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Do Divine Conceptualist Accounts Fail?

A Response to Chapter 5 of *God over All*

Greg Welty

Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary

**Abstract**: William Lane Craig’s *God Over All* argues against the kind of ‘divine conceptualism’ about abstract objects which I defend. In this conference presentation I note several points of agreement with and appreciation for Craig’s important work. I then turn to five points of critique and response pertaining to: the sovereignty-aseity intuition, the reality of false propositions, God’s having ‘inappropriate’ thoughts, propositions being purely private and incommunicable, and a consistent view of God’s own ontological commitments. I conclude by summarizing our two key differences, indicating that we may have much more in common than first appears (both theologically and metaphysically).

William Lane Craig’s book *God Over All* addresses the *prima facie* conflict between divine aseity (defended in chapter 2) and the existence of Platonistic abstract objects (described in chapter 3).[[1]](#footnote-1) Chapters 4 and 5 then critique two ways theism might be further developed as a way of reconciling divine aseity and Platonic realism: ‘absolute creation’ in chapter 4 (God creates abstract objects, so that they causally depend on him), and ‘divine conceptualism’ in chapter 5 (God’s thoughts just are the abstract objects, so that they constitutively depend upon him). The second half of the book (chapters 6 through 10) defends William Lane Craig’s favored way of reconciling divine aseity with Platonic realism: deny Platonic realism by defeating the ‘indispensability argument’ in its favor. In this way theists can deflate the Platonist challenge rather than accept it. According to chapters 6 and 7, maybe there are true claims that seem to refer to abstract objects but don’t commit us to abstract objects. Or, alternatively, according to chapters 8 through 10, maybe these claims would ontologically commit us to abstract objects if they were true, but we have little reason to think they are true. Either way, there are no true claims which ontologically commit us to abstract objects, and so divine aseity is untroubled by these non-existent objects. This is Craig’s main conclusion.

As far as I can tell, the views of the participants in this ‘author meets critics’ session can be helpfully contrasted by way of an inconsistent triad:

* *Realism*: the Platonist arguments for abstract objects are good arguments.
* *Threat*: abstract objects existing independent of God would challenge divine aseity.
* *Theistic Accounts Fail*: abstract objects can’t depend on God.

Professor Craig rejects *Realism*, Professor Peter van Inwagen rejects *Threat*, and I reject *Theistic Accounts Fail* (by, of course, endorsing a theistic account).

Craig’s chapter 5 on “Divine Conceptualism” is his 24-page interaction with my unpublished Oxford doctoral dissertation, and with my re-presentation of that material in the six-author symposium on God and abstract objects published by Bloomsbury Academic.[[2]](#footnote-2) For obvious reasons my reply will focus on this part of the book. But I’d like to preface my response by highlighting important points of agreement that I share with Craig, including ways he has helped me to think about these issues more clearly.

**Points of Agreement and Appreciation**

***Craig’s insistence on the distinction between Platonist and anti-Platonist realisms brings much-needed clarity to this debate.***

In chapter 1 “Introduction” Craig helpfully distinguishes Platonism from anti-Platonism, and then distinguishes these in turn from realism and anti-realism. Thus, there can be both Platonist and anti-Platonist realisms: for some realists, the objects in question are abstract, and for other realists they’re concrete, but for both camps there aresuch objects. Thus, Platonist realism and anti-Platonist realism are alternatives to anti-realism. Initially, I strongly resisted this terminology, and even considered it an abuse of well-worn historical categories that are not open to Craig to revise. (If you’re an anti-Platonist then you’re both a nominalist andan anti-realist, and there’s an end on it! Don’t nominalists deny that universals *exist*?!) But after reflection spurred by Craig’s careful discussion, I now think that ‘anti-Platonist realist’ is a useful way to express my own views, and I thank Craig for consistently using these terms in a way that brings clarity rather than confusion. I now see that my use of ‘realism’ in the dissertation was ambiguous between ‘objects of some kind exist’ (e.g. set-theoretic nominalism, linguistic nominalism, conceptualism, theistic conceptual realism) and ‘Platonic realism about these objects’. Craig is correct that “the nominalisms of which Welty speaks are, in fact, realist views” (77 fn. 12).[[3]](#footnote-3)

***Craig’s ‘bootstrapping objection,’ though directed to absolute creationists, also creates a challenge for theistic conceptualists like me.***

According to the ‘bootstrapping’ objection to absolute creation, the problem is that before God can create all properties, he must have some properties of his own (65). But then these uncreated divine properties, at least on the Platonic conception, exist *a se* and are exemplified by God, which involves advocates of absolute creation in a twofold compromise of divine aseity: “things other than God exist *a se*” (i.e., his properties), and “God does not exist *a se*” (since he is “actually dependent upon His independently existing nature for His existence as God”) (67). To avoid this, absolute creationists must say that God creates even his own properties.

