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Divine Ideas for Metaphysical Realism

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Divine Ideas for Metaphysical Realism

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Dedication

To the band of ragamuffins whose love, friendship, and support gave me the courage I needed. And to the memory of George MacDonald, whose words help me continue to believe that the God of whom I write is, indeed, The Good.
Acknowledgments

I would like to thank the participants at the 2011 Meeting of the Society of Ancient Greek Philosophy, the 2013 Eastern Regional Meeting of the Society of Christian Philosophers, the 2014 South Carolina Society of Philosophy, and the 2015 Classical Theism Workshop at St. Thomas University for their suggestions for, and critique of, various portions of this project. A special thanks goes to Craig Bacon, Michael Dickson, Glenn Gentry, Jeremiah Hackett, George Khushf, and Christina Van Dyke whose detailed and insightful comments on various sections have contributed greatly to the quality of this work. I owe a significant debt of gratitude to Christopher Tollefsen for his support and oversight of the project. His perceptive, suggestions, and criticisms of (many) drafts have shaped and developed my thinking on these issues in important ways, and his support has greatly exceeded what any graduate student could expect of a dissertation director. Finally, I would like to thank my husband, Yuriy Panchuk, for his encouragement, his patience, and his undertaking of more than his fair share of household and childcare duties throughout the course of my work.
Abstract

In recent years more and more theist philosophers have turned their attention to an apparent tension between the existence of abstract universals and the God of classical monotheisms. In this project I argue that this tension can be relieved by adopting a Neo-Augustinian account of universals. When the doctrine of creation *ex nihilo* is given sufficient place within one’s theory, divine concepts can do all of the work for which abstract universals are usually posited. Over the course of 5 chapters, I argue that the problem of universals, at base, requires a theory of properties as its solution; that my theory of universals is well grounded within the medieval tradition; that divine concepts can account for property exemplification, attribute agreement, abstract reference, and subject-predicate discourse; and that a solution to the notorious “bootstrapping problem” is available if one accepts the doctrine of divine simplicity. I conclude with some remarks on the epistemic theories that one might adopt if one is inclined to accept my account of universals.
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Introduction

In my hand I hold a red mug (a delightfully steamy cup of earl grey, if you care to know). On my desk I can see a jar that holds two red pens. There is a range of philosophically interesting questions we could ask about these three objects. For example, what is it that makes each of them *individually* red? What is it that grounds the truth of my *assertion* that they are red? What is it that makes it true that all three of them are *the same color*? As I contemplate these questions, I might also entertain the proposition that ‘Redness is a color.’ What could it be that makes that thought true? Our attempts to answer these questions engage us in the long and noble tradition of contemplating what has often been called the problem of universals. And it is to this tradition that the present project contributes.

If we answer the questions posed above by saying that each of the three objects has its own unique redness—either as a non-material constituent of the whole or in virtue of its physical make-up—then we are probably nominalists (or perhaps fictionalists). If, on the other hand, we want to claim that there is one *thing* distinct from the material parts of the cup and pens—let’s call it ‘redness’—that makes all of them red and to which we refer when we say that redness is a color, then we are realists about universals, and we may believe in the existence of abstract objects.

Personally, I am inclined to think that there must be something separate from all of the particulars, by standing in relation to which, particulars have the character that they
do. By most accounts, this makes me a Platonist about universals and, by extension, a Platonist about abstract objects. Abstract objects are commonly understood to be necessary entities. They don’t come into or go out of existence, and they exist in every possible world. It is at this point that I run into a problem, because I am also a theist, who believes that every existing thing that is distinct from God depends on God for its existence. And it is difficult to see how necessary beings might depend on God in the relevant way.

It turns out that I am far from a minority in being a Platonist-leaning theist. In a 2009 survey conducted by PhilPapers, 61.8% of those who claimed to accept or lean toward theism also claimed to accept or lean toward Platonism about abstract objects. In contrast, only 39.3% of the general respondent pool identified as Platonist.¹ On the other hand, 32.8% of theists claimed to be or lean toward nominalism, which is reflective of the general population of philosophers, 37.7% of which are nominalists. We can conclude, then, that theists tend to be Platonists at much higher rates and accept alternative views of abstract objects at much lower rates than the general population of philosophers. But as I mentioned above, this raises an apparent problem. Indeed, one Christian thinker has gone so far as to assert that “if Platonism is true, then, there literally is no God.”² Must all of us give up our realism about universals in particular, or abstract objects in general, in order to maintain our theistic beliefs?


