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A Priori (Atheism)

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A number of philosophers have thought that, in addition to the familiar world of contingent concrete objects known *a posteriori,* via the senses, there is a realm of necessarily existent abstract objects that are knowable *a priori*, that is, prior to or independent of experience. However, it is at least initially puzzling how such knowledge is possible: how can truths about the world outside the mind be known merely by means of reflection on items inside the mind?

Some theists have argued that such a correlation between thought and world smacks of pre-established harmony, requiring forethought and arrangement by an omniscient, omnipotent deity. Some theists have also argued that the existence of abstract objects does not fit well within the naturalistic ontology commonly accepted by atheists. By contrast, they argue, such necessarily existent, immaterial entities can be handily explained in terms of a necessarily existent, immaterial God. Atheists disagree. Some atheists deny the existence of a priori knowledge; some deny the existence of abstract objects; and some accept one or the other (or both) but deny that either one is best explained in terms of theism.

The present chapter provides an overview of the core issues, arguments, and stances with respect to a priori knowledge, abstract objects, and what bearing they might have on the epistemic credentials of theism and atheism. The chapter is divided into two main sections. The first considers a priori knowledge and its bearing on the epistemic credentials of theism and atheism. The second considers abstract objects and their bearing on theism and atheism. It will be concluded that neither one renders theism more likely than atheism.

**Theism, Atheism, and A Priori Knowledge**

The present section explores whether a priori knowledge exists, and what evidential bearing such knowledge might have on the hypotheses of theism and atheism

Preliminaries

Many accounts of a priori knowledge have been proposed, and to date, there is no consensus about any given account. For the purposes of this chapter, however, it is enough to provide a rough and impressionistic account of the notion. Very roughly, then, to say that something is known a priori is to say that it is known prior to or independent of experience. By “independent of experience,” it shall be meant that experience plays at most an *enabling* role, and not a *justificatory* role, in such knowledge. That is, when it comes to a priori knowledge of a proposition, experience (at most) either (a) provides the *occasion* for one to know the proposition a priori, or (b) provides the relevant concepts required to grasp the proposition’s truth-value. Finally, “experience” is defined broadly so as to denote not only perception, memory, and testimony but also introspection and proprioception.

Truths known a priori are typically taken to be necessarily true. Furthermore, these truths are commonly taken to be known either directly, by intuition (where these are cashed out in terms of internally accessible intellectual seemings or externalistically construed, non-experientially based, truth-tracking beliefs), or indirectly by deductive, inductive, or abductive reasoning.

Examples of truths knowable a priori include those of mathematics (e.g., 1 + 1 = 2), logic (e.g., If *P* is true and *P* implies *Q*, then *Q* is true), modality (e.g., It is necessary that an entity is identical to itself; it is possible that I will get a flat tire tomorrow), and metaphysics (e.g., If an object was in fact made from a particular hunk of stuff, then it is impossible for it to have been originally made from a radically different hunk of stuff).

Truths that are knowable a priori are standardly divided into two types: analytic and synthetic. As with the distinction between a priori and a posteriori knowledge, there is no agreed upon account of the distinction between analytic and synthetic a priori truths, and many deny that there is one. However, it is enough for our purposes to draw a rough and impressionistic distinction between the two. Thus, say that an a prioritruth is *analytic* if its truth depends on the meaning of its constituent concepts alone (e.g., “All triangles have three angles”), and an a priori truth is *synthetic* if its truth does not depend on the meaning of its constituent concepts alone (e.g., according to some, “nothing can be red all over and green all over at the same time” is such an example, but this is controversial, as is the category of synthetic a priori truths).

Many philosophers of course deny that there is a distinction between analytic and synthetic truths, or even that there is such a thing as a priori knowledge. W. V. O. Quine, for example, famously argued that the meanings of terms are determined by the theory of the world in which they are embedded. Therefore, individual sentences within a theory cannot be tested in isolation but rather must “face the tribunal of experience … as a corporate body” (1951, 41). As such, even the truths of logic and mathematics are revisable, and earn their keep within one’s theory in virtue of being embedded within our total system or “web” of beliefs, which in turn accrue confirmation just to the extent that they explain and predict the world we experience.

Suppose, though, that at least some knowledge is a priori. What bearing might such knowledge have on the epistemic credentials of theism and atheism? Some have argued that while theism provides the materials to explain the possibility and reliability of a priori knowledge, such knowledge is impossible or improbable on the hypothesis that there is no god, and the natural world is all there is. The discussion that follows explores the issue of whether a priori knowledge makes theism or atheism more likely. In particular, we will consider whether a priori knowledge or justification across a range of domains—mathematics, logic, modality, philosophy, and morality—requires or is best explained in terms of theism.

To begin, how might a priori knowledge be explained on the hypothesis of theism? Any adequate theistic account of a priori knowledge requires at least two elements: an account of how God ensures that humans can have a priori knowledge of the truths in the relevant domain, and an account of how *God himself* has knowledge in the relevant domain.

Accounts of how God ensures that humans have knowledge of a given domain of truths likewise fall into two main categories. According to accounts of the first sort, God creates us in such a way that some range of a priori truths are innate (cf. Descartes’ doctrine of innate ideas). According to accounts of the second, God designs our cognitive faculties so that they reliably grasp a priori truths.

Accounts of how God *himself* can have knowledge in a given domain generally fall into two main categories: those that take the ground of the relevant domain of truths to be *internal* to God’s being, and those that take it to be *external* to God’s being. Among those of the former type, God has such knowledge either because he has *decreed* or otherwise *made* them true, or because, although he has not decreed them or otherwise made them true, they are elements of God’s being, and to which he has internal access. Among accounts of the latter type, God’s omniscience and omnipotence, and/or his metaphysical affinity with the objects of a priori knowledge, somehow enable him to access, and have reliable knowledge of, the truths in the relevant domain.

Accounts of both of the main sorts are considered in this chapter, with some unavoidable overlap. Accounts of how God ensures that *we* have a priori knowledge in a given domain are covered in the first section. Since accounts of how *God himself* can have knowledge of truths in a given domain standardly rely on accounts of God’s relation to abstract objects, they are deferred to the second section.

General Arguments from Intuition

In “Two Dozen (or So) Theistic Arguments” (2007), Alvin Plantinga sketches several arguments from a priori knowledge of logical, philosophical, and mathematical truths to theism. The two most plausible among them are considered here.

One takes its cue from the Benacerraf problem (1973): a good deal of a prioriknowledge is putatively about abstract objects, such as numbers, sets, and functions. But knowledge requires standing in causal relations with the thing known. This is impossible with respect to abstract objects, since they are by definition nonspatiotemporal and acausal; therefore, if the entities in some domain are abstract, then we cannot have knowledge of them. However, if abstract objects are instead elements of God’s mind—for example, if properties are divine concepts, propositions are divine thoughts, sets are divine collections, and so on—then God stands in causal relations with his own thoughts. Furthermore, we can come to stand in causal relations to God’s thoughts by virtue of our causal relation to God. Therefore, we can have such a prioriknowledge only if theism is true.

Atheists can respond to the argument in a number of ways. First, some deny that there is such a thing as intuitive or a priori knowledge of synthetic truths (e.g., Quine 1951). Second, some have argued that there are substantive reasons for thinking abstract objects cannot be plausibly construed as divine thoughts, divine collections, and so on (see the discussion on God and abstract objects in the second section). Third, some have argued that since we do have a priori knowledge of synthetic truths, then if such knowledge requires knowledge of abstract objects, then such knowledge does not require that we stand in causal relations with them (Plantinga 1993b; Huemer 2016). Alternatively, some have argued that since we do have such a priori knowledge, if abstract objects are acausal entities, then a priori knowledge must not involve abstract objects (see the second section for discussion of alternatives to the view that mathematical and other a priori knowledge involves knowledge of abstract objects).