I sheepishly concede that the only reason *I* avoid a similar bootstrapping objection—one directed against divine conceptualism—is that I refrain from even offering a theory of properties! Perhaps surprisingly, the scope of my project involves identifying only propositions and possible worlds with divine thoughts, while leaving out a theory of properties. This is because I think the latter are quite different from the former. Propositions and possible worlds, like thoughts, seem to be obviously intentional entities possessing aboutness, representational capacities, and—in the case of propositions—alethicity and doxasticity. Properties possess none of these, and so in my view they are unfit to be constituted by divine thoughts. Since my whole case for conceptualism rested upon the close match between the relevant conditions on propositions and possible worlds, and the fine-grained intentionality of thoughts, thoughts seem ill-suited to play the role of properties (*contra* Edward Feser’s adaptation of my views to universals.[[4]](#footnote-4))

*Could* theistic conceptualists like me move forward here in this matter of properties, while avoiding the bootstrapping objection, fruitfully spurred on by Craig’s critique of absolute creation? Two things would need to be done. *First, the conceptualist must offer a principled reason for abandoning “the Platonistic assay of things” when speaking of the nature of the Creator, but then insisting on this same Platonism when speaking of the nature of created things.* To avoid any arbitrariness, theistic conceptualists about properties must not only acknowledge the Creator/creature distinction but incorporate it as a central *motivation* for the realist side of their theory. That is, an anti-realist assay of *divine* things entails a Platonist assay of *created* things. There would have to be something distinctive about creatures that requires that abstract objects such as propositions, possible worlds, and even properties must be available for *them* to refer to, quantify over, and even instantiate (as the case may be), even if *God* has no need of such things. These features of his thoughts are for our benefit, as it were, not his. Could it be that divine aseity itself is what motivates the distinctively Platonist assay of creatures?

*Second, theistic conceptualists such as myself would have to say more about how divine ideas could play the role of properties after all, at least for creatures*. Objects are typically said to have their powers in virtue of the properties they have. That is, properties are causally relevant; they make a difference between what an object can and cannot do. Imagine I put a weird, alien artifact on the table before you. You have no idea what it is. You have no concept of its internal structure, etc. Yet despite your ignorance, clearly it will have various causal powers, and that’s because the causal powers it has are independent of what you think of it. Now let’s say *God* has a perfect concept of this alien artifact, internally and externally. Would the object have its causal powers in virtue of God’s concept of it? That sounds very strange indeed, but that is the story that might have to be told, if properties are going to be divine concepts: how can we relate the powers of a thing to God’s idea of the thing? How would an idea confer powers? If all we’re talking about is intentionality, then it seems clear there’s hope for propositions to be divine thoughts. Propositions have intentionality, but don’t have powers. But once we bring in properties and therefore powers, it’s not as clear that concepts can be the things that confer or explain powers, and therefore properties. If all concepts have to offer, metaphysically speaking, is intentionality, then can they play the role of properties?

Perhaps there are interesting routes to take here. Developing Berkeleyan idealism might be relevant in connecting divine ideas with creaturely powers and therefore properties. Alternatively, perhaps by leaving behind the relevance of the divine thoughts altogether, and instead emphasizing the reality of divine powers, one could provide a theistic theory of properties, though to do so successfully might push one in the direction of some form of occasionalism. Or perhaps some combination of divine powers and ideas working in tandem, as Aquinas seems to suggest in his doctrine of exemplar causality, is the most fruitful way forward, since on a theistic doctrine of creation it is not possible for anyconcrete object distinct from God to exist, except as the realization of a divine idea by way of divine power.[[5]](#footnote-5) Clearly, more work needs to be done by theistic conceptualists to meet the challenge of showing how anti-realism at the divine level does not preclude and may even require the need for realism at the creaturely level, so that we can finally give the bootstrapping objection the boot.