In this project I defend the view that the answer to the above question is a qualified ‘no,’ at least with respect to universals. I develop an answer to the problem of universals that is justly described as a realist theory of properties, but which is not only compatible with, but dependent on, a commitment to the God of classical theism.\(^3\) Namely, I demonstrate that divine concepts can do all of the work for which abstract universals are typically posited. I argue that since these divine ideas are multiply exemplifiable, the view can be considered a realist theory, even if one thinks it is wrong-headed to call the content of the divine mind ‘abstract.’ In the first chapter, I argue that the problem of universals is, at bottom, a question about the character of particulars and demands a theory of properties as its solution. I then evaluate the success of various nominalist and realist solutions to the problem of universals in light of two fundamental theistic commitments. In the second chapter, I a survey the contemporary work responding to the tension between Platonism and theism and then present the questions to which a realist, theistic theory of properties must provide adequate responses. In the third chapter, I turn to medieval conceptions of the relationship between God and universals. These, I believe, demonstrate how the doctrine of creation might ground our understanding of that relationship and point out that a theist who wishes to embrace a Neo-Augustinian understanding of universals faces a significant difficulty both with respect to our epistemic access to universals and with respect to the simplicity of the divine nature. In chapter four, I present my positive argument for divine concepts functioning as universals. I demonstrate that property exemplification, abstract reference, attribute agreement, and subject-predicate discourse can all be accounted for on a Neo-

\(^3\) I do not take a stand on whether the divine mind can account for the rest of the platonic horde, or on whether that horde could rightly be called ‘abstract’ on such a read.
Augustinian account at least as well as on standard versions of transcendent realism. The fifth chapter addresses two difficulties that the Neo-Augustinian view poses for our understanding of the nature of God: the bootstrapping problem and the doctrine of divine simplicity. Here I argue that we can address both difficulties by rejecting the principle of character grounding with respect to God. Finally, in the sixth and concluding chapter I draw some general conclusions about the nature and limits of human knowledge from my theory.
Chapter 1

The Problem of Universals and the Theist

Our characterization of the relationship between God and universals will depend to a large degree on the sort of thing a universal is. God would stand in a different relation to human concepts than he would to abstract sets, and to constituents in the ontological make-up of a particular than to a form in a Platonic heaven. In fact, whether or not it even makes sense to think of God as standing in some relation or another to universals at all will depend on how the theist understands and responds to the problem of universals as such. Therefore, before we can develop a satisfactory characterization of that relationship, we will need to consider some preliminary questions. First, we need to settle on which interpretation of the problem of universals we will adopt. Second, we must consider what commitments about the nature of God circumscribe compatible views. Only then, can we evaluate the philosophical strengths and weakness of the theories of universals available and how each interacts with the theological commitments relevant to the present question.
I. What is the Problem of Universals?

Despite its impressive pedigree in the history of philosophy, philosophers remain divided not only over the correct solution to the problem of universal, but also over exactly what the problem of universals is. Because how one understands the problem posed largely determines what counts as a candidate for its solution, we cannot move forward in our investigation without first settling on how we understand the problem that we expect our theory of universals to solve. The problem has been construed alternately as a problem about predication, abstract reference, attribute-agreement, properties, causal powers, and laws of nature, to name just a few. The various analyses share common themes, but many demand quite different sorts of explanation. For the sake of simplicity, it may be helpful to delineate four main approaches.

(I) The problem of universals is the problem of the one over the many.

(II) The problem of universals is a pseudo-problem.

(III) The problem of universals is the problem of the many over the one.

(IV) The problem of universals is a problem about the character of particulars.

A. The One Over the Many

The problem of universals is most widely expressed as the problem of the one over the many, since the student of philosophy is often introduced to it through Plato’s dialogues. Though he doesn’t use the term ‘universal’, Plato points to the need for permanent and unchanging Forms that ground the nature of particulars in a world that is in constant flux.
We may know this red object and that red object, but what is “the Red itself” that never changes, in virtue of which we judge each of the objects to be red at a particular moment? Plato here is concerned about the one over the many—the one thing that explains what many similar objects have in common.

