44-45) where he explicates the notion of possible worlds in terms of maximal state of affairs.

<sup>11</sup> For a classic treatment of the semantics of modal talk in terms of possible worlds, see Kripke (1971).



“x exists necessarily” = “x exists in every possible world”

“x exists contingently” = “x exists in some possible worlds, but not every possible world.”

Thus possible world semantics entail (minimally, I shall argue below that it is also ‘nothing more than’) what I shall call scope necessity (SN): if x exists necessarily, then x exists in every possible world. But, importantly, the above does not explicitly assume or entail what I shall call nature necessity (NN): if x exists necessarily, then the cause or reason for x’s existence is included in its own nature; that is, x has no external cause for its existence. Modal facts are distinct from (and might *or* might not entail) essentialist facts (that is, facts about an object’s nature).<sup>12</sup> Oddly, van Inwagen concedes (in another context) the very point I shall argue below: there is no entailment between (SN) and (NN). Embedded within a discussion regarding the cosmological argument, van Inwagen argues the following:

It is not, however, easily demonstrable that just any necessary being would be an independent being. Any one who wanted to demonstrate this conclusion would have somehow to prove the impossibility of cases like the following one. Suppose that A is a necessary being and that A causes the existence of B and that it is necessary that A cause the existence of B. Then B will be a necessary being—B will exist in all possible worlds, since A exists in all possible worlds, and, in every possible world in which it exists, causes B to exist in that possible world—but B will nonetheless [asymmetrically] depend upon A for its existence (1993, 108).

At any rate, it is easy to see how “x exists necessarily” is *thought* to entail (1)-(4).

While considering abstract objects, Plantinga states:

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<sup>12</sup> See Kit Fine (1994), where a number of cases are provided for thinking that modal facts about some object x are distinct from its essentialist facts. For example, it is possible for two philosophers to agree on all the modal facts regarding the relationship between a person, his body, and his mind (e.g., necessarily, a person just has one body and one mind, etc.) and still disagree on the essential properties of persons, bodies and minds (e.g., philosopher A thinks persons are essentially immaterial minds that happen to have bodies, philosopher B thinks persons are essentially bodies and minds are identical to brains, etc.). I shall argue that it is possible to exist necessarily (SN) without existing essentially (NN). Thanks to an anonymous referee for pointing me to the Fine article. See also McCann (2012, 235) where it is argued that essential existence doesn’t entail necessary existence.

It is natural to think of these things as *everlasting*, as having neither beginning nor end. There was a time before which there were no human beings, but no time before which there was not such a thing as the property of being human or the proposition there are *human beings*. That property and that proposition have always existed and have never begun to exist. Abstract objects are also naturally thought of as *necessary* features of reality, as objects whose non-existence is impossible (1980, 3-4).

Later, Plantinga asserts that only objects that have a beginning can be created (1980, 143). Hence, if abstract objects are everlasting, they are uncreated. And it is natural to think that such objects are also independent. I agree with Plantinga that abstract objects, setting aside *sets* with contingent members, are everlasting. They are also necessary beings. But, it is only proposition (2), the impossibility of non-existence, which is entailed from “x exists necessarily.” To prove this entailment, assume “x exists necessarily” and not-(2). If x exists necessarily then x exists in every possible world. Yet, given not-(2), it is possible that x not exist, which is to say that there is a possible world where x does not exist. But that is just to say, “x exists contingently” which contradicts our assumption.

However, necessary existence doesn't entail (1), (3) or (4). Consider (3). To say “x is everlasting” is to assert, “x exists throughout all periods of time.” Thus, there never is a time in which x does not exist and at no time does x begin or cease to exist. If there are possible worlds in which there *are* no times, that is, possible worlds in which no object exemplifies the property *existing at time t*, then “x exists necessarily” does not entail “x is everlasting” for the simple reason that x exists at *no* period of time in those worlds. Suppose instead that all possible worlds include times.<sup>13</sup> The following seems plausible: Suppose “x never exists” is self-contradictory but “x sometimes does not exist” and “x exists necessarily” is consistent. Then x will exist in