**Points of Critique and Response**

Turning to Craig’s specific criticisms of my view in chapter 5, he agrees these aren’t “knock-down objections to conceptualism” (94). Indeed, when all is said and done, he continues to “think that conceptualism remains one option for the theist wrestling with the challenge posed by abstract objects to divine aseity” (94). Nevertheless, Craig thinks his worries about my view are strong enough that they “should motivate the theist to look seriously at the wide variety of anti-realist solutions to the challenge before acquiescing too easily to the traditional conceptualist viewpoint” (94). Thus, his anti-realist arguments in chapters 6-10. Here I take a second look at his objections to conceptualism in chapter 5.

***Craig thinks conceptualism still violates the sovereignty/aseity intuition, since it has “merely substituted uncreated, concrete entities for uncreated abstract entities” (80). I disagree.***

According to Craig, if uncreated Platonistic objects existing distinct from God are unacceptable, then surely uncreated divine thoughts existing distinct from God are unacceptable. What I find most far-fetched in this objection is the notion that thoughts which God *necessarily* has, are most naturally understood as existing ‘distinct from’ him. Well, it may be that “meaning just ain’t in the head” (Putnam), but surely thoughts are! Why in the world should we think otherwise? Isn’t the burden on the one who wants to argue that thoughts occur *outside* the person who thinks them?

What is Craig’s criterion of distinctness? Is it counterfactual? “Thoughts exist distinct from God iff God would still exist even if the thoughts failed to exist.” But the thoughts I identify with propositions and possible worlds don’t satisfy that criterion. (They partly constitute the omniscient state he is necessarily in.) Is it causal? “Thoughts exist distinct from God iff God causes them.” But again, this criterion isn’t satisfied on conceptualism. Is it mereological? “Thoughts exist distinct from God iff they are parts of God.” Now we’re getting somewhere. As we all know, the doctrine of divine simplicity contends that positing any metaphysical distinctions in God makes for God’s having metaphysical parts (and thus for his having a dependence on those parts). Does Craig agree with this? For it’s only on such an austere conception of the requirements of aseity that the view that God has thoughts could be problematic. If God’s thoughts are concrete parts of God, then why would going this route mean that “conceptualism is just misconceived” (83)? Wouldn’t it instead follow that we have *reconciled* conceptualism with divine aseity? If divine thoughts are concrete parts of God, then they are not “an inflated ontology of mental events which we have no good reason to embrace” (83).

Here are two ways I can invite Craig to be reconciled with my view. *First, let’s go Trinitarian.* On his own view of the Trinity, God has parts, and necessarily so. The divine Persons are parts of God.[[6]](#footnote-6) Presumably, Trinitarianism doesn’t violate divine aseity. So why would divine thoughts as parts of God violate divine aseity? If God has ‘uncreated being’ as his parts (the Persons), why can’t he have more ‘uncreated being’ as his parts (the divine thoughts)? In the end, if “the doctrine of divine aseity affirms that God is the only uncreated being” (81), then we simply say that the divine thoughts are parts of the very being of God. Since their status as ‘uncreated being’ is simply inherited from their being parts of the uncreated being of God, what exactly is the problem as far as aseity is concerned?

*Second, let’s go adverbial.* Craig insists that “Thinking, after all, is something that God does; it is an activity, even if timeless, in which God is engaged” (78-79). So perhaps the language of ‘thoughts’ just tells us how it is with God, with respect to this conceptual activity, rather than specifying with any metaphysical seriousness distinctly existing events, or event-tokens, or parts. There is just ‘God engaged in thinking,’ and there’s an end on it. So even if “the anti-realist” might proceed “by denying that divine thoughts are objects or things that really exist” (82), it seems to me that there are more than enough rich resources in the divine conceptual activity to provide a foundation that is objective (relative to finite minds), necessary, and plenitudinous enough for all of our reference to propositions and possible worlds. (Such conceptual activity would also be in accord with Ockham’s Razor, and have aboutness, representational capacity, etc.) According to Michael Loux’s “Aristotelian Theory of Abstract Objects,” there would be “an objective foundation for the rich Platonistic framework that is part and parcel of our working picture of the world… There are only substances… but one substance has a mental life rich enough to support beliefs that are apparently, but not really, about entities of the sort so exotically characterized by Platonists.”[[7]](#footnote-7) Why can’t this conceptual activity ‘play the role’ assigned to propositions and possible worlds? Or should a rejection of ‘indispensability arguments’ force a rejection even of divine conceptual activity?! If I’m right, then Craig’s focus on divine thoughts as destructive of divine aseity is a red herring.