We first see the word ‘universal’ emerge as a technical term in the writings of Aristotle. In On Interpretation, he divides the world into two basic kinds: particular entities and universal entities. He says that, “among things, some are universal while others are singular. By ‘universal’ I mean what is apt to be predicated of many, by ‘singular’ what is not.” We find a related, but distinct, definition of the term later in Boethius’s Second Commentary on Porphyry. Here, he describes a genus (which is one kind of universal) as something that “is supposed to be common [to many singulars] in such a way that the whole of it is in all its singulars, and at one time, and also it is able to constitute and form the substance of what it is common to.”

Though the medieval world was deeply divided over the answer to the problem of the one over the many—they argued over whether universality was a property of words only, or whether some universal entity fit Boethius’s definition—it was widely accepted that the one over the many captured what was at stake in the problem of universals.

Adopting contemporary jargon, thus construed the problem asks what metaphysical reality explains the apparent fact that numerically diverse particulars, a and

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1 7


3 We will consider medieval approaches to this problem in more depth in the third chapter.
$b$, both exemplify the very same property $F$. And further, what grounds the truth of sentences of the following form?  

(a) $a$ and $b$ are both $F$.

Everyone agrees that the particulars, $a$ and $b$, are part of what makes sentences of this kind true. They are the entities to which the subject of the sentence refers. But what, if anything, distinct from the particulars, makes it true that they are $F$? To what does the predicate “are both $F$” refer? Both ways of stating the problem ask how diverse particulars may have the same nature. What makes it true that this rose and that glass of wine are both the very same shade of red? In the contemporary literature, this interpretation of the problem of universals is still quite popular, though, as we will see when we consider option (IV), many now argue that that it is only one aspect of it.

**B. The Psuedo-Problem**

Like the supporters of the first perspective, proponents of the view that the problem of universals is a pseudo-problem have often taken the problem of universals as requiring that one account for the truth-value of certain kinds of sentences. Michael Devitt, appealing to Quine’s criterion of ontological commitment, argues that a philosopher need

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4 Though truth-conditions have oft played a significant role in this question, I will demonstrate below that this version of the question often leads us far afield.


6 They are far from being the only ones to understand the problem in this way.
only commit herself to the existence of those things necessary for the truth of the sentences that she accepts as true.\(^7\) For example, one only needs to be committed to the existence of universals if one accepts that sentence (a) is true, and the truth of sentence (a) necessarily commits one to the existence of universals. However, if one is able to find a satisfactory paraphrase of (a), such that the paraphrase does not commit one to the existence of universals, then one need not accept that universals exist. For example, one might interpret (a) in the following way:

\[(a') \text{ } a \text{ and } b \text{ have the same property, } F\text{-ness.}\]

This paraphrase would commit its supporter to the existence of something answering to the term F-ness. However, one who believes that (a) is true need not accept this interpretation. Instead she might accept:

\[(a'') \text{ } a \text{ is } F, \text{ and } b \text{ is } F.\]

On Quine’s theory of semantics, sentences like (a’’) only require the existence of the particulars \(a\) and \(b\): (a’’) is true if and only if there exist some \(x\) and some \(y\) such that ‘\(a\)’ designates \(x\) and ‘\(b\)’ designates \(y\), and ‘\(F\)’ applies to \(x\) and ‘\(F\)’ applies to \(y\). Since we can explain the truth of both conjuncts, it follows that the conjunction is true, and there is no need for a further explanation of the \(sameness\) of the predicate \(F\) in both cases. One need not appeal to tropes, universals, concepts, or resemblance facts to formulate truth-

conditions, according to Quine and Devitt. Therefore, the problem of universals is not a real problem from their perspective.

This approach requires its adherents to do some work paraphrasing sentences that apparently refer to abstract objects (such as the number 3, propositions, or F-ness) into sentences that reference only particulars. However, some sentences don’t appear to have adequate translations that lack the undesirable ontological commitments. Quine, for example, has difficulty with sentences such as (b), since the paraphrase he suggests, (b’), has significantly different logical entailments from the original, as both Michael Loux and D. M. Armstrong point out.8

(b) Humility is a virtue.

