
R.T. Mullins
statement is accurate *simpliciter* if and only if what it claims to be the case really is the case. My hypothesis is that he has in mind another sort of accuracy, what we might call “as-ifery accuracy.” If my hypothesis is correct, then we need to know, exactly, what this quality is and we need a metric for non-arbitrarily assigning more or less of it to statements. Only then can we begin to understand how it can be that it is more as-ifery accurate to describe God as omnipotent and omniscient instead of powerless and ignorant when we know for a fact that it is more accurate *simpliciter* to describe God as powerless and ignorant instead of omnipotent and omniscient.

Christian analytic theology is a wonderful enterprise. For, among other things, Christian analytic theologians allow us to see more starkly than ever what is at stake in our different attempts to understand the great doctrines of the Church. This is certainly true of William Hasker’s metaphysics of the Trinity. As I come away from my study of his book, two questions loom large for me. First, are we Christian analytic theologians going to follow the one we profess as our Lord and stand up and count ourselves as full-blooded monotheists, insisting that our metaphysics, logic, and philosophy more generally get in line with our profession? Yes, it is difficult to define “monotheism”; but we don’t need a definition to know that whatever else monotheism involves, it implies that there is only one God, and so it implies that there is a God. Second, is it morally permissible for Christian analytic theologians—or Christian intellectuals and leaders more generally—to adopt as-ifery in their most fundamental theorizing about the nature of God? We might approach the second question through reflection on the Church’s mission, no small part of which is expressed by the Great Commission. In this connection, let me phrase the question in a conspicuously evangelical way: can we Christians in good faith evangelize with “God loves you and offers a wonderful plan for your life” when we think it would be more accurate *simpliciter* to say “God does not love you and offers no plan for your life, much less a wonderful one. But don’t take it personally. God can’t love or offer anything to anyone”?


R. T. MULLINS, University of Notre Dame

Are you the sort of philosopher who prefers desert landscapes, or lush forests? Would you gladly live in a world that contained the Platonic heavens, or would you rather decry the heavens and do without? Where
does God fit into all of this? What, if any, is God’s relationship to the Platonic heavens? Beyond the Control of God seeks to explore these questions and more.

The book begins with an introductory chapter by Paul M. Gould that nicely sets the stage for the debate. God, according to Gould, is a necessarily existent, perfect being worthy of worship who is solely responsible for creating everything else that exists. God exists a se, is sovereign, and independent. Gould captures this with the Aseity-Sovereignty Doctrine (AD).

AD: (i) God does not depend on anything distinct from Himself for his existence, and (ii) everything distinct from God depends on God’s creative activity for its existing. (2)

I gather that (i) is about God’s aseity, and that (ii) is about God’s sovereignty. (i) is a fairly straightforward definition of aseity, and I find nothing controversial here. However, I don’t find it obvious that (ii) captures divine sovereignty. For one, it seems to assume that God’s sovereignty is a necessary and essential attribute of God, but that is not self-evident. Imagine that God exists alone, and that nothing distinct from God exists. Is God sovereign in this state of affairs? I’m tempted to say no, since sovereignty implies a relationship to some external thing—in order to be sovereign, one must have something to be sovereign over. Further, I can’t help but get the feeling that (ii) is stacking the deck against the Platonist. Perhaps it would be good to have a more detailed discussion of sovereignty, and some sort of justification for the doctrine being articulated as it is in (ii), but I shall lay that issue aside for now.

After discussing AD, Gould moves on to the topic of Abstract Objects (AOs). AOs are things like properties, propositions, relations, sets, possible worlds, and numbers. On Platonism, if AOs exist, they exist necessarily. Further, on Platonism, AOs exist independently. Their existence does not depend upon anything else. Gould sees here a conflict between theism and Platonism. God exists necessarily and a se, and so do abstract objects. Doesn’t this conflict with theism, which says that only God is ultimate in reality? It might seem that God would depend, in some sense, for His existence and nature on AOs. For instance, God wouldn’t be wise without being related to the universal Wisdom. This would certainly not seem to be compatible with the claim that God is ultimate in reality as described by AD.