***Craig thinks I can’t explain how conceptualists can handle false propositions (84). But this is not a problem.***

First, when speaking of propositions we can distinguish three things: their existence, their truth-value, and the modal status of that truth-value. I’ve only offered theistic conceptual realism as a theory of the existence of truth-bearers, not as an account of the truth-value of those truth-bearers or the modal status of that truth-value. And that is quite enough to be getting on with. God’s thoughts explain the existence of propositions, they may not further explain why the propositions have the truth-values they do, and isn’t it a virtue of the theory that it leaves this open? After all, theists tend to disagree on what ultimately explains (read: accounts for) the truth-value of many propositions (including many false propositions). For instance, as John Laing, Kirk MacGregor, and I argue in the Conclusion of our forthcoming volume on *Calvinism and Middle-Knowledge: A Conversation*, both Molinists and non-Molinists could be theistic conceptualists about the existence of counterfactuals of creaturely freedom, while disagreeing over what accounts for the truth-value of the counterfactuals.[[8]](#footnote-8)

Second, if one wants an answer to this question of false propositions, the solution is relatively straightforward. Let’s say, following Loux, that God engages in a process of thinking that takes various forms, such as conceiving, entertaining, and believing. God can be ‘properly characterized’ as thinking in all of these ways. In no case is this activity an attitude directed to an object. Rather, adverbially speaking, this is just how it is with God’s conceptual activity. Then for a proposition to exist is for God to conceive that p, and for a *false* proposition to exist is for God to conceive that p but not believe that p.[[9]](#footnote-9) (Craig himself offers a similar solution on my behalf: for false propositions, “God doubts or denies that *p*” (85).)

In short, this objection seems to assume that God’s thoughts are coextensive with his *beliefs*, and so an omniscient God cannot have any false thoughts. But once we make room for God’s conceivings and entertainings, then this is sufficient to generate all the propositions there are.

***Craig thinks conceptualism requires God to have ‘inappropriate’ thoughts (85). I disagree.***

Here Craig continues to press the objection formulated against me by Graham Oppy, in the six-author symposium.[[10]](#footnote-10) The idea is that “conceptualism requires that God be constantly entertaining actual thoughts corresponding to every proposition and every state of affairs. But this seems problematic” (85). Why? Well, in Oppy’s words (as Craig quotes him), “it threatens to lead to the attribution to God of inappropriate thoughts: bawdy thoughts, banal thoughts, malicious thoughts, silly thoughts, and so forth” (85). Again, as Craig puts it: “Conceptualism would require God to be entertaining and dwelling on bawdy or malicious thoughts” (87).

First, I confess I *still* don’t understand the force of this objection. It’s just not clear to me that God’s entertaining all sorts of bawdy, banal, malicious, or silly thoughts somehow “impugns His holiness” (86). I guess if that’s allGod thought about, he’d suffer from a dubious character. So would we! But what about all of the thoughts which God has right alongside these thoughts? I take it that God is also continuously *evaluating* the situations referred to in these thoughts *as* bawdy, banal, malicious, and silly situations, taking up the proper judgment with respect to them, with a thorough and comprehensive verdict. Seen in that light, the ‘total package’ of God’s plenitudinous conceptual activity—as an activity—is far more holy than we humans can manage, or even imagine! Surely it is a far more severe problem to simply deny such thoughts of God, since that would compromise his omniscience. I’m often a loathsome sinner with vile and unworthy thoughts. If God’s continually having my sinful plight in mind somehow compromises his holiness, I’m a goner for sure! (Adverting to a ‘dispositional’ account of divine omniscience won’t help with this alleged problem, since a being continuously disposed to have bawdy and silly thoughts doesn’t seem much of an improvement, character-wise, over a being occurrently having those thoughts.)

Second, this helps us to see that Craig has artificially restricted the context of this problem to *false* propositions. Apparently, if only we didn’t identify false propositions with God’s thoughts, God wouldn’t end up with all these unwholesome thoughts that “impugn His holiness”! But if this is a problem, it is a problem for non-conceptualists who think (with every other theist) that God believes all the *truths* there are. Surely God is fully aware of the constant swarm of malicious and distasteful thoughts which lurk in human hearts across the globe. This is the (constant) truth about us, and God knows it! Should we deny him that knowledge, on the grounds that it makes him unholy? Once we’ve swallowed this camel of true divine beliefs, the swarm of false propositions—no matter how large—are gnats best left unstrained.