(b’) Humble people are virtuous.

William Lane Craig, who agrees that the problem of universals is a pseudo-problem, avoids this outcome in a slightly different fashion. Craig claims, without argument, that it just “seems obvious” to him that causal-mechanical accounts sufficiently explain the properties that things have. Thus, Craig claims that an appeal to Mary’s physical constitution (i.e. the strength of her muscles and her history of physical training) is sufficient to provide an explanation of the truth of the assertion:

(c) Mary is swift.

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Though in this particular discussion he does not consider statements like (a), which involve attribute agreement, one can infer that he would want to follow the same line of thought, noting the physical constitution of $a$ and the physical constitution of $b$. However, he does acknowledge that sentences with abstract references are a bit more difficult. Craig argues that sentences of type (b) are not an issue, because the universal statement has no existential import. That is, we may talk about humility without committing ourselves to the existence of humility. However, sentences with an abstract reference within the scope of an existential quantifier are more problematic. As a solution, he suggests that since “there is/there are” locutions often lack existential import in everyday English, we have no reason, beyond absurd beliefs about that nature of artificial languages, to think that they must have existential import in formalized translations. This approach has the happy (for Craig, at least) consequence of allowing us to speak truly about a broad range of “odd things,” without actually committing ourselves to the literal existence of entities such as holes, abstract objects, or properties. Thus, appealing to Mark Balaguer, he states that it is now widely understood that the problem of the “one over the many” is not a real problem.

D. M. Armstrong disparagingly calls approaches like Quine’s, Devitt’s, and Craig’s “Ostrich Nominalism.” According to Armstrong, attribute agreement is a Moorean fact for which every philosopher must give some account, regardless of what

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9 “A Nominalist Perspective on God and Abstract Objects.” *Philosophia Christi* 13 (2011): 315

10 Ibid., 310. Interestingly, Loux ("Perspectives on the Problem of Universals." *Documenti e studi sulla tradizione filosofica medievale* 18 (2007): 601-21.) claims that it is widely agreed that the problem of universals is a problem about the character of particulars and that only a very few philosophers (he sites David Lewis and V. O. W. Quine) object to it. As far as I can tell, Devitt, Craig, Balaguer, Lewis, and Quine are the only significant proponents of this view, which is far from the broad consensus that Craig describes.
sort of account it ends up being. Denying that it needs any explanation at all is tantamount to burying one’s head in the metaphysical sand. “Like an Oxford philosopher of yore, [Quine] keeps on saying that he does not deny that many different objects are all of them red, but what this ostensible sameness is he refuses to explain. Instead he thrusts his head back into his desert landscape,” says Armstrong.\(^{11}\)

In addition to the problem that Armstrong points out, Quine’s criteria leads us astray as a guide to the ontological furniture of our world. Quine claims that the philosopher need only commit herself to the metaphysical entities entailed by the sentences she accepts. While there is prima facie plausibility to this criteria—after all, why would one be required to accept the existences of entities entailed by sentences that one deems false?—it leads many metaphysicians to spend their time doing linguistic gymnastics rather than analyzing the metaphysical phenomena to be accounted for. In “A Theory of Properties” Peter van Inwagen argues that we cannot get away with being nominalists, though it would be preferable to be nominalists if we could. To demonstrate this, he spends three pages of the article suggesting and refuting various paraphrases of the sentence: “Spiders share some of the anatomical features of insects”\(^{12}\) The motivation behind this sort of approach is the belief that if a sentence the metaphysician accepts entails the existence of unsavory metaphysical entities—such as abstract objects—then one way around the problem is to find a sentence that accurately translates the first, but that does not entail the existence of the unhappy entities. Since he is unable to do so, van Inwagan says he is forced, despite his preferences, to accept realism about

\(^{11}\) Armstrong, “Against ‘Ostrich’ Nominalism,” 444. Perhaps this quote is unnecessary, but it is too much fun to omit.