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<sup>13</sup> The claim seems plausible: If God (a necessary being) is essentially temporal, as a number of prominent philosophers have recently argued (*inter alia* Swinburne (1994), DeWeese (2004), and Wolterstorff (1975)), then there are no possible worlds without times.

every possible world but will not be everlasting in every possible world.<sup>14</sup> In every possible world, x will exist for some period of time t, where t is a subset of all periods of time in that world.<sup>15</sup> Further, if God creates entities distinct from himself that exists in every world, then such entities would exist necessarily but would be created. That is, if in every world God creates an x such that  $x \neq \text{God}$ , then x has (SN). But x's having (SN) obviously doesn't entail (1)—it is only when (NN) is assumed that (1) is entailed from “x exists necessarily.” Finally, if God sustains entities distinct from himself in existence in every world, then such entities would exist necessarily but would clearly not be independent—x will have (SN) but will also be dependent (on God) for its existence. Hence, “x exists necessarily” doesn't entail (4), i.e., “x is independent.” As Brian Leftow states:

According to currently popular semantics, ‘x exists necessarily’ asserts only that x is to be found in every possible world. It entails nothing at all about why this is so; it leaves open the question of whether there may be some cause or causes which account for this (1988, 137).

And it is this openness to other accounts of necessary beings that provides some logical space for the possibility of God creating abstract objects.

## 2.2 Created Necessary Beings, Causation, and An Adequate Completion of (S)

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<sup>14</sup> Thanks to Paul Draper for this point.

<sup>15</sup> An anonymous referee objects: “the conclusion of [this] argument seems to be obviously false (i.e., it seems manifestly true that if something could fail to exist, then it exists in every time).” Response: Again, modal facts are distinct from essentialist facts—all the modal facts entail here is the existence of x in every possible world, not the existence of x at every time in every possible world. It is entirely consistent with possible world semantics to say, “x exists in every possible world” and to deny that x essentially exemplifies (in every possible world) the property *is everlasting*. A final objection: “x exists necessarily” entails not (3), but (3\*):

(3\*) “x is timeless.”

Response: This entailment is most plausible when considering abstract objects, and perhaps this is where the supposed entailment gets its force. But again, the modal facts concerning x's necessary existence do not entail any essentialist facts regarding x's temporal mode of being. If abstract objects are timeless, it is not due to their necessity, rather it is due to the fact that they are essentially immutable, incapable of intrinsic change. That this entailment between necessary existence and timelessness does not hold can be seen from the plausible accounts (cited above) of an essentially temporal God, a God that exists necessarily.

What we need then is an account of how one necessary being (i.e., God) can create other necessary beings (i.e., abstract objects). Van Inwagen is right in thinking that creation is fundamentally a causal notion. It is my judgment that if sense can be given to the causality by which one necessary being would cause another necessary being to exist, if condition C<sub>2</sub> can be satisfied, then there is no good reason to think that God could not create abstract objects and hence, no good reason to think van Inwagen is correct in his claim that abstract objects (free or otherwise) cannot enter into causal relations.

The suggestion that one necessary being can create another necessary being pushes against a strongly held intuition regarding causation. The intuition is that causal claims usually entail a counterfactual claim as well.<sup>16</sup> For example, if my striking a match causes it to light, then it seems to follow that in the nearest world where I do not strike the match, the match would not have lit. Further, if someone wants to claim that God causes a necessary being to exist, then, one will also want to make the parallel claim, that in the absence of this cause (say, through its causal inactivity or its non-existence), the necessary being would not have existed either. But it is not clear that one can make such an assertion in the case of a necessary being which is caused to exist. Consider the claim that

(5) had God not caused the property P, P would not exist.

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<sup>16</sup> John Pollock explicitly defends this intuition in his (1984, 151-153). I am not here endorsing a counterfactual account of causation. Rather, I am asserting that a causal claim will be vacuous, and so defeated, were this entailment denied. On the other hand, a counterfactual analysis of causation will *reduce* causal dependence to counterfactual dependence. I am simply reporting the pre-philosophical intuitions of many philosophers, as summarized by James Woodward (himself an anti-reductionist regarding causation):

The suggestion I want to make is that to the extent that commonsense causal judgments are unclear, equivocal, or disputed, it is better to focus directly on the patterns of counterfactual dependence that lie behind them—the patterns of counterfactual dependence are, as it were, the ‘objective core’ that lies behind our particular causal judgments, and it is such patterns that are the real objects of scientific and practical interest (quoted in John Carroll (2010, 292)).