Gould says that theists face an Inconsistent Triad.

(1) Abstract objects exist. [Platonism]

(2) If abstract objects exist, then they are dependent on God. [from AD]

(3) If abstract objects exist, then they are independent of God. [Platonist assumption]

According to Gould, at most only two of these can be true. It seems to force us into the position of admitting that if Platonism is true, theism is false. Or, if theism is true, Platonism is false. So it appears that one must
reject one of the premises of the Inconsistent Triad. But which one? There are various ways to answer this question, and some of those ways are represented in Beyond the Control of God.

The book is comprised of six essays that lay out six different views. In each essay the contributor or contributors articulate a position. Then the other authors in the volume offer a brief critique, followed by a response to the critics from the contributor. This back and forth debate style is a helpful way to be introduced to the subject matter, and makes for a lively discussion.

Theistic Propositionalism. In the first essay, Keith Yandell focuses his discussion on the relationship between God and propositions. Yandell refuses to accept the claim that if Platonism is true, then theism is false. He seeks to establish the plausibility of this claim by showing that there is no problematic relationship between God and propositions. Yandell defends Theistic Propositionalism (TP). On TP, there are propositions that do not depend for their existence on God, nor does God’s existence depend on these propositions (22). The truth value of propositions like God exists depends on the existence of God, but the existence of such propositions does not so depend.

Yandell’s position seems to face two major challenges: (i) it is not compatible with scripture and Christian tradition; and (ii) it does not satisfy the AD.

With regard to (i), Yandell examines several biblical passages such as Colossians 1:16–17. He makes an exegetical move that several of the other authors offer as well. The apostle Paul simply did not have abstract objects in mind when he penned that passage. “Paul’s point seems to be that God is sovereign over ‘thrones or powers or rulers or authorities’ that might pose a threat; abstract objects have no such possible role” (24). The reply to Yandell from William Lane Craig is that Paul didn’t have in mind quarks or strings either, but surely we would think that, if Paul were aware of quarks, he would say that God created them. Yandell concedes the point, but says that this is not analogous to AOs. The passage is clear that God created the heavens and the earth. Quarks are simply filling in the details of the heavens and the earth. AOs are a completely different kettle of fish. Further, as several authors point out, we have good reason to think that the domain of created things can be restricted. John 1:3 says, “All things were made through him, and without him was not any thing made that was made.” This would exclude uncreated things from the creative divine act. Yandell maintains that AOs cannot be created. So AOs would be excluded from the creative divine act.

Contra (ii), Yandell does not think that TP violates AD because there are logical and metaphysical limits to divine sovereignty and omnipotence. God cannot do that which is logically and metaphysically impossible. Creating necessarily existent AOs, according to Yandell, is impossible. As such, it is no offense against AD that God cannot perform this impossible act.
**Modified Theistic Activism.** In the second essay, Paul M. Gould and Richard Brian Davis defend a position called Modified Theistic Activism (MTA). Several years ago Thomas Morris and Christopher Menzel offered an account of God and AOs called Theistic Activism (TA). TA had the unfortunate consequence of entailing that God creates His own nature. One of the goals of Gould and Davis’s essay is to make certain modifications to TA in order to avoid this deep incoherence. On MTA, God does not create His own essence. Some AOs exist within the divine mind, whilst others exist within the platonic heaven (61). Certain AOs exist within the divine mind as ideas and concepts of God. Properties are God’s concepts, and propositions are God’s thoughts. These necessarily existent AOs are concepts and thoughts that God necessarily has. Other AOs are created by God. These are properties and relations that are not exemplified by God. Gould and Davis propose that God creates these necessarily existent AOs. The main objection to MTA will be discussed below.

**Theistic Conceptual Realism.** In the third essay, Greg Welty articulates Theistic Conceptual Realism (TCR). Welty claims that divine ideas play the role of AOs. Much like Gould and Davis, Welty believes that the AD supports the notion that AOs depend upon God. Unlike Gould and Davis, Welty denies that AOs can be causally dependent upon God. Instead, “AOs are necessarily existing, uncreated divine ideas that are distinct from God and dependent on God” (81). Welty runs various arguments for the existence of propositions and possible worlds. He claims that any view must offer a satisfying account of propositions and possible worlds. Welty contends that a satisfying account of God and abstracta must meet 6 different conditions: Objectivity, Necessity, Intentionality, Relevance, Plenitude, and Simplicity. Welty argues that the nature of propositions is such that they are necessarily existing objects that are mind-independent. Propositions are intentional in that they have a truth value. Relevance focuses more on the nature of possible worlds. A common complaint with certain accounts of possible worlds is that such accounts have no utility. They cannot explain why other possible worlds are relevant to making it the case that our world is the way that it is. Plenitude is about the seemingly infinite number of propositions and possible worlds. The simplicity condition is not about the nature of propositions or possible worlds. Instead, it is about the virtues of a theory. A theory is more likely to be true if it can account for all of the desiderata without unnecessarily multiplying ontological kinds.

Welty maintains that TCR offers the most satisfying account because only TCR meets all of the conditions. Divine thoughts necessarily exist, so the necessity condition is met. Objectivity is secured by the fact that only one omniscient, necessarily existent person has thoughts that are uniquely identified with AOs. Further, they are mind-independent for human minds, though not for the one and only divine person. Intentionality is preserved because an omniscient being knows what is true and false.
Also, an omniscient mind can hold an infinite number of propositions, so plenitude is satisfied. Relevance is secured by omniscience and divine power. God’s knowledge ranges over all of the possible worlds that He could create. The content of the divine ideas constrains the possibilities for creation. God uses this knowledge to create a particular world. Simplicity is said to be satisfied by the fact that AOs are identified with divine ideas. We are already committed to the existence of thoughts, so divine thoughts do not add any new ontological kind into the mix.

TCR faces various problems. First, a mere theist can hold to TCR, but no Trinitarian theist can. The objectivity of TCR is supposedly secured by the fact that only one person has thoughts that are uniquely identified with AOs (88–89). If AOs were identified with several minds, Welty says that objectivity would be lost. However, it is not clear whether or not Trinitarians can modify TCR in such a way that it satisfies the objectivity condition.

Second, the objectivity condition does not really seem to satisfy objectivity. Propositions, according to Welty, are mind-independent. Propositions are independent of human minds on TCR, but strictly speaking they are not ultimately mind-independent. Propositions just are divine thoughts in the divine mind. In the final analysis, propositions are not mind-independent on TCR.

Anti-Platonism. William Lane Craig’s essay seeks to accomplish several things. First, he argues that orthodox Christians must hold that God created everything, including AOs. He appeals to scripture and the Nicene Creed in support of this claim. Second, he seeks to offer a refutation of arguments for Platonism in order to defend his version of nominalism. Craig says a few words about how a fictionalist approach to AOs can offer alternatives to Platonist accounts of propositions, mathematical objects, and other AOs. Ultimately, however, Craig does little to put forth a positive view, as is further evidenced by the critics of his essay. One of the resounding claims from the critics is that Craig needs to say more.

I found Craig’s creedal argument unconvincing. Oppy points out that the Church Fathers were attacking the views of Plato and Pythagoras just as Craig claims. However, Oppy further notes that Plato and Pythagoras hold views about AOs that contemporary Platonism does not hold. As such, it is difficult to claim that the Fathers explicitly rejected Platonism, and that contemporary Christians are being unorthodox when they hold to Platonism. Further, I find it rather odd that Craig appeals so heavily to the Nicene Creed. Craig is someone who denies the doctrine of eternal generation. This is a doctrine that is explicitly taught in the Nicene Creed. Apparently Craig does not see a problem with being orthodox when he denies explicit aspects of the Nicene Creed, but does see a problem when others deny things that are allegedly implied by the Creed. Craig needs to offer a principled way of sorting out which parts of the Creed, if any, Christians can deny and remain orthodox.
God With or Without Abstract Objects. Scott A. Shalkowski sets out to argue for two things. First, theological problems do not arise for theism because there are insufficient reasons to believe in AOs. Second, even if AOs exist as Platonism says, there is no theological problem from the AD. In the first part of Shalkowski’s essay, he runs several arguments against Platonism. His arguments are different enough from Craig’s to make this section interesting. The second part of his essay is where things get really interesting. As such, I shall focus my attention on it.

In most of contemporary theology “divine sovereignty” is used often, but rarely is it ever defined. This is rather unfortunate, as theologians commonly make appeals to divine sovereignty. This is no different in Beyond the Control. Yandell offers a definition of omnipotence, and seems to assume that sovereignty is a derivative of this divine attribute. However, nothing explicit is said. Shalkowski is the only contributor who actually offers a definition of divine sovereignty. It is not the most robust definition of sovereignty, but he at least gives the reader something to work with. According to Shalkowski, God is sovereign if things turn out the way that God wants things to turn out on some level of generality (143). The existence of AOs that exist independently of God do not threaten divine sovereignty because they do not prevent God from ensuring that things turn out as He desires. As Shalkowski points out, AOs are not a limit on God because there is nothing beyond those limits. Things that are impossible are simply impossible, and God is no less sovereign for failing to be able to perform impossible actions.

Shalkowski also attacks another argument that is constantly repeated throughout Beyond the Control. The argument says that if AOs did not exist, God would not exist, or God would be different. Hence, God is dependent upon AOs in an objectionable way. Shalkowski will have none of this. First, God cannot be other than He in fact is. This is what it means to be God. AOs are not limiting God from being something else. Second, God necessarily exists. It is impossible for God to fail to exist. So the argument hangs on an impossible state of affairs.

Shalkowski ends on a very important note for Christian theologians and philosophers. He asks, what would happen if it turns out that the God of perfect being theology is incompatible with Platonism? Say Platonism is true, and the God of perfect being theology does not exist. What would follow from this? Very little. It could still be the case that a triune God exists, who created all of concrete reality, and sent His Son to redeem humanity. “Investing too much in perfect being theology forces us to miss how much is left if that stock crashes. Religiously speaking, nearly everything is left” (153–154).

The main quibbles over Shalkowski’s paper focus on the strength of his case against Platonism, and his interpretation of scripture and the AD. Nothing particularly new is explored in these critiques.
Abstract Objects? Who Cares! Graham Oppy closes the book with an interesting paper on theism versus naturalism. Oppy argues that neither theism nor naturalism can provide a better account of abstract reality. He goes through each proposed theistic account of AOs and explains that each fails to offer a more satisfying account than naturalism—though, as Oppy explains, naturalism fares no better than theism on this front. Interestingly, like Yandell, Oppy thinks that Craig’s version of nominalism is a non-starter. As such, much like Yandell, he largely ignores it. As one might expect, this does not make Craig too happy.

Against theistic conceptualist accounts, Oppy advances an argument that is mentioned by several of the other contributors in the earlier critical response sections. Oppy simply gives it more explication. The main thrust of the argument is that conceptualism is not in fact an account of AOs. Concepts are mental tokens. Mental tokens are concrete, so we do not have an account of AOs. Oppy suggests that conceptualists should either go realist or fictionalist about AOs.

Concluding Thoughts. This book offers a riveting introduction to the nature of abstract objects, and God’s relationship to such objects. The debate format makes the discussion engaging. The lead essays are short, and the critical responses are even shorter. This forces the authors to get straight to the point, which has its own perks for readers. It makes the essays easier to consume. The only down side with such short essays is that it leaves many questions unexplored. Of course, this leaves the reader wanting more, and that is not a bad thing. Beyond the Control certainly whets the reader’s appetite. It is highly recommended for those interested in philosophy of religion. Theologians might find it difficult to be motivated to read this book, but I believe there is much to be gained by engaging it. For instance, in contemporary theology, defenders of divine simplicity often assume that the only options are divine simplicity or Platonism. If Platonism is true, God is not sovereign or a se. Defenders of divine simplicity often argue that divine simplicity is the only way to maintain the AD. This book shows that the defenders of divine simplicity are quite simply mistaken. The options are not divine simplicity or some deeply problematic Platonism. The options are many, and theologians would do well to explore them.