universals. This method suggests that our ability, or lack thereof, to paraphrase one sentence of a language—whether natural or artificial—into another is indicative of what sorts of entity exist in the actual world. In other words, such philosophers assume that linguistic structure is a good, perhaps even necessary, guide to the ontological structure of our world. This raises an interesting question. If the metaphysician can translate every sentence involving a reference to spiders into a sentence referring only to certain biological processes, is this alone a sufficient reason to think that spiders fail to enter into the ontological make up of our world? Conversely, if I cannot seem to rid myself of references to evil, does that, by itself, give me evidence that evil has some real existence, contra Augustine? While one might wish to accept either or both of these views (that evil exists and that spiders don’t) surely our linguistic structure is not the correct basis for the decision. How do we know whether our ability or inability to find a paraphrase is indicative of the nature of reality and not simply a function of the grammatical and idiomatic limitations of the target language? After all, what one can rid oneself of via paraphrasing differs from language to language, depending on the grammatical and idiomatic conventions of that language. It would be odd if Russians were bound to hold different ontological commitments than Iranians, simply because Farsi has different grammatical structures and idioms from Russian. One might think that we avoid this problem by translating into first order logic, but, apart from arguments to the contrary, there do not seem to be any grounds for believing that first order logic is more likely to capture the nature of reality.

One might claim that regardless of the nature of reality, we cannot help the fact that all of our beliefs are beliefs of propositions, which we entertain for the most part via
sentences in some language. While we may be wrong we are, at the very least, committed to the existence of those things entailed by the sentences that we feel bound to affirm. There is something compelling about this view. It suggests that, even though we could be wrong, language is the best guide we have. But what reason do we have to think that sentences and paraphrases are the only evidence worth considered when trying to inventory the metaphysical furniture of the universe? Even if we are bound to accept the entailments of the sentences we believe, are those sentences the only reasons we might have for accepting some entity into our ontology? Surely there are other phenomena that might provide us with reasons to posit metaphysical entities. As I mentioned above, one phenomenon that the problem of universals seeks to account for is property agreement. It is not simply that we say that two entities are both red. It is that our sense experience provides prima facie evidence to think that they are both red. The theist, further, has reason to think that the external world was created by God and has some sort of character quite apart from what humans say about it. Thus, the idea that we need not commit ourselves to those things which we can successfully rid from our speech and thought, via translation, just seems absurd to me. If this critique is correct, then my point applies not only to Quine, Craig, and Devitt—who believe that the problem of universals is a pseudo-problem—but also to van Inwagen and (the early) Loux, who rely heavily on arguments from the impossibility of satisfactory paraphrasing in their treatment of metaphysical realism.\textsuperscript{13}

\textsuperscript{13} In Loux’s early work \textit{Substance and Attribute}, he relied heavily on translation-based arguments. However, in later works, such as "Perspectives on the Problem of Universals," he seems significantly less inclined to do so. His characterization of the problem of universals as a problem of character indicates this.
C. The Many over the One

Proponents of the third view acknowledge that the problem of universals is a real problem, but suggest that it has been historically misconstrued. This camp argues that though most have understood the problem as one demanding an explanation of how numerically distinct particulars can share a single property, the problem is actually one of how a single particular can exemplify multiple properties simultaneously. There is no trouble explaining sentences of type (a), but there are problems explaining another sort of sentence:

(d) a is F and G.

Gonzalo Rodriguez-Pereyra comes to this conclusion because he conceives of the problem of universals as requiring an explanation of how the truth of sentences like (a)-(c) is possible despite some apparent reasons to the contrary. He suggests two possibilities for what an explanation of (a), (b), and (c) type sentences (among others) might be like. First, an explanation might give an account of the ontological commitments of these sentences. Second, it might give an account of the truthmakers, or the ontological grounds of the truth, of the sentences. He points out that a sentence is ontologically committed to an entity only if the sentence entails that the entity exists. On the other hand, if something is a truthmaker for a sentence, then the truthmaker entails the truth of the sentence. The relationship between a sentence and the world runs in opposite directions in these two cases. Since the entities whose existence a given sentence entails are a necessary condition for the sentence’s truth, but not a sufficient
one, they alone cannot explain how the truth of the sentence is possible, because the entity’s existence is compatible with the sentence’s falsity. A truthmaker, on the other hand, explains the