Third, Craig stresses the idea that God is “constantly” entertaining these actual thoughts, as if God recalls them over and over throughout time. But on a conception of God as timeless (which Craig also accepts, at least *sans* creation), then God has these thoughts timelessly. Since on that view there is no opportunity for these thoughts to be ‘out of’ God’s mind, then apparently a timeless God can’t be omniscient if he wants to be holy, whether or not we are conceptualists. Doesn’t the doctrine of God’s timeless knowledge suffer enough challenge from the problem of the temporal indexical without having to add the problem of the bawdy indexical too?

***Craig thinks conceptualism turns (many) propositions into purely private and incommunicable entities (87). I disagree.***

According to Craig, “Since God has first-person thoughts, identifying God’s thoughts with propositions commits us to the existence of purely private propositions which are incommunicable by God to us” (87). This is because “if we say that propositions just are God’s thoughts, we are no longer able to distinguish between the aspectual shape of a proposition and the aspectual shape of a divine thought having that propositional content” (87).

In my view this criticism, by equivocating on the meaning of ‘aspectual shape,’ illegitimately privatizes the propositional content of thoughts. Once we untangle the distinct meanings, we see that nothing malevolent follows. Following Tim Crane, I use the term ‘aspectual shape’ to mark a *difference* in propositions. It is the key reason why the intentionality of propositions is fine-grained (in a way that matches the fine-grained intentionality of thoughts). So while “Lois Lane loves Superman” and “Lois Lane loves Clark Kent” may have the same aboutness (because they attribute the same properties to the same substances), they have a different aspectual shape, and are thus two different propositions. But Craig additionally utilizes ‘aspectual shape,’ not to mark a *difference* in propositions, but to indicate different first- and third-person perspectives on the *same* proposition. In my view, this spoils his argument, since clearly two thoughts can have the same propositional content despite this difference in first- and third-person perspective. If so, then the difference between the divine and human perspective doesn’t mark a difference in propositional content.

To illustrate, Craig accepts that “I am Napoleon” (thought by Napoleon) and “He is Napoleon” (thought by God) are the same proposition (86). Notice that this difference of personal perspective (which Craig misleadingly calls ‘aspectual shape’) doesn’t make for a difference in proposition. Likewise, Craig accepts that “I am making a mess” (thought by John Perry) and “John Perry is making a mess” (thought by God) are the same proposition, and again, difference of personal perspective doesn’t make for a difference in proposition (87). But for some reason, Craig insists that “Yahweh is the God of Israel” (thought by us) and “I am the God of Israel” (thought by God) don’t have the same propositional content. Rather, “at most, we could grasp a proposition like *Yahweh is the God of Israel*; but that is not the same proposition as *I am the God of Israel*” (87). This approach doesn’t look consistent. I think Craig has been led into this contradiction in his analysis because on his view ‘aspectual shape’ does double-duty for (i) what marks a *difference* in propositional content and (ii) differing perspectives on the *same* propositional content.

If “John Perry is making a mess” (thought by God) and “I am making a mess” (thought by John Perry) are graspings of the same propositional content (87), then presumably the proposition believed by one *isn’t* ‘incommunicable’ to the other. They are the same proposition! Indeed, this same proposition is already believed by both parties, so no ‘communication’ necessary. Given all this, why would “a first-person divine thought like *I am the God of Israel*,” in virtue of being a *first-person* thought, be a “purely private proposition . . . incommunicable by God to us”? The reasoning here is obscure. If Craig had argued that the ‘making a mess’ propositions are different propositions (in virtue of different first- and third-person perspectives), then perhaps the ‘first-person’ proposition, being a genuinely different proposition, might be forever locked up in God’s first-person perspective, never to be held by anyone else. But this is precisely what Craig denies. He affirms they are the same proposition. (So there are really three things to be discussed: the aspectual shape of propositional intentionality, the aspectual shape of belief-contents, and the different perspectives we can have upon the same proposition. I identify the first two, and reduce neither to the third. By conflating difference of propositional content with difference of personal perspective upon that content, Craig is erecting a spurious barrier to the conceptualist project.)