Statement (5) seems to be just what the Platonic theist under consideration wants—a one-way causal dependence relationship between God and abstract objects. But, if P is a necessary being, as the Platonist thinks, then the consequent of (5) is necessarily false. So on a standard treatment of counterfactuals, it seems to follow that (5) is necessarily false.<sup>17</sup> But then, if the entailment relation between causal claims and counterfactual claims does not hold, then what content can one give to the claim that P exists because God caused it to exist? Further, how can the theist capture the asymmetrical dependence relation if such a counterfactual is false?

This worry has been carefully discussed by Brian Leftow, and his response is as follows. The above question rests on a false understanding of (5), one which “assumes that there is a possible world in which [God] does not cause P which is most similar to the actual world” (1988, 144). This is false because there is no possible world in which God fails to cause P. This is because the concept of a necessarily existent God who is creator is such that if God causes a necessary being, God causes it necessarily. To put it another way: in every possible world, the non-divine necessary being x exists and necessarily exemplifies the property *being caused by God*. And for God, *causing P to exist* is an essential property of God. Thus, in (5), both the antecedent and consequent are necessarily false. And as Leftow claims, “this is reason to assign [5] truth rather than necessary falsehood” (1988, 145). Hence, on the standard counterfactual semantics, the entailment relation does hold, even when a necessary being creator is in view. And if the entailment relationship holds, we have satisfied the core intuition that causal claims usually entail counterfactual claims as well. In the process, we have also learned that a Necessary

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<sup>17</sup> See David Lewis (1973) and Robert Stalnaker (1968). Matthew Davidson (1999, 283) explicates the Lewis-Stalnaker semantics for counterfactuals as follows (where ‘>’ is used for counterfactual implication):

“A counterfactual ( $p > q$ ) is true in the actual world if and only if (i) p is necessarily false or (ii) a world where ( $p \& q$ ) is true is closer to the actual world than any world where ( $p \& \sim q$ ) is true.”

Being Creator (i.e., a NBC) *necessarily* creates other necessary entities. Hence, created necessary beings essentially possess the property *being created by an NBC*.

Let's return now to the task of specifying a completion of (S). The above considerations suggest that a reductive account of causation in terms of counterfactuals might do the trick:<sup>18</sup>

(S<sub>3</sub>) For all x, if x is an abstract object, God caused x if had God not caused x, x would not exist.

There is a problem with this reduction however, for if (5) is true, still so is

(6) had God not caused the property P, P would still exist.

Notice that (6)'s consequent is necessarily true, and so therefore is (6). But, this suggests the (additional) following completion of (S):

(S<sub>4</sub>) For all x, if x is an abstract object, God caused x if had God not caused x, x would exist.

But, if both (5) and (6) are true and (S<sub>3</sub>) and (S<sub>4</sub>) are adequate completions of (S), then again, the claim that God causes abstract objects to exist seems to have no content.

In light of these difficulties, Platonic theists typically go in one of two directions. As Tom Morris states:

There are two possible strategies at this point. The theist can [endorse a counterfactual analysis of causation and] refuse to endorse the standard semantic view [for counterfactuals, i.e., the Lewis-Stalnaker account], and on some basis separate the sheep from the goats among such propositions. This would be a semantic maneuver of significant interest, and one which many theists might find attractive for reasons completely independent of our problem. But such a move is not strictly necessary at this point due to a second option. The theist can admit the truth of [(5)] as well as [(6)], acknowledge a *logical* dependence running both ways between God and abstract objects (a trivial result of there being necessary existence on both sides) and nevertheless maintain that there is a *causal* or ontological dependence running in only one direction, rendering [(5)] somehow ultimately more revealing than [(6)] (1987, 165).

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<sup>18</sup> Granted, (S<sub>3</sub>) does not obviously satisfy C<sub>1</sub>, so it would need to be filled in a bit, but minimally, satisfying C<sub>2</sub> gets us going in the right direction.

Some Platonic theists have in fact opted for Morris' first strategy, *inter alia* Richard Brian Davis (2006) and Ed Wierenga (1989).<sup>19</sup> I think the second strategy is more promising—i.e., to give up on providing a standard sort of counterfactual analysis of the causal relation between God and created abstract objects, and to endorse an anti-reductive account of causation.<sup>20</sup> Anti-reductionism is not the view that causation is primitive. Primitivism regarding causation denies that there are *any* concepts more basic than causation. All I wish to endorse here is that there are no non-causal terms that can adequately explicate the notion of causation. Given anti-reductionism regarding causation, a first pass at completing (S) is as follows:

(S<sub>5</sub>) For all x, if x is an abstract object, God caused x if God brought it about that x exists.

Anti-reductionism regarding causation is plausible, enjoys independent motivation,<sup>21</sup> and has been ably defended recently by *inter alia* John Carroll (2010) and James Woodward (1990).<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> In Leftow (1988), Brian Leftow also has provided an alternative semantics for so-called counterpossibles such as (5) and (6) (i.e., counterfactual conditionals with impossible antecedents). Recently, Leftow defended this earlier paper against objections from Richard Brian Davis in Leftow (2006). However, in the years since he wrote the 1988 paper, Leftow's view of abstract entities has changed considerably. He now is inclined toward anti-Platonism and fictionalism about worlds and hence doesn't employ the null-world semantics that he originally offered (and recently defended against charges of semantic collapse from Davis) in articulating his own current views on counterpossibles. Still, a Platonic theist could employ his so-called null-world semantics if desired.

<sup>20</sup> Some think the second strategy the *only* possible way to explicate the causal dependency between God and abstracta. For example, after an extended discussion of the possibility of employing a counterfactual analysis of causation to God's creating abstracta, Matthew Davidson states, "if *any* reductive analysis of causation would capture the causal relationship between God and abstracta, it would be a counterfactual analysis . . . . But, since not even [a counterfactual analysis] works as a reductive analysis, it seems that *no* reductive analysis of the causal dependence of abstracta on [God] can be given" (Davidson 1999, 286). So too Scott Davison: "I am inclined to think that *no* counterfactual with impossible antecedents express important metaphysical connections, and hence (for reasons of systematicity and convenience) that all of them are vacuously true. In part, this is because I can't think of *any* way to characterize the purported asymmetric 'connection' between antecedent and consequent which would distinguish the 'good' from the 'bad' counterfactuals with impossible antecedents" (Davison 1991, 491). See also Ernest Sosa and Michael Tooley (1993) for discussion of the difficulties in providing a reductive analysis of causation.

<sup>21</sup> Typical arguments for anti-reductionism involve (i) detailing the repeated failures of reductive analysis; (2) the fact that there is a sparse base of non-causal concepts that can be employed in providing a reductive analysis; and (iii) the case of preemption. See John Carroll (2010).

<sup>22</sup> See also Tooley (1997, Chapter 4), where an anti-reductivist analysis of causation is employed to argue that the spatio-temporal world is dynamic, and O'Connor (1995) where it is employed to defend the possibility of agent causation.

Further, the fact that there is a view of causation that can accommodate a *prima facie* correct reading of Scripture and tradition on the topic of God’s creative activity provides indirect motivation for thinking it a true account of causation in general. Anti-reductionism *may* even be van Inwagen’s account of causation.<sup>23</sup> This is *not* a trivial result. We have provided a way to understand the notion of causal dependency between God and abstracta—an understanding of causation that can be motivated independently from the problem that concerns us here. To see the non-triviality of (S<sub>5</sub>), consider Scott Davison’s (1991, 493) claim that if a counterfactual analysis of causation in analyzing God’s creation of abstracta is eschewed, all that is left is a “metaphorical understanding of the key notion of dependence at work here.” In reply, there is nothing metaphorical about an anti-reductive account of causation. On the contrary, our understanding of the causal dependency is straightforward and literal: God brings about the existence of abstract objects. Completion (S<sub>5</sub>) satisfies condition C<sub>2</sub>.

But, do we have a genuine completion of (S), a completion that satisfies conditions C<sub>1</sub> and C<sub>2</sub>? One could reasonably object: (S<sub>5</sub>) is hardly *illuminating* in terms of *how* God creates abstract objects. Specifically, the right-hand side of the conditional doesn’t illuminate the left-hand side—as it stands, they are virtually synonyms at face value. Fortunately, we’ve already seen a more illuminating explanation of *how* God causes abstract objects, the theistic activism of (S<sub>2</sub>):

(S<sub>2</sub>) For all x, if x is an abstract object, God caused x if x is a constituent of God’s mind brought about by the activity of thinking.

Notice, S<sub>2</sub> is consistent with a non-reductionist account of causation (satisfying C<sub>2</sub>) and provides a causal explanation of God’s creating abstracta, including a description of the relata of the

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<sup>23</sup> Van inwagen (2012) remains unimpressed by contemporary attempts to define causation. Still, he thinks causal explanations are possible, and that such explanations depend essentially on causal verbs. If this is not an endorsement of anti-reductionism, it is (minimally) consistent with it.



causal dependence relation: God's cognitive activity and (the resultant) abstracta (satisfying C<sub>1</sub>).

I also think that the following is an acceptable completion (along with S<sub>2</sub>) of (S):

(S<sub>6</sub>) For all x, if x is an abstract object, God caused x if (i) x is a constituent of God's mind brought about by the activity of thinking; or (ii) x is brought about by the activity of divine willing.

On (S<sub>6</sub>), the relata of the causal dependence relation are either God's cognitive activity (on (i)) or God's volitional activity (on (ii)) and (the resultant) abstracta.<sup>24</sup> Completion (S<sub>6</sub>) allows that God creates abstract objects wholly distinct from his being—existing in a Platonic heaven even—free of any concrete particular. And if (S<sub>2</sub>) or (S<sub>6</sub>) are possibly true, then God *can* indeed create abstract objects. The Platonist argues that he has in fact done so.<sup>25</sup>

In the end, the Platonic theist is free to apply a Moorean-shift to van Inwagen's skeptical argument. Van Inwagen argues:

God cannot create free abstract objects [skeptical premise]  
Free abstract objects exist.  
∴ God is not the creator of everything distinct from himself.

But, as the epigraph from Barth at the beginning of the paper suggests, we find motivation (from the domain of theology) for thinking that the quantifier 'everything' in the statement "God is the creator of everything distinct from himself" ought to be wide (that is, everything distinct from God is created by God). For the traditional theist, constrained by Scripture and tradition, this

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<sup>24</sup> Objection: If God is the creator of all free abstract objects, then universal possibilism is true. If *triangularity* is created by God, then triangles could have been other than they are. Response: The objection is based on a mistake, that of thinking we can speak sensibly of possibilities with respect to free abstracta prior to God's creation of such entities. But, if God is the creator of free abstracta, then prior to God's creative activity there was nothing to be said about *triangularity* or any possibility regarding it. See McCann (2012, 211), Leftow (2012, 272-98), and Morris and Menzel (1987, 168-72).

<sup>25</sup> Granted, there are other issues looming in the background that would need to be addressed in articulating a *robust* doctrine of God's creation of abstract objects, including providing an explication of eternal creation—for in the case of God creating everlasting abstract objects, the cause is not temporally prior to its effect. This topic would require another paper, but for now let me state that many contemporary philosophers working on the metaphysics of causation agree that causation need not involve reference to the relation of temporal priority. Indeed contemporary discussions of causal asymmetry deal routinely with cases in which cause and effect are simultaneous and, we are told, physics takes seriously the possibility of backwards directed time-travel and the accompanying backwards directed causation. See John Carroll (2010) and "Anti-reductionism" and Michael Huemer and Ben Kovitz (2003).

provides reason to think that, apart from any independent considerations in its favor, an anti-reductive view of causation ought to be endorsed. At any rate, van Inwagen has failed to show that the creating of abstract objects is one of the things that God cannot do. Thus:

God is the creator of everything distinct from himself.

Free abstract objects exist.

∴ God can create free abstract objects

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