The other argument begins with the observation that humans seem to have many kinds of intuitions: logical, mathematical, moral, and philosophical. It also seems that such intuitions are instances of knowledge. But it is much easier to see how we could have intuitive knowledge on a theistic account of the nature of human beings than to see how we could have it on a nontheistic account. Therefore, theism is the best explanation of intuitive knowledge, in which case theism is probably true—or at any rate, intuitive knowledge increases the probability of theism (Plantinga 2007).

An atheist might agree that we have intuitive knowledge of the sorts referred to above, but what is Plantinga’s reason to think such knowledge is easier to account for on theism than on atheism? Unfortunately, Plantinga does not say in the paper, leaving the argument for others to fill out.

Perhaps the most natural way to fill it out is to say that if theism is true, then God is omniscient, and thereby has direct, unmediated knowledge—that is, intuitive knowledge—of the truths of logic, mathematics, ethics, philosophy, and so on. He is also omnipotent and perfectly good. Given these three attributes, it follows that God is willing and able to design any intelligent beings he might happen to create in such a way that they likewise have such intuitive knowledge. By contrast, if atheism is true, then our cognitive faculties are the product of unguided evolution. But evolutionary accounts explain the development of traits in terms of whether they are useful for survival and reproduction, and it is not at all clear how intuitive knowledge of the necessary truths of mathematics, logic, philosophy, and so on—at least those that have no clear bearing on the practical concerns of human beings—are useful for survival and reproduction. Therefore, theism explains intuitive knowledge of such truths better than atheism, in which case such knowledge provides at least some confirmation of the former vis-à-vis the latter.

An atheist might reply in a number of ways. First, some have appealed to evolutionary accounts of the origin and function of intuitive knowledge, which explain how such knowledge is conducive to survival and reproduction (De Cruz 2016). Second, Amie Thomasson (2014) and others have offered conventionalist accounts of truths known via intuition, according to which the objects of intuitive knowledge are not beyond our cognitive reach. Finally, some have argued that theism is no better off than atheism with respect to explaining intuitive knowledge, since the theistic explanation just pushes the problem back a step without solving it, leaving *God’s* knowledge of the relevant truths unaccounted for. (More on this below and in the second section.)

A more sophisticated version of the argument can be gleaned from Plantinga’s mature (1993b) account of warranted belief. According to that account, for tokens of *any* type of belief to have warrant—perceptual, mnemonic, introspective, testimonial, intuitive, whatever—that belief must be produced by a cognitive faculty in accordance with a design plan that is successfully aimed at truth, and in an epistemic environment of a sort relevantly similar to the ones in which it was designed to function. (To account for the apparently gradable nature of warrant, Plantinga adds that the *degree* of warrant a belief enjoys is a function of the degree of firmness or conviction with which it is held.) But according to Plantinga, the notion of proper function and cognate notions—purpose, plan, design, malfunction, and so on—are essentially connected to the notion of *intelligent design*. Furthermore, Plantinga argues that attempts to give naturalistic accounts of function in terms of natural selection and evolutionary history have failed miserably, further shoring up this claim. But, argues Plantinga, the best candidate for the intelligent designer of our cognitive faculties is the god of theism. Therefore, the very existence of warranted beliefs—including warranted *intuitive* or a priori beliefs—provides strong evidence for theism (Plantinga 1993).

A number of criticisms have been raised against both Plantinga’s theistic proper functionalist account of warranted belief and his argument from proper function to theism. Against the former, some have argued that the account is subject to counterexamples, and therefore fails as an adequate account of warranted belief. For example, it has been pointed out that certain sorts of brain lesions can enhance memory, in which case proper function is not necessary for warrant (Greco 2003). Against sufficiency: Suppose God designed us in such a way that we come to believe that God exists with maximal firmness whenever presented with a seemingly impeccable but subtly fallacious argument for atheism. Plantinga’s account entails that belief in God formed in this way has maximal warrant—on a par with that enjoyed by one’s belief that one exists. But this is prima facieabsurd (Senor 2002; for other counterexamples, see Feldman 1993; Lehrer 1996).

Against Plantinga’s argument from proper function to theism, some have argued that proper function is not essentially tied to intelligent design. Toward that end, they have also argued that adequate naturalistic evolutionary accounts of function can in fact be given that avoid Plantinga’s criticisms (Bardon 2006; Wunder 2008; Graham 2011).

Finally, one might argue that Plantinga’s account of warrant is self-referentially incoherent. For we have seen that Plantinga analyzes warrant in terms of beliefs formed by properly functioning, (successfully) truth-aimed cognitive faculties in congenial epistemic environments. However, we have also seen that he thinks appeal to intentional design is required for any adequate account of function. Yet he also thinks *God* is a person with cognitive faculties, and that *his* faculties were not designed. Therefore, they would seem to lack functions, in which case, a fortiori, they cannot function *properly*. But if not, then it seems that *God’s beliefs lack warrant*. But if *God’s* beliefs lack warrant, then it is hard to make intelligible the notion of God as a competent designer of our cognitive faculties. Therefore, Plantinga’s accounts of warrant and of proper function seem to jointly entail that none of our beliefs—including, again, our *intuitive* or a priori beliefs—have warrant. It is therefore not at all clear that general theistic accounts of intuition render theism more likely than atheism.

Moral Knowledge

Theists standardly take morality to be objective—that is, independent of human belief and opinion—and many atheists agree. On standard accounts of objective moral knowledge, moral truths are knowable a priori. A number of theistic philosophers have argued that a priori knowledge of objective morality is better explained on theism than on atheism. The most popular accounts of this sort rely on some version or other of divine command theory in meta-ethics, and so determining whether theism provides the best explanation of a priori moral knowledge largely depends on the plausibility of divine command theory. A brief overview of divine command theory, as well as standard criticisms, are therefore given below.

The simplest form of divine command theory is one that accounts for all moral values and duties in terms of God’s commands. However, it is widely thought that the simplest form of divine command theory has been defeated by the Euthyphro dilemma. According to the dilemma, either something is morally right or good because God commands or decrees it, or God commands or decrees it because it is already morally right or good. But if something is morally right or good merely because God commands or decrees it, then moral rightness and goodness are arbitrary, which is implausible: prima facie, harming people or animals merely for fun would still be wrong even if God commanded it. On the other hand, if God commands or decrees something because it is *already* morally right or good, then moral rightness or goodness is independent of God’s commands and decrees, in which case divine command theory is false. Therefore, either moral rightness and goodness are arbitrary, which is implausible, or they are independent of God’s commands and decrees, in which case divine command theory is false.

Robert Adams (1999) and William Alston (1989) have developed and defended a modified version of divine command theory with the aim of (among other things) answering the Euthyphro dilemma. According to Adams’s modified divine command theory, (i) the infinite good is God himself, and finite goodness is analyzed in terms of resemblance to God or the divine nature; and (ii) an act is morally obligatory just in case a *good* God commands it. Given these alterations, it looks as though modified divine command theory can go between the horns of the Euthyphro dilemma: morality is neither arbitrary nor independent of God.

However, Wes Morriston (2001) has argued that even if modified divine command theory escapes the Euthyphro dilemma for moral *duties*, it yet falls prey to a Euthyphro dilemma for moral *values*: either God is good because he has the properties that constitute moral goodness (lovingness, kindness, justice, honesty, etc.), or the properties are good because God has them. If the latter, then moral goodness is arbitrary: if what *makes* a set of moral properties good is the fact that God has them, then if God were, say, a greedy, murderous coward, then it would have been good to be a greedy, murderous coward, which is absurd. But if the former, then moral goodness is independent of God: moral goodness consists in having those properties, and God (and anyone else, for that matter) *qualifies* as good in virtue of exemplifying those properties. Therefore, either moral goodness is arbitrary, or the standard of moral goodness is independent of God.

One response to the new Euthyphro dilemma is to identify God himself, and not his properties, as the ultimate standard of goodness (Alston 1989; Adams 1999). On this sort of view, when it comes to goodness, God functions in a way analogous to the standard meter bar in Paris. Thus, while the length of the standard meter bar is not analyzed in terms of any other standard beyond itself, the bar serves as the standard by which all other lengths have the property of being a meter in length: an object is a meter in length just in case its length exactly resembles the length of *that* bar. Similarly, while God (qua the Good) is not analyzed in terms of any other standard beyond himself, he serves as the standard by which all other entities have the property of goodness: an object is good just to the extent that it resembles *that* being (viz., God qua the Good). On this sort of view, then, goodness supervenes directly on God’s being, and confers goodness on his loving, kind, honest, just, and so on, nature.

Two main criticisms have been raised against the latter sort of view. First, the view entails that if God did not exist, then kind, honest, loving, just humans would not be good, which is implausible (Morriston 2001). Second, since God is not good in virtue of being kind, loving, honest, just, and so on, the view makes it unintelligible what God’s goodness consists in (Morriston 2001; Koons 2012).

The lesson of the new Euthyphro dilemma seems to be that what matters for moral goodness is having the relevant properties, in which case goodness does not depend on whether God exists and has those properties. But if the *properties alone* are what determine moral goodness, explaining the latter by positing a God that has them complicates our view of the world without adding to our understanding of it. But the latter sort of view is compatible with atheism.

Other problems have been raised against both versions of modified divine command theory. One is that it seems that at least some actions are *intrinsically* wrong—that is, wrong *in themselves* (Wielenberg 2014). But modified divine command theory denies this: it entails that if God does not exist, or if he does but never commanded against (for example) harming a person or animal merely for entertainment, then that would not be morally wrong. In short, even if divine command theory could account for the data that some things seem *objectively* right or wrong, it cannot account for the data that some things seem *intrinsically* right or wrong.

Another problem is that divine command theory leaves some moral facts ungrounded or otherwise unaccounted for (Wielenberg 2014). For example, it fails to explain why, if God commands one to do something, one is morally obligated to do it. But if divine command theory entails that at least *some* things are morally obligatory without being commanded by God, divine command theory looks unmotivated: if at least *some* things do not require the command of a good God to make them morally right or wrong, then it is not clear why one should think *anything* does. (For further criticisms, see Murphy 1998, 2012.)

However, a theist might yet argue that even if divine command theory is false, and so God is not strictly needed to *ground* morality, God is needed to *communicate* the objective truths of morality. The most natural view of this sort states that the objective standards of morality are a set of necessarily true propositions, construed as abstract objects. Since the topic of God and abstract objects is taken up in the second half of the chapter, worries of that sort are deferred to that section.

Is moral knowledge a problem for atheism? Some argue that evolutionary debunking arguments (e.g., Street 2006), when combined with a naturalistic view of the world (which many atheists accept), defeat the atheist’s epistemic grounds for moral realism (Bogardus 2016). The basic line of reasoning in evolutionary debunking arguments starts with the plausible claim that our evaluative moral judgments are extensively shaped by evolutionary factors. But if so, then our evaluative moral judgments line up with those that help us, individually and collectively, to survive and reproduce. But if morality is objective, then moral truths are true independently of the evolutionary factors that shaped our evaluative moral judgments. Therefore, it would be an extraordinary coincidence if our evaluative moral judgments lined up with moral truths. And if that is right, our justification for our moral beliefs is defeated, in which case we should embrace moral skepticism.

A number of criticisms have been leveled against evolutionary debunking arguments. First, a number of accounts of moral realism have been articulated and defended that allow—and sometimes insist—that evolution has reliably shaped our system of evaluative judgments. Perhaps the most relevant is neo-Aristotelian virtue theory, most notably developed and defended by Rosalind Hursthouse (1999), Philippa Foot (2001), and Micah Lott (2018). According to this version of virtue theory, moral goodness is analyzed in terms of what is good *for* members of a given species, which in turn is defined in terms of what allows its members to carry out their characteristic life-cycle, which in turn has been shaped by evolutionary factors. On this sort of account, moral knowledge is a kind of practical knowledge of how to achieve one’s species-specific goods. Given this sort of account, it is *guaranteed* that evolution will shape our evaluative judgments in a way that is truth-tracking. For those individuals whose evaluative judgments *fail* to reliably track the truth about what is good for them are thereby selected out.

Second, some non-natural moral realists (Huemer 2006, 2016) argue that moral truths are necessary truths, known via reason. Therefore, the way we know moral truths is the same way we know other necessary truths (e.g., those of mathematics and philosophy). And while there is as of yet no complete account of the mechanics of a priori knowledge (but for defenses see Bonjour 1999; Bengson 2015a, 2015b; Chudnoff 2014; and Huemer 2016), this fact has not led many to deny that we have such knowledge. But if not, then by the same token, it should not lead one to reject moral knowledge.

Other (natural and) non-natural moral realists resist evolutionary debunking arguments in other ways. For example, Erik Wielenberg (2014, 2016) argues that, while evolution did not select for knowledge of moral truths, it selected for something else that *is* adaptive and that *correlates* with moral truths. In particular, he argues that creatures with cognitive capacities like ours thereby have rights. But evolution did not *select* for this knowledge. Rather, it selected for our *cognitive capacities*, which in turn help us survive and reproduce. But creatures with such capacities are thereby able to grasp the concept of rights, and to come to believe that they have them.

Yet others point out that evolutionary arguments do not apply to constructivist accounts of morality. Versions include those articulated by Immanuel Kant (2012 [1785]), Christine Korsgaard (1996a, 1996b), John Rawls (1999), and Timothy Scanlon (1998). According to at least some of these versions, there are constitutive features of rational, autonomous agents from which a set of moral principles is necessarily constructed (by means of, e.g., a deliberative procedure, or the essential features of practical reason, etc.). Furthermore, knowledge of such principles is knowable a priori.

Finally, some take evolutionary debunking arguments to be successful. Those that do can take any number of views about morality, such as moral relativism (Harman 1975; Prinz 2007), moral fictionalism (Nolan, Restall, and West 2004), or some version of non-cognitivism (e.g., Gibbard 2003). On virtually any such view, the atheist need not embrace a set of moral guidelines or attitudes that conflict with commonsense morality. And when this fact is combined with the fact that it is not at all clear that theism can account for a priori or intuitive knowledge of objective moral facts, it is also not at all clear that atheism is any worse off than theism from an epistemic point of view.

Modal Knowledge

Some (e.g., O’Connor 2008) have argued that our knowledge of what is possible and what is necessary is puzzling on naturalism but not on theism. The core of the worry is that if naturalism is true, then it is plausible to think that there is no special faculty of modal intuition that reliably tracks the truth. As mentioned earlier in relation to knowledge of abstract objects generally, such an idea smacks of forethought by an intelligent agent that ensured a pre-established harmony between our modal intuitions and the modal properties of the world. Therefore, if naturalism is true and we have some modal knowledge, then it is most plausibly construed as empirical knowledge. But empirical knowledge tells us only about what is *actually* the case, not what is *possibly* the case, or *necessarily* the case. Therefore, if naturalism is true, then it is prima facie surprising that we have knowledge or justified beliefs about modal facts.

By contrast, such knowledge is not surprising on theism, since God is omniscient, in which case he knows all truths, and therefore all *modal* truths. And since, by hypothesis, he is also omnipotent, then he can create us with a faculty of modal intuition that reliably tracks the truth about modal facts.

There are three main worries with this line of argument. First, an analogue of the Cartesian circle threatens such accounts, at least to the extent to which the case for theism relies on arguments with at least one modal premise. For then the arguments for God’s existence succeed only if one has independent reason to think our modal intuitions or conceivability-possibility inferences are reliable. But one has independent reason to think our modal intuitions or conceivability-possibility inferences are reliable only if the arguments for God succeed.

Second, such an account merely pushes the problem of modal knowledge back a step, as it leaves unexplained how *God* can have knowledge of modal truths. The problem at issue here reduces to God’s relation to abstract objects and is therefore deferred to the second section.

Finally, it is not at all clear that modal knowledge is surprising on naturalism. For there have been a number of independently motivated, naturalistically acceptable accounts of justified conceivability-possibility inference. Standard accounts start with something like a phenomenal conservativist principle, according to which the way things appear or seem provide at least some prima facie evidence for how things are (Huemer 2007). From there, such accounts can infer that if some state of affairs seems or appears possible to one, then that is prima facie evidence that it is possible.

Some such accounts construe such appearances as purely rational or intellectual seemings, and thereby take rational intuition as a guide to possibility (Bealer 2002). Yet others take something like the phenomenal imagery of imagination to ground modal seemings. Stephen Yablo’s (1993) account is representative here. The core idea of his account is that possibility claims are prima facie justified in virtue of imagining possible worlds at which their demodalized counterparts are true. So, for example, the claim that, possibly, a ball is stuck on a roof is justified if I can imagine a world at which “a ball is stuck on a roof” is true.

A more sophisticated account is that of David Chalmers (1999, 2002). Chalmers’s account is similar to Yablo’s in that he views imagination as an independent source of justification for modal beliefs, and that he accepts his two-step method of verifying a possibility claim. Chalmers’s primary innovation lies in his wedding of Yablo’s account with the two-dimensionalist distinction between considering a world as actual and considering a world as counterfactual. To give a rough and brief illustration: Suppose I imagine an XYZ-world—that is, a world at which XYZ is the stuff that plays the role of water. If I consider the imagined world *as actual*, I consider it as a hypothesis about how the actual world could turn out to be for all I know a priori—I suppose that XYZ, and not H<sub>2</sub>0, turns out to be the *actual* occupant of the watery role. Call this *counteractual conceivability*. On Chalmers’s view, the counteractual conceivability of XYZ watery stuff is prima facie evidence for the metaphysical possibility of XYZ watery stuff. Call this *counteractual possibility*.

By contrast, when I consider the imagined XYZ world *as counterfactual*, I hold the actual, H<sub>2</sub>0 world fixed, and imagine (or attempt to imagine) that XYZ is *water*. Call this *counterfactual conceivability*. Of course, XYZ water seems to be counterfactually impossible, but when something *is* counterfactually conceivable, that is evidence that it is a counterfactual possibility.

Chalmers’s account builds on Yablo’s account and supplements it with key elements of two-dimensional semantics. Chalmers’s main motivation for the two-dimensionalist twist on Yablo-style modal epistemology is to handle the problem of a posteriori necessities raised by Saul Kripke and Hilary Putnam. Thus, Chalmers’s diagnosis of the problem of a posteriori necessities is that one is liable to modal error when one illicitly uses counteractual conceivability as a guide to counterfactual possibility, as when one imagines a world with XYZ as the occupant of the watery role and mistakenly takes it as depicting a world with XYZ *water*. And Chalmers’s solution to the problem of a posteriori necessities is to use counteractual conceivability only as a guide to counteractual possibility, and to use counterfactual conceivability only as a guide to counterfactual possibility.

There has been a growing trend, however, toward empiricism in the epistemology of modality, according to which our modal knowledge traces back to our knowledge of the actual world via empirical sources (Fischer and Leon 2016). To start with the most obvious sort of case, a good deal of modal knowledge can be got via deduction from the actual to the possible (*P* is actually the case; whatever is actual is possible; therefore, *p* is possible). Beyond this, a number of naturalistically friendly accounts of modal knowledge have been offered. For example, it has been argued that evolutionary pressures have led to a reliable capacity for counterfactual reasoning, as it enables us to evaluate risks and opportunities, which in turn enhances our ability to survive and reproduce (Nichols 2006; Williamson 2007). It has also been argued (Williamson 2007; Leon 2016) that much modal knowledge can be generated from our folk theories of how the world operates (e.g., ours is a world where objects can be moved around, painted, held, smashed, etc.), which in turn accrue confirmation by virtue of their ability to explain and predict the world around us.

In addition, there are inductive and track-record accounts (Leon 2016): Observed tokens of F are possible, since actual; so, probably n+1is possible as well (Leon 2016). There are also similarity-based accounts, according to which we can justifiably move from the actual to the possible by means of relevant similarity to the actual world: *P* is possible (since actual); *Q* is relevantly similar to *P*; therefore, *Q* is probably possible as well (Hawke 2011; Leon 2016; Roca-Royes 2016). According to yet other accounts, possibilities are justified by virtue of an inference to the best explanation (Fischer 2016, 2017). According to one important version, our best theories are justified via embodying the theoretical virtues (simplicity, scope, fit, predictive power, etc.). Such theories entail that some things are possible. Therefore, such possibilities are justified in this way via abduction.

It might be objected that empiricist accounts cannot explain our knowledge of possibilities that play a central role in paradigm cases of successful thought experiments. It may also be objected that, while such accounts provide a naturalistic explanation of our knowledge of “nearby” possibilities, they cannot account for our knowledge of “far out” possibilities that are remote from ordinary experience.

In response to the first objection, it has been argued that such accounts do, in fact, explain our knowledge of the paradigm cases of successful thought experiments (Gettier cases in the epistemology literature; the trolley problem case in the ethics literature; Locke’s locked room case and Frankfurt’s “Black and Jones” counterexamples in the free will literature; the fake barn case in the epistemology literature; the ship of Theseus case in the personal identity literature; Singer’s Shallow Pond example and Thomson’s violinist example in the practical ethics literature; Kripke’s Gödel/Schmidt case, Perry’s grocery store case, and Burge’s “tharthritis” case in the philosophy of language literature, etc. [Leon 2016]). In response to the second objection, it has been argued that it is a *virtue* of empiricist accounts that they do not explain our knowledge of “far out” possibilities remote from ordinary experience. This is because there are strong reasons to doubt that we have such knowledge. For one thing, knowledge of “far out” possibilities cannot be justified on *any* account of modal epistemology, whether rationalist or empiricist (Fischer and Leon 2016) as is evidenced by the widespread and perennially entrenched disagreement about them (such as those about the possibility of Anselmian beings, personal fission, disembodied souls, philosophical zombies, etc.).

Furthermore, such disagreement is predicted and explained by modal empiricist theories. For if all of our knowledge of possibility traces back to our sources of knowledge of the actual world via deductive, inductive, and abductive inference, then we would *expect* such claims to remain perennially contentious. On the face of it, such sources cannot justify such claims. By contrast, this is surprising on theism. For prima facie, it is mysterious as to why our modal insight should fizzle out at all on the theistic hypothesis. It is also prima facie mysterious, on the theistic hypotheses, why the doxastic and epistemic force of possibility claims would fizzle out at just the point where inferences from actuality fizzle out. Again, not so on the naturalism-friendly versions of modal empiricism discussed presently (Leon 2016). Prima facie, then, it seems that the nature and scope of human modal knowledge is better explained on atheism than on theism.

In conclusion, we have looked at theistic and atheistic explanations of a priori knowledge (or the lack thereof) in a representative sampling of domains: moral, modal, mathematical, logical, and philosophical. In most cases, we have seen that it is deeply problematic to account for such knowledge on theism. We have also seen that, with few exceptions, atheism seems to have an easier time of explaining such knowledge. It is therefore not at all clear that the existence of a priori knowledge is more probable on theism than on atheism.

**Theism, Atheism, and Abstract Objects**

The present section explores whether abstract objects exist, and what evidential bearing their existence might have on the hypotheses of theism and atheism.

What Are Abstract Objects?

There is considerable disagreement about how to characterize abstract objects, and it is not clear that a single account can clearly individuate them from entities in other ontological categories (Balauger 2004). However, in the contemporary discussion surrounding God and abstract objects in philosophy of religion, the focus is on *platonism* with respect to abstract objects as that notion is characterized in the philosophy of mathematics, namely the view that there are timeless, nonspatial, acausal, necessarily existent entities that exist *a se*—that is, they are self-existent (Craig 2016). Candidate examples include properties (redness, roundness, etc.), relations (causes, has more mass than, etc.), propositions (the information content encoded in declarative sentences), possible worlds (ways a world can be or could have been), numbers, sets, and functions.

Abstract objects stand in contrast with concrete objects, which are spatiotemporal entities that can stand in causal relations to other entities. Examples include particular substances or individuals (water molecules, rocks, trees, persons, quantum fields, etc.), events (e.g., sliding into third base), and tropes (property-instances). An important exception for our purposes is of course God, who is taken to be a *nonspatiotemporal* concrete particular object that can stand in causal relations to other things, including spatiotemporal entities.

Knowledge of Abstract Objects

Given the account of abstract objects sketched above, it is natural to suppose that proponents of platonism might have a hard time explaining our knowledge of abstract objects. For given the peculiar transcendent, acausal, immaterial nature of abstract objects, it is at least initially puzzling how one might have knowledge of them.

Two main sorts of accounts of knowledge of abstract objects have standardly been given. According to the first, which is the more traditional account, abstract objects are knowable immediately and directly by the mind via acts of rational intuition, whereby the abstract objects themselves are directly “grasped,” or apprehended, by the intellect. This sort of view is called *intuitionism*.

One might find intuitionism mysterious: how can one be in direct contact with an object that is by its very nature non-spatiotemporal and acausal? This concern is at the root of perhaps the most important objection to platonism about abstract objects, argued forcefully by Paul Benacerraf (1973) and discussed in the first section. Recall from that section that the argument runs as follows: Knowledge requires standing in causal relations with the thing known. But this is impossible with respect to abstract objects, which are by definition nonspatiotemporal and acausal; therefore, if the entities in some domain are abstract, we cannot have knowledge of them.

Intuitionists respond to Benacerraf’s objection in a number of ways. The most direct sort of response requires giving an account of how intuition of abstract objects is possible. One account of this sort (Chudnoff 2014; Bengson 2015a) offers a *noncausal* account of rational intuition. According to this sort of account, there is a certain type of noncausal relation—*constitution*—that is epistemically relevant to our cognition of abstract objects. In particular, abstract objects can at least partly constitute our thoughts, and knowledge of abstract objects can thereby be explained in terms of such a relation.

Others offer an indirect response to Benacerraf’s objection. We saw some standard replies in the first section. However, many Platonists are suspicious or skeptical of intuitionism. This leads us to the second, and perhaps most popular, account of our knowledge of abstract objects. According to this sort of account, knowledge of abstract objects is a kind of theoretical knowledge (Plantinga 1993b). In particular, abstract objects are theoretical posits that earn their keep in our theories by virtue of best explaining a range of data. So, for example, perhaps the positing of properties as universals (i.e., entities that can exist in more than one place at the same time) best explains the phenomena of resemblance, predication, and abstract reference (Moreland 2001; Loux and Crisp 2017). Or perhaps the positing of abstract numbers best explains the metaphysical necessity of mathematical truths and the infinity of numbers. Relatedly, yet others argue that certain sorts of abstract objects, such as numbers or sets, are indispensable for our well-confirmed scientific theories, and are posited on that basis (Quine 1949). (More on this in the next part of this section.)

Finally, some argue that while we cannot stand in causal relations with abstract objects, we can stand in causal relations with their concrete tokens or property-instances, and that this provides the epistemic anchor for knowledge of abstract objects (Bonjour 1999; Moreland 2001; Loux and Crisp 2017).

Arguments for Abstract Objects

Historically, the central argument for the existence of abstract objects has been the *one-over-many argument* (Moreland 2001; Balauger 2004; Craig 2016; Loux and Crisp 2017). This sort of argument is typically used to justify belief with respect to a particular kind of abstract object, namely, universals (i.e., entities that are repeatable or can have more than one instance at the same time). The argument can be stated as follows: It is a datum of ordinary experience that two or more objects seem to be the same in some respect. For example, two cars fresh off the assembly line are the same shade of red. What explains this? The Platonist about universals answers that the best explanation of this phenomenon is that there is a *single* entity—namely, the property *redness*—that is instantiated in or exemplified by the two cars at the same time.

Although historically the one-over-many argument has been at the center of the debate about abstract objects, perhaps the most popular contemporary argument for abstract objects is Quine’s (1948) indispensability argument (Balauger 2004; Craig 2016). Given its centrality in contemporary discussions of abstract objects, it warrants more elaboration than the one-over-many argument.

According to this sort of argument, the statements we accept commit us to the existence of the objects to which they refer or over which they quantify (Quine 1948). Typically, first-order logic is used as a device to lay bare the underlying structure of the statements we assert, and to thereby reveal our ontological commitments. For example, consider the statement, “Savannah is a philosopher.” In first-order predicate logic, we may express this statement as follows:

 Ps

where *P* symbolizes the predicate “is a philosopher,” and *s* is a singular term that denotes the individual, Savannah. If the sentence is to be taken in a literal sense, then if it is true, its components must genuinely refer to the things they aim to pick out. But if so, then two things must be the case: (i) Savannah must really exist, and (ii) the predicate “is a philosopher” must correctly apply to her. So unless one has good reason to think that either (a) the sentence is false, (b) it is more plausibly given a nonliteral, figurative gloss, or (c) one can replace the sentence with a paraphrase that has different referents, one is ontologically committed to the existence of Savannah, and of her being a philosopher.

Similarly, this holds for statements involving existential quantifiers (i.e., expressions used to assert that some entity or entities exist, such as “some,” “there is,” and “there exists”). For example, consider the statement, “A red ball exists.” We can expose the logical structure of the sentence in terms of first-order logic, as follows:

 ∃x(x is a ball & x is red)

In English, the formalized statement says that *there exists* at least one entity *x*, such that *x* is a ball and *x* is red. If the sentence is to be taken in a literal sense, then if the sentence is true, its components must all genuinely refer. But if so, then at least two things must be the case: (i) there must be an object in the domain over which the statement quantifies—in this case, a ball, and (ii) the predicate “is red” must genuinely apply to it. But if so, then the object in the domain must really *exist*. So unless one has good reason to think that the sentence is more plausibly given a nonliteral, figurative gloss, or unless one can replace the sentence with a paraphrase that has different referents, one is thereby ontologically committed to the existence of the ball.

Given this sketch of how the statements we accept carry ontological commitments, consider some statements that are relevant to our topic:

Two is an even number,

There is a number between 8 and 10.

Orange resembles red more than it resembles blue.

We can express statements (1)–(3) in first-order logic to clarify what is required for their literal truth:

1’. Et

 2’. ∃x(x is a number & x is between 8 and 10)

 3’. Rorb

(1’) and (3’) are statements involving singular terms. As such, their literal truth requires that they have genuine referents that really exist. But the referent of *t* in (1’) is the number 2 (not the numeral 2, but the entity to which that numeral refers), and the referents of *o*, *r*, and *b* in (3’) are apparently universals—namely, redness, orangeness, and blueness. By contrast, (2’) is an existentially quantified statement. Therefore, the literal truth of (2’) requires that there really exists an object in the domain at issue—that is, a number—such that it is between 8 and 10, namely, the number 9. But where is the number 9? It certainly does not seem to be a concrete physical object. Rather, it seems to be an abstract object. Furthermore, it is hard to deny that (1’)–(3’) are true statements. Therefore, unless we can offer adequate paraphrases of (1’)–(3’) that do not make reference to these entities, it seems that they likewise commit us to saying that abstract objects exist (viz., the numbers and the color universals they refer to).

Mark Balauger (2004) helpfully standardizes the indispensability argument as follows:

1. If a simple sentence (i.e., a sentence of the form “*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.

Responses to Arguments for Abstract Objects

Given the arguments for abstract objects sketched above, how might one respond? Of course, one response is to accept the arguments’ premises, and thereby to accept the existence of abstract objects. As we have seen, this view is known as platonism. On this view, one accepts the existence of abstract objects. However, many philosophers are reluctant to accept such entities. Such philosophers therefore tend to accept one of the views sketched below instead.

Another response is to embrace some version of nominalism about abstract objects. According to views of this sort, there are no abstract objects. Rather, there are only concrete objects. Nominalists account for the data appealed to in arguments for platonism in a variety of ways. (To simplify, let us focus on nominalism about universals.) *Predicate nominalists* try to account for the data of one-over-many arguments by saying that (e.g.) there is no universal—*redness—*that many particular objects have. Rather, there are just particular red things, and we apply the predicate “red” to all of them. Similarly, *concept nominalists* (or *conceptualists*) say that there are only particular red things, and that to say that each among a plurality of things is red is just to say thateach one falls under our concept of redness. Others—*class nominalists*—say that redness is to be identified with the class of all and only red things. Yet others—*resemblance nominalists—*say that something is red just in case it resembles the red things. Finally, *trope nominalists* take tropes (i.e., concrete, particular property-instances, such as a particular red patch on the surface of a billiard ball) to be fundamental constituents of concrete reality, in addition to ordinary physical objects. According to trope nominalists, redness is to be identified with the plurality or class of red tropes.

With a version of nominalism in hand, one might aim to rationally resist platonism by using it as the basis for a response to one-over-many and indispensability arguments. In response to the former, one might argue that a particular nominalist theory of (say) universals explains the data of (e.g.) resemblance at least as well as platonism. And in response to the latter, one might resist premise 2 of the indispensability argument by offering nominalistic paraphrases of statements that seem to commit one to (say) platonism about universals.

A third sort of response is to embrace some version of *fictionalism* about abstract objects. According to views of this sort, there are no abstract objects. As such, all statements that seem to be referring to abstract objects are literally false. However, we *pretend* or speak *as if* such entities exist because of their ability to enhance the representational power of our language (e.g., to help us express rich and complex truths about the world simply and efficiently).

Problems Abstract Objects Pose for Theism

Abstract objects raise at least five problems for classical theism. The first four are traditional, and are associated with the so-called *aseity-sovereignty doctrine* (AD):

(AD) God does not depend on anything distinct from himself for his existence, and everything distinct from God depends on God’s creative activity for its existence (Plantinga 1980; Gould 2014; Craig 2016)

By contrast, the fifth has only recently received focus in the literature (but see Plantinga 2007). It will therefore be discussed last.

The first problem abstract objects pose for classical theism stems from their aseity (Plantinga 1980; Morris and Menzel 1986; Davidson 1999, 2013; Gould 2014; Craig 2016). According to classical theism, part of God’s greatness consists in his uniquely enjoying a superior mode of being: metaphysically necessary, ontologically independent existence. All other entities are created beings, or *creatures*, and thereby have an inferior mode of being: metaphysically contingent, ontologically dependent existence. Furthermore, prima facie, the chain of ontological dependence cannot be infinite. Therefore, God is the Supreme Being on which all other entities depend for their existence. But if abstract objects exist, then God is not uniquely supreme in these respects. For as we have seen, abstract objects likewise enjoy his mode of being. But if so, then God is just one metaphysically necessary self-existent being among an infinite sea of such beings.

Things are of course worse if God is a *contingent* being—that is, a being that exists in some possible worlds, including the actual world, but not others, as (for example) Richard Swinburne (2004, 2016) has argued. For then the mode of God’s being is inferior to that of abstract objects: while abstract objects exist in all possible worlds, God does not. In either case, God’s greatness is diminished by the existence of abstract objects.

The second problem pertains to the threat abstract objects pose for God’s sovereignty (Plantinga 1980; Morris and Menzel 1986; Davidson 1999, 2013; Gould 2014; Craig 2016). For if classical theism is true, then God created and sustains all things apart from himself. But at least very many abstract objects are entities that are distinct from God that God cannot (and therefore did not) create. This is because abstract objects are self-existent, necessarily existent, uncaused beings. As such, God cannot be their creator or sustainer of their existence. Nor can he alter their natures, as they have their properties essentially. But these facts are incompatible with God’s sovereignty. Their existence thus seems to be incompatible with a core thesis of classical theism.

The third problem is perhaps more worrisome than the last. The idea is that, if the god of classical theism exists, then he is, at a minimum, all-knowing, all-powerful, and morally perfect. But these appear to be his *properties*—indeed, they appear to be some of the core properties that constitute God’s *nature* or *essence*. But if properties are necessarily existent abstract objects that cannot be created, then God’s existence and nature are ontologically posterior to, and dependent on, the existence of abstract objects (Morris and Menzel 1986; Craig 2016).

This point can be clarified further by means of the larger ontological frameworks standardly associated with platonism. On platonism, properties are among the basic elements of being, out of which other things are “built” or constituted. Platonic accounts of properties are usually tied to either relational ontologies or constituent ontologies of concrete objects. According to Platonic relational ontologies, a concrete object is a bare particular or a substratum that stands in a primitive relation of exemplification to its properties. By contrast, on Platonic constituent ontologies, concrete objects are bundles of properties standing in relations of constitution or fusion. On either sort of account, it is natural to suppose that God is, in a worrisome sense, a dependent being: he is ontologically dependent on more fundamental constituents out of which he is composed. But this seems to conflict with God’s sovereignty and aseity (Craig 2016).

The fourth problem relates to the third and pertains to the doctrine of divine simplicity—that is, the doctrine that God is not a composite being in terms of parts and metaphysical structure. As we saw above, God appears to have “metaphysical parts.” But if God is a simple entity, then he has no parts. Therefore, since the doctrine of divine simplicity has traditionally been taken to be a central doctrine of classical theism, abstract objects seem to pose a formidable problem for the view (Plantinga 1980; Davidson 2015; Craig 2016).

The fifth problem abstract objects pose for classical theism does not have any obvious connection to the aseity-sovereignty doctrine. It is the problem of explaining how God can have knowledge of abstract objects. To see the problem, recall the Benacerraf argument that abstract objects pose for *human* knowledge of abstract objects: Prima facie, knowledge requires causal contact with the thing known. But causal contact is impossible with respect to abstract objects. Therefore, if abstract objects exist, then we cannot have knowledge of them. The same problem seems to arise for *God’s* knowledge of abstract objects. For if abstract objects are mind-independent and acausal, then God cannot interact with them in the way required for knowledge any more than we can. platonism about abstract objects therefore poses a serious problem for God’s omniscience (Plantinga 2007; Baras 2017).

Theistic Responses

The five problems sketched above appear to pose formidable problems for theism. In response, theists have proposed a number of solutions to the problem of God and abstract objects. Of these, four views have gained a significant number of adherents: platonism, theistic activism, theistic conceptualism, and theistic nominalism.

The first sort of theistic response is *theistic platonism* (Plantinga 1980; Yandell 2014). According to this response, abstract objects exist, and they do so independently of God and his causal activity. Theists who accept this sort of view typically respond to the problems discussed earlier in one or more of the following ways. First, they argue that such a stance is unproblematic from the standpoint of revealed theology, on the grounds that sacred scripture or tradition does not clearly teach that abstract objects (if they exist) were created by God (Yandell 2014). Second, they argue that theistic platonism is unproblematic from the standpoint of philosophical theology. For abstract objects exist and have their natures of necessity, and it is impossible to create or alter an item that exists and has its nature of necessity. But since omnipotence only ranges over possible states of affairs, it is no strike against God’s omnipotence or greatness that he cannot create abstract objects.

Despite theistic platonism’s attractions for the theist who accepts abstract objects, a number of problems have been raised for the view. First, as we have seen, it requires denying AD, which requires rejecting perfect-being theology (Craig 2016). Many theistic Platonists are willing to accept this requirement. Because of this, they are also often willing to abandon the doctrine of divine simplicity, and willing to abandon God’s modal supremacy.

However, a second problem is more worrisome for theists who accept the authority of sacred scripture. For it is widely acknowledged among biblical scholars and theologians that the biblical writers and ancient church authorities embraced Middle platonism, according to which putative abstract objects are ideas and thoughts in the mind of God (Craig 2016). Given this, it is not clear that theistic platonism is consistent with revealed theology.

Third, while the theistic Platonist who rejects perfect-being theology may find several of the problems abstract objects pose for theism easy to shrug off, the problem of God’s ontological dependence on abstract objects is not shrugged off so easily. For then God is ontologically posterior to and dependent on the existence and ontological structure of modal space. But if that is right, then again, God is, in a worrisome sense, a dependent being.

Another standard view is *theistic activism* (Menzel and Morris 1986). According to this, abstract objects are real. However, they are causally or ontologically dependent on either God’s nature or God’s will.

Most theists reject straight theistic activism for at least two reasons. First, some argue that it is prima facie incompatible with the classical view of creation (Craig 2016). The root of the problem lies with the eternality and necessary existence of abstract objects: in order for God to explain their eternality and necessity, one must posit that God causes them of necessity, whether timelessly or everlastingly. But then this conflicts with the standard theistic account of divine creative acts. For according to that account, (i) created entities have a temporal beginning, coinciding with the moment of their creation by God, and (ii) God’s creative acts are supposed to be acts of free will, in the libertarian sense that free will requires the ability to do otherwise (Craig 2016). But if so, then we have a dilemma: either one sticks with the classical view of creation or one revises it so as to allow creation to be compatible with a denial of (i) and (ii).

Consider each option in turn. If one sticks with the classical view of creation, then God does not create the vast majority of objects distinct from God; comparatively speaking, God is responsible for creating a tiny portion of the things that exist. Rather, most things—the infinite platonic horde of abstract objects—are merely *ontologically dependent* on God, and not *created* by him (Craig 2016).

On the other hand, suppose one revises the classical view of creation so that eternal and nonfree divine acts can count as acts of divine creation. Then most of what God creates is involuntary, in that it is not “up to” God to create them. But this amounts to an abandonment of divine creation of abstract objects for a kind of theistic emanationism (Craig 2016).

The most serious objection to theistic activism is the *bootstrapping problem* (Davidson 1999, 2013; Bergmann and Brower 2006; Craig 2016). The core of the problem is that at least some abstract objects must exist and be exemplified by God before God can create them, which is metaphysically impossible. To illustrate the worry, suppose it is possible for God to create properties, a kind of abstract object. Now suppose that God is setting out to create them. In order to carry out his plan, God must *first* have the power to create properties. But then in order for God to *create* properties, God must already *have* at least one property, namely, *having the power to create properties*. Therefore, God must already have some properties before he can create them, which is impossible. Therefore, since the assumption that God can create all properties logically entails an impossibility, that assumption must be false—in other words, it is impossible for God to create all properties.

Primarily because of the bootstrapping problem, most theists reject theistic activism. However, some theists hold on to the view and modify it in ways so that it avoids the bootstrapping problem. According to this sort of view—*modified theistic activism* (Gould and Davis 2014)—God does not cause or create the properties within his nature. Rather, he only causes or creates abstract objects, so to speak, outside the borders of his being. But what about the status of things inside the borders? There are two obvious options for the modified theistic activist at this point: (i) adopt a Platonic construal of God’s nature, so that he has a real nature or essence composed of real yet uncaused properties, or (ii) adopt a nominalist or fictionalist construal of God’s nature, so that he lacks such properties.

Option (i) has been subject to at least five criticisms. First, adopting the view comes at the expense of rejecting the AD doctrine, which imperils classical theism (Craig 2016). Second, modifying theistic activism in this way comes at the cost of making the view seem unmotivated: if some properties exist uncreated and independent of God’s causal activity, why not the rest (Davidson 2015; Craig 2016)? Third, the view entails that God is ontologically dependent on his independently existing divine nature, in which case God is, in a significant sense, a dependent being, in which case he does not exist *a se* (Craig 2016). Fourth, it seems that on such a view, *any* being who should exemplify the divine nature would thereby be God, which diminishes God’s uniqueness and supremacy (Leftow 2012). Finally, the view looks to be incoherent. For one constituent of the independently existing divine nature—that is, *deity*—is the property *aseity—*that is, self-existence. But then in order to exemplify *deity*, God must exemplify *aseity*. But then God’s aseity depends on his exemplifying the property *aseity*. And if his aseity *depends* on exemplifying a property, then he does *not* exist *a se*. This is incoherent, as it says that God’s aseity ontologically depends on his exemplifying aseity, and no entity that is dependent on another can be one that has aseity (Craig 2016).

Some theists who adopt option (i) aim to avoid the problems by conjoining it with the doctrine of *divine simplicity*. According to this doctrine, God is absolutely simple: he is identical to his properties, which in turn are identical to each other. He is therefore not dependent on his ontologically prior constituents. There are a number of versions of the doctrine. However, the standard criticism of virtually all of them is that the doctrine entails an incoherent or absurd view of God. For example, if God is identical with his properties, and properties are abstract objects, then God is an abstract object, which is absurd (Plantinga 1980; Davidson 2015; Craig 2016).

Given the problems besetting option (i), a theist with activist leanings might thus look to option (ii). This sort of view has the obvious benefit of dissolving the bootstrapping problem. It also seems to avoid most of the problems of option (i). However, the benefits come at the high cost of making theistic activism look unmotivated. For if one being (i.e., God) can exist without exemplifying Platonic properties, it is no longer clear why any being cannot exist without them (Davidson 2015; Craig 2016).

Historically, the most widely accepted response is *theistic conceptualism*. According to this view, abstract objects are identified with items in the mind of God. On standard accounts, properties are divine concepts, propositions are divine thoughts, possible worlds are maximal consistent sets of divine thoughts, and sets are divine collections (Plantinga 1980, 1993b, 2007; Welty 2014). In this way, theistic conceptualists aim to account for God as the creator or cause or ground of abstract objects.

Despite its historical and contemporary popularity among theists, several criticisms have been leveled against it. First, if God causes his thoughts, then the bootstrapping problem we saw in our discussion of theistic activism arises all over again for theistic conceptualism. For on the latter view, properties are divine thoughts. But if so, then for God to have the property *being able to create*, he must first produce the corresponding concept. But before he can produce the corresponding concept, he must first have the property *being able to create*. Therefore, in order for God to create properties, he must already have some (Davidson 1999; Craig 2016).

As with theistic activists, it is up to conceptualists to respond to the bootstrapping problem with a modified version of their view, according to which God’s nature is given a Platonistic or nominalistic construal. But then the same sorts of worries that arose for that view would seem to arise with the present view (Craig 2016).

Second, theistic conceptualism seems to unduly restrict God’s freedom. For in order to explain the objectivity, necessity, and infinity of abstract objects, theistic conceptualism entails that God *must* think all of his thoughts (and just *those* thoughts) and must think them constantly (Oppy 2014; Craig 2016).

Third, God’s thoughts are mental states, and, as such, are concrete particular objects, not universals. If so, then they cannot be repeatable or multiply exemplifiable entities. But many abstract objects, such as properties and propositions, are repeatable entities. If so, then prima facie, God’s mental states are unsuited to play the role assigned to them by theistic conceptualism (Gould and Davis 2014; Craig 2016).

Fourth, theistic conceptualism seems to imply that God has ungodly thoughts. For if all propositions are divine thoughts, and there are propositions about things that are prima facie beneath the greatness and moral perfection of God—silly things, evil things, trivial things, naughty things, and so on—it follows that God has thoughts about things that are beneath him. Indeed, he must think about them, constantly (Oppy 2014). This seems problematic, given God’s greatness and moral perfection.

Finally, there are worries about the content and granularity of God’s thoughts. For if God’s thoughts are inherently intentional or representational, as the theistic conceptualist insists, it is not clear what his thoughts could be *about* with respect to merely possible entities. Some theistic conceptualists (Welty 2006; Leftow 2012) say that his thoughts are about his power to create. However, as has been pointed out (Adams 2013; Oppy 2014), it is not clear that thoughts about God’s power alone are sufficiently fine-grained to be individuating, qualitatively identical entities.

The fourth and final view theists take in response to the problem of abstract objects is *theistic nominalism*. According to this sort of view, there are no abstract objects. Rather, there are only particular, nonrepeatable, concrete entities. According to this view, then, God is a concrete object, and he is a person who is all-knowing, all-powerful, and perfectly good. However, God is not this way in virtue of exemplifying ontologically prior abstract objects (such as universals or individual essences) on which God ontologically depends. For according to theistic nominalism, there are no such entities (Craig 2016).

Unlike those who accept one of the other responses, the theistic nominalist denies that there are abstract objects. As such, they alone have the burden of criticizing the one-over-many argument and the indispensability argument. Against the one-over-many argument, nominalists naturally take some version of nominalism about universals (e.g., resemblance nominalism, trope nominalism) to be at least as good an explanation of resemblance as platonism.

Against the indispensability argument, theistic nominalists have leveled criticisms against both premises. Since William Lane Craig is the theistic nominalist who has provided the most sustained and systematic critique of the argument to date, his key points feature heavily in what follows.

Against the first premise, Craig argues that there are a number of ways to resist the claim that our language commits us to the existence of its referents. For example, neutral logicians propose a quantifier *P* (= “for some”) that is not ontologically committing, and which can be used in the place of the existentially committing “∃” (Craig 2016). Jody Azzouni argues that not even the ordinary existential quantifier is ontologically committing (Craig 2016). Furthermore, in the place of the seemingly ontologically committing objectual semantics for quantification, which are presupposed in premise 1 of the indispensability argument (where the truth of a statement requires objects in a domain to which its terms refer or over which they quantify), one can instead appeal to substitutional semantics (where the truth of a statement does not require a domain of objects). On the latter approach, the truth of an existentially quantified statement requires only that at least one term can be substituted for the variable that yields a true statement.

There are also logical systems that do not require ontological commitments for singular terms. So, for example, according to free logic, all singular terms in one’s statements have a referent, even if the referent is not a real object. To get this result, free logics appeal to a dual-domain semantics. In the first domain are ordinary objects to which singular terms typically refer. In the second domain are fictional objects of pretense. Given this account, statements can be true even if they fail to refer to real objects.

Theistic nominalists likewise have a range of options for rejecting premise 2 of the indispensability argument (Craig 2016). However, all such options involve an appeal to fictionalism (broadly construed) about abstract objects. For example, they might appeal to a standard fictionalist account according to which statements referring to abstract objects are useful fictions that are, strictly speaking, false. By contrast, they might appeal to a figuralist account, according to which such statements are true when taken as figures of speech (e.g., “He was born with a silver spoon in his mouth”), but not true when taken literally. Finally, they might appeal to pretense theory, according to which talk of abstract objects is a form of pretending or make-believe, and therefore does not obviously require ontological commitments to their referents.

The core criticism of the nominalist response is that it cannot explain the data of abstract objects better than the hypothesis of platonism. With respect to the one-over-many argument, many contend that nominalist accounts are implausible or otherwise inadequate. For example, some argue that “ostrich” nominalism, which asserts that there are many particular red things but denies a universal—redness—that they all share, implausibly leaves unaccounted for a fact that cries out for explanation (Armstrong 1980). Others argue that resemblance nominalism, which is perhaps the most popular and sophisticated version of nominalism to date, lacks the explanatory scope of Platonist theories. For example, they have trouble accounting for distinctions between necessarily coextensive properties, such as triangularity versus trilaterality (Allen 2016, 2018).

More sophisticated versions of nominalism have been developed and defended that aim to account for such worries, but such accounts often come at the expense of massively bloating one’s ontology and adding doctrines that seem no less counterintuitive than platonism’s doctrine of multiple instantiation. For example, Gonzalo Rodriguez-Pereyra’s (2002) sophisticated version of resemblance nominalism aims to handle the problem of necessarily coextensive properties. However, the solution requires accepting modal realism, according to which there is an infinite number of in-principle unobservable concrete possible worlds that are just as real as the actual world. It also requires accepting counterpart theory, according to which no individual can exist in more than one possible world.

Abstract Objects as a Problem for Atheism?

Atheism is just the view that there is no person such as God. As such, there is no explicit entailment from atheism to a denial of abstract objects. On the face of it, then, it is not clear how abstract objects even *could* pose a problem for atheism.

Sometimes atheism is conflated with *materialism*—the view that only material entities exist—and that is of course incompatible with the view that there are abstract objects as we have characterized them. However, atheism does not entail materialism. For example, one can consistently accept both atheism and Russellian monism (the view that the fundamental stuff of concrete reality has both physical and protophenomenal properties). Such a person would be an atheist who is not a materialist. Similarly, one can consistently accept both atheism and platonism, and thereby be an atheist who is not a materialist.

Perhaps, though, one will argue that the most plausible forms of atheism entail materialism, which in turn entails a denial of abstract objects and protophenomenal properties at the foundations of reality. However, it is not clear how such reasoning might go. Perhaps one might argue that if Russellian monism is true, atheism cannot account for how protophenomenal properties arose from the physical; nor can they explain why abstract objects exist at all, if abstract objects exist.

But these concerns are confused. As to the first: On Russellian monism, the protophenomenal properties are not derivative entities that arose from physical stuff and its properties. Rather, protophenomenal properties are as fundamental as physical properties, and so did not arise or emerge from the latter. And as to the second: As we have seen, according to standard Platonic accounts of abstract objects, they are uncaused, eternal, necessary beings that exist *a se*. As such, they need no explanation for their existence any more than God needs such an explanation (if he should turn out to exist). But it is epistemically possible that a form of atheism that entails both platonism and Russellian monism turns out to be the best explanation of all the relevant data across the board. It is therefore not clear that the most plausible versions of atheism entail materialism.

In conclusion, we looked at some of the main lines of evidence for the existence of abstract objects. We also looked at some of the main ways in which both theism and atheism can account for such evidence. From our discussion, we saw that, at the very least, theism does not provide a better explanation of such data than atheism.

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