Let’s put the question to Craig, as an anti-realist about propositions. Presumably, though he rejects propositional existence, he accepts propositional *content* (of our various conceptual activities). So there is John Perry and God: one believes “I am making a mess” and the other believes “John Perry is making a mess.” Stipulate there are no propositions in the heavyweight Platonistic sense; there are just persons with their mental activities and processes. Nevertheless, Perry and God are believing the same proposition. But Perry’s thought is a ‘first-person thought’. Does it follow that Perry’s thought has a propositional content which is ‘purely private’ and ‘incommunicable’ by Perry to anyone else? Should we hold, on the basis that Perry has *his* conceptual activity and God has *his*, that we can’t distinguish between the aspectual shape of the proposition they hold in common, and the ‘aspectual shape’ of their distinct conceivings? I hope not for Craig’s sake, as that would be a very quick *reductio* of anti-realism about propositions. It would mean that none of us have the same beliefs.

Any anti-realist about propositions will have to hold that difference of personal perspective in our subjective conceivings does *not* suffice (by itself) for difference of propositional content. So why does Craig the anti-realist hold that difference of personal perspective in our subjective conceivings (both ours and God’s) *does* suffice for difference of propositional content, rendering that content as ‘purely private’ and ‘incommunicable’? The argument proves too much. It would target both conceptualists and anti-realists about propositions.

***Craig thinks that conceptualists cannot have a consistent view of God’s ontological commitments (88). I disagree.***

Craig asks us to consider the following two thoughts: (i) *The number of people killed in the attack was 66* and (ii) *66 people were killed in the attack*. Craig asks: “So which one is God’s thought? If God thinks both, what are His ontological commitments? The ontological commitments of the former cannot be annulled by paraphrasing it as the latter, for the paraphrase cannot be said to give the propositional content of the thought, since according to conceptualism, both divine thoughts just are propositions” (88).

In reply, it seems that the safest route is not to prejudge the outcome of various paraphrastic strategies. Nominalists and realists are notorious for disputing whether various candidate paraphrases in a whole range of contexts are successful or not. I say let a thousand flowers bloom! What the conceptualist needs is enough divine thoughts for there to be all the propositions *there are*, while leaving open whether we have a foolproof method for determining *which* propositions there are, when all is said and done.

*Are (i) and (ii) distinct propositions?* Let’s say they are, on the ground of their different ontological commitments. First, are (i) and (ii) both true? Well, that depends on whether there are numbers. If there are, then to be omniscient God will hold both (i) and (ii) as beliefs. There’s no problem here: The propositions are distinct, so the divine beliefs are distinct, and it’s OK if God is committed to numbers because *there are* numbers.But second, what if (i) and (ii) are distinct propositions, but (i) is false because *there aren’t* any numbers? In that case, while God might entertain (i), he wouldn’t believe (i), whereas he would believe (ii). If so, then God’s entertaining (i) is sufficient to serve as the proposition that, say, (deluded) realists about numbers believe, whereas God’s belief that (ii) is sufficient to serve as the proposition that (enlightened) anti-realists believe. Here God continues to turn out to be omniscient, having no false beliefs, and the differing ontological commitments of (i) and (ii) don’t generate any inconsistencies for him. (He doesn’t *believe* both (i) and (ii).)

*But what if (i) and (ii) are really the same proposition*, perhaps because they can be translated or paraphrased into each other? In that case, two further questions deserve attention. First, what is the ‘real’ ontological commitment of (i)/(ii)? Does (i) reveal what (ii) is implicitly committed to, or is it the reverse?[[11]](#footnote-11) Presumably there is a fact of the matter here about the ‘real’ ontological commitment of these claims, and in addition a fact of the matter about whether or not numbers exist. That will settle whether or not God believes (i)/(ii) or merely entertains (i)/(ii). (An omniscient God isn’t going to believe something that involves a false ontological commitment, though he can easily entertain such deluded views.) Second, in believing or entertaining (i)/(ii) are there two divine thoughts here, or just one? Craig thinks that the conceptualist dare not say there are twodivine thoughts, since that will generate twopropositions when (*ex hypothesi*) there is just one. But it is no part of the conceptualist thesis to say that just *any* divine thought counts as a proposition. The conceptualist view is more modest than this: “a *particular range* of the uncreated divine thoughts function as abstract objects because of the peculiar role they play with respect to any created realm (actual or possible).”[[12]](#footnote-12) Divine conceptualism does not specify in any detail *which* divine thoughts are to count as the propositions needed if we are to have the objects which satisfy the grammatical, quantificational, modal, and counterfactual arguments for propositions. Clearly, if (i)/(ii) are the *same* proposition (i.e., have the same propositional content), then either thought will serve as the proposition. Why does God need both thoughts when one will do? What the conceptualist needs is enough divine thoughts for all the propositions *there are*, and Craig’s examples don’t show there aren’t enough. Nor does his strategy show that there must be too many.

