

William Lane Craig. *God Over All: Divine Aseity and the Challenge of Platonism*. Oxford University Press 2016. 272pp. \$55.39 USD (Hardcover ISBN 9780198786887); \$29.95 USD (Paperback ISBN 9780198802921).

William Lane Craig. *God and Abstract Objects: The Coherence of Theism: Aseity*. Springer International Publishing 2017. 540pp. \$113.24 USD (Hardcover ISBN 9783319553832).

In his recent pair of books *God Over All* (hereafter abbreviated GOA) and *God and Abstract Objects* (G&AO), William Lane Craig codifies over a dozen years of research and reflection on the threat that realist views of abstract objects pose to divine aseity.

The divine attribute of aseity has it that “God alone is self-existent. Everything else is dependent for its existence upon something else” (GOA, 1). The foregoing “minimalist” conception of aseity neither entails nor is entailed by necessity, whereas a more robust conception of aseity—such as that articulated later by Medievals like Anselm and Aquinas, according to which God alone is identical to His essence—is thought to have such entailments. Craig gestures further to an “even more expansive” conception of aseity among Reformed theologians, according to which “God is independent not only in His existence, but in all aspects of His being, such as His knowledge and will” (G&AO, 5). Because Craig later criticizes divine simplicity, and GOA proceeds with the minimalist conception, we are led to gather that it is this one Craig defends.

Craig finds strong declarations of aseity in both Biblical and Patristic sources. John and Paul both use unrestricted quantifiers in describing God as the creator, source, sustainer, and goal of *all* things apart from God, who alone is eternal and uncreated. This is echoed by the Patristics, who taught that God is the sole *agenatos*, or “unoriginated, uncreated” being. Abstract objects were seen by them as archetypal forms proceeding from the mind or Logos of God. Their high Christology complicated matters, since the divinity of the Son requires that he too be *agenatos*, despite being begotten (*gennetos*, as opposed to *genetos*) of the Father. We thus have strong declarations of aseity from both Biblical and Patristic sources.

The “most formidable challenge” (GOA, 2) to the coherence of aseity, and indeed one that “strikes at the very heart” of theism (G&AO, 33), comes from a realist view of abstract objects, or Platonism. According to contemporary Platonism, what Craig calls “heavyweight Platonism,” abstract objects such as properties, propositions, possible worlds, and numbers exist and are just as real as familiar concrete objects such as people, planets, and chairs. Although many abstract objects, such as numbers, would seem to be uncreated and necessarily existent, the distinguishing feature of all abstract objects is their being essentially causally effete (But is this sufficient? Would space and time then count as abstract objects?).

“The only major consideration in favor of Platonism” (G&AO, 78), writes Craig, is the Indispensability Argument (IA), for which W. V. O. Quine is largely credited. A generalized version of the argument unsaddled by certain of Quine’s other theses (e.g., naturalism and conformational holism) is given:

- (1) If a simple sentence (i.e., ‘*a* is *F*’, or ‘*a* is *R*-related to *b*’, or...) is literally true, then the objects that its singular terms denote exist. Likewise, if an existential sentence is literally true, then there exist objects of the relevant kinds (e.g., if ‘There is an *F*’ is true, then there exist some *F*s).

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

Premise (1) is the Quinean criterion of ontological commitment: successful reference and existential quantification incur ontological commitment. Premise (2) is the Indispensability Thesis, that some sentences, if literally true, must refer to or existentially quantify over abstract objects. Given the literal truth of sentences such as ‘Socrates is wise’ or ‘That shirt is holy (viz., has holes in it)’ or ‘ $2 + 2 = 4$ ’ or ‘The number of apples is 2’, together (1) and (2) entail the existence of abstract objects like wisdom, holes, and numbers. The problem is that if uncreated, necessarily existent abstract objects exist, God no longer has claim to being the sole ultimate reality and creator of all that exists apart from Himself. So what’s a theist to do?

For the theist who accepts the deliverances of the IA, Craig considers first realist options: absolute creationism and divine conceptualism. The absolute creationist maintains that abstract objects are in some way created by God. Craig identifies two problems with such a view. First, it requires fudging with the traditional doctrine of creation, which implies that all things apart from God are freely created by God and have a temporal beginning. But as eternal creations, abstract objects would lack a temporal beginning, rendering the ordinary realm of concrete created things infinitesimal by comparison. Further, they would be more like emanations flowing necessarily from God’s nature rather than the products of a free act of creation, which is more like neo-Platonic emanationism than the doctrine of creation. The second problem is the familiar bootstrapping objection: God would already have to possess certain properties in order to create them, which is viciously circular. E.g., to create the property *being powerful*, God would already have to be powerful. Perhaps, then, God creates all properties except those essential to his nature. But this either sacrifices aseity to Platonism (there are uncreated properties) or concedes anti-Platonism (God need not exemplify *F* before being *F*). This latter route avoids the bootstrapping objection, but only by making abstract objects superfluous. Craig therefore advises the theist to look elsewhere for a more satisfying solution.

The other realist option open to the theist, one that “...the Church Fathers, if not the biblical writers themselves, embraced” (GOA, 72) is divine conceptualism: the view that what we normally take to be abstract objects are really concrete objects, viz., thoughts or concepts in the mind of God. The most developed contemporary version is Greg Welty’s Theistic Conceptual Realism, which seeks to identify abstract objects with God’s uncaused thoughts. But construing God’s thoughts as uncaused does not avoid violating aseity, for if they are distinct from God, we still have a realm of uncreated objects distinct from God. Supposing this difficulty can be overcome, things like false propositions and first-person knowledge make it difficult to see how God’s thoughts or activities could be identified with, or play the role of, abstract objects—this despite the several features of abstract objects to which Welty points, such as their necessity, platitudinousness, and representational nature, that makes identifying them with the thoughts of God attractive.

Besides, Welty offers no more than “various incarnations” of the IA for thinking abstract objects exist, leaving us with the question of whether the IA is any good in the first place.

Craig thinks not, and mounts an impressive assault on the IA than spans the rest of each book, undercutting both the criterion of ontological commitment in (1) and the Indispensability Thesis in (2). The criterion of ontological commitment, Craig argues, leads to extravagant commitments that can scarcely be taken seriously. A combination of Jody Azzouni’s neutralism and positive features of free logic show that neither existential quantification nor reference to singular terms need be ontologically committing. Craig pulls no punches: “In my opinion, the criterion of ontological commitment that comes to expression in premiss (I) of the Indispensability Argument is not only false, but, I should say, obviously false and wholly implausible. It is a meta-ontological thesis for which there is no good argument, and the linguistic evidence is overwhelmingly against it. Its assumption hinders logical reasoning. Most significantly for our purposes, it is outrageously inflationary ontologically, saddling us not only with innumerable abstract objects, but fantasies of almost every sort” (GOA, 143). To undercut the Indispensability Thesis in (2), Craig surveys a handful of the most prominent anti-realist views on offer today. Although the fictionalist’s claim that sentences referring to and existentially quantifying over abstract objects are literally false is a hard sell, we might, with the figuralist, regard them as figuratively true, or, with the pretence theorist, pretend they are true whilst remaining neutral as to their ontological status. These options, Craig thinks, effectively deflate the challenge Platonism poses to the divine attribute of aseity.

Craig’s exposition of the landscape of contemporary anti-realism is truly first-rate. But don’t take my word for it. Jody Azzouni said (personal communication) he was “incredibly impressed with the care with which he [Craig] approached scholarly questions (about me, in particular, but generally) about how my position had shifted over the years, and exactly what sharp distinctions needed to be made. ... he exhibits enormous care and sensitivity when describing my positions.” If one judges life too short to traverse the daunting landscape of anti-realisms for himself, Craig seems to have provided a reliable shortcut. We can certainly agree that he has shown there to be “a cornucopia of views available to the classical theist” (G&AO, 484) in response to Platonism’s affront on aseity, a modest but important conclusion.

That said, it seems to me there is a very significant shortcoming of Craig’s project that should temper any triumphalist proclamations about the coherence of the attribute of aseity. Much of the difficulty stems from the fact that Craig doesn’t offer the sort of systematic philosophical analysis of aseity that other divine attributes have received, which is surprising given its professed importance. Instead the reader is left to piece together on his own what amounts to a rather inchoate picture. In variously describing aseity, Craig says God is:

- (i) Self-existent
- (ii) Independent
- (iii) Uncreated
- (iv) Underived

Further, Craig says of aseity that it is:

- (i) A divine perfection
- (ii) An essential attribute
- (iii) An incommunicable attribute

But the first cluster of descriptions are not substantively analyzed individually or as a group. Craig seems to use them synonymously. However, each conceivably admits of several interpretations and is distinguishable from the others in interesting and important ways. For instance, the Son was thought by the Patristics to be *agenētos* (uncreated) but *gennētos* (begotten)—i.e., derived from the Father. And being derived from the Father, the Son can scarcely be said to be self-existent or independent of the Father. So is only the Father *a se*? That cannot be correct, as aseity is a divine perfection, essential to deity.

A single footnote reveals Craig is aware of the difficulty, but seems remarkably facile about it. Citing his previous work on the Trinity, he writes, “since the doctrine of the Son’s being begotten in his divine, as opposed to human, nature is unattested by Scripture ... [and] is merely a vestige of the Logos Christology of the early Greek apologists, I am inclined to dispense with it, holding the persons of the Trinity to be underived. ... There is then no difficulty in claiming aseity belongs to the divine nature” (G&AO, 59).

Respectfully: yes, there is. If the divine nature is distinct from the persons, then it, not the persons, exists *a se* (and what would the divine nature be, if not an abstract object?). And the persons cannot be said to be *a se* in virtue of sharing in the divine nature, because aseity is incommunicable. Worse, I don’t know of a single model of the Trinity where each of the three persons are *a se* in the sense of being self-existent, independent, and underived. In fact, could there be a clearer affirmation of tritheism than to say there are three divine persons, each of whom are self-existent, independent, and underived? And the irony of Craig citing his own work of the Trinity here is cringeworthy, for on his view, all three persons *depend on* (are “supported by”) an underlying substance of which they are parts, and so cannot be *a se* in the minimalist sense.

The waters get even murkier. Later, in discussing the conceptualist’s attempt to preserve aseity by construing divine thoughts as parts of God, it’s as if Craig is reminded of his view of the Trinity, for there he introduces for the first time talk of being “acceptably” *a se*. The modest qualifier is a noticeable departure from what is otherwise confidently referred to as “the” doctrine of divine aseity, all views deemed contrary to which be damned. Craig writes: “What counts as a part of God? We might take the persons of the Trinity to be parts of God which, though not God, exist acceptably *a se*. ... Could God’s thoughts be taken to be aspects of God which similarly exist acceptably *a se*?” (G&AO, 199). He answers this last question affirmatively, so long as God’s thoughts are construed as undetached concrete parts.

Why would undetached concrete parts get a pass, but not undetached abstract parts? It is unclear. He writes: “For plausibly if something creates non-successively all its parts, it creates itself, which, apart from its apparent metaphysical impossibility, would render God a created being. So God cannot create His parts, and yet, being parts of God, these objects are clearly not examples of things existing *a se* apart from God” (G&AO, 201). Is Craig assuming the massively implausible view that composition is identity? In what sense can a part be self-existent and independent, and how can a whole made up of parts be underived? We are not told. No matter, for Craig is ready to play an anti-realist card here, too: “If undetached parts are not really existing objects, so much the better!”

(G&AO, 201). But how is it at all better to say that the persons of the Trinity are not really existing objects? Perhaps the thought is that there are no challenges to God's aseity if God doesn't even exist.

The conclusion, I think, is a rather dour one for Craig: the challenge facing the coherence of the attribute of aseity is God's being asymmetrically dependent on *anything*, and that problem remains even if abstract objects do not exist. This is clear from Medieval expressions of aseity, which, buttressed by divine simplicity, regard even undetached concrete parts as anathema to God's metaphysical ultimacy. But Craig (rightly) rejects simplicity, despite speaking on behalf of "classical" theism. So what's his solution? Nothing in GOA or G&AO tells us. Thus as piece of philosophical theology with the expressed aim of demonstrating the coherence of the attribute of aseity (G&AO, ix), Craig's project must be judged a failure.

GOA is a much slimmer volume than G&AO, containing just the core insights of the latter. It is not, however, a simplified version of G&AO intended for a non-specialist audience. It is directed primarily to philosophers and theologians, but lacks the amount of excruciatingly meticulous detail and footnotes found G&AO, which I assume is directed primarily to masochists. Kidding aside, there does arise a genuine puzzle about readership. It seems to me what we have, in each case, are really two different books, one on the challenge Platonism poses to aseity, and another, much larger and better book on anti-realism. However disappointing the treatment of aseity may be to philosophers of religion, the quality of the survey of anti-realisms is, to my knowledge, unrivaled in its incisiveness and comprehensiveness. But who will benefit from it? I suspect those interested just in aseity will stop short of it, thinking "Ok, point is, there are anti-realist options" and those interested just in anti-realism would never think to consult a book called *God Over All* or *God and Abstract Objects*. Why not pull the two apart by marketing a stand-alone survey of anti-realisms for use in upper-level graduate metaphysics seminars, then presuppose anti-realism in another, beefed-up volume on aseity? Those interested in the latter would be aware of the former, but the reverse cannot be assumed.

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