**Conclusion**

I want to close by stressing what Craig and I have in common. Though he might vigorously contend otherwise, I think Craig and I are committed to the same exact ontology. Clearly, Craig is an anti-realist about Platonic objects. And we’ve seen how he seems to be an anti-realist even about divine thoughts. But surely he believes that *God* exists, and on a personal conception of God, God must engage in some kind of cognitive, conceptual activity, even if this cognitive activity is not to be further metaphysically characterized as events*.*

So let’s talk about this divine cognitive activity. God’s activity of thinking that the Eiffel Tower exists in France isn’t an activity that exists ‘for me’ but not ‘for others’. It exists for everyone, full-stop. It is just as real as the existence of God himself. This is ‘metaphysically heavyweight’ existence. Where Craig and I differ is over whether we have sufficient motivation to characterize the divine conceptual activity *as* the various kinds of objects argued for in realist theory: propositions, possible worlds, etc. Craig says no (since he’s an anti-realist about these objects), whereas I say yes (since I’m a realist about these objects).

So our key difference isn’t over which of us preserves divine aseity, or has an inflated ontology. We are equal on that score. We both posit God and the divine thoughts/conceptual activity, and that is it. Our main difference seems to be over whether the realist arguments succeed in the first place, and whether my theistic conceptualist construal of realism is coherently stateable. I’ve tried to defend the latter in my remarks today.[[13]](#footnote-13)

1. William Lane Craig, *God over all: Divine Aseity and the Challenge of Platonism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016). Parenthetical references in the text are to this work. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Greg Welty, “*Theistic Conceptual Realism: The Case for Interpreting Abstract Objects as Divine Ideas*,” DPhil dissertation, University of Oxford, 2006; Greg Welty, “Theistic Conceptual Realism.” In *Beyond the Control of God? Six Views on the Problem of God and Abstract Objects,* ed. Paul M. Gould (NY and London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2014). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Craig further presses the need for this kind of conceptual clarity in Craig 2017. William Lane Craig. “Absolute Creationism and Divine Conceptualism: A Call for Conceptual Clarity,” *Philosophia Christi*, vol. 19, No. 2 (2017): 431-38. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Edward Feser, *Five Proofs of the Existence of God* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 2017), 106-116, esp. 107. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I, q.14, a.8, reply 3; article 8 concerns “Whether the Knowledge of God Is the Cause of Things?” [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. J. P. Moreland and William Lane Craig, “The Trinity,” in *Oxford Readings in Philosophical Theology*, vol. 1, *Trinity, Incarnation, and Atonement*, ed. Michael Rea (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009). Originally published in J. P. Moreland and W. L. Craig, *Philosophical Foundations for a Christian Worldview* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2003). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Michael J. Loux, “Toward An Aristotelian Theory of Abstract Objects,” *Midwest Studies in Philosophy*, vol. 11, ed. P. French, T. Uehling, and H. Wettstein (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), 507. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. John D. Laing, Kirk R. MacGregor, and Greg Welty, eds., *Calvinism and Middle Knowledge: A Conversation* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2019). [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Loux, “Toward An Aristotelian Theory of Abstract Objects,” 502. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Gould, *Beyond the Control of God?,* 105*.* [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Notice that the paraphrastic strategy is ill-equipped by itself to answer this question, a point famously made by William Alston in “Ontological Commitments,” *Philosophical Studies* 9 (1958): 8-17. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Welty, *Theistic Conceptual Realism*, 213 (emphasis added). [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. The original manuscript contained several points not read out at the presentation due to lack of time. These addressed five further objections: *(a)* that my refusal to extend a causal account of the thinker/thought relation to the divine case is “both implausible and *ad hoc*” (Craig, *God over All*, 78), *(b)* that conceptualists can affirm the causal dependence thesis and still avoid bootstrapping worries (79-80), *(c)* that on conceptualism, we’re stuck with the existence of mathematical objects even if they can be paraphrased away (88), *(d)* that my view of divine omniscience as occurrent is unjustified (89), and *(e)* that Craig offers four cogent arguments against divine-thoughts-as-properties (91-2). [↑](#footnote-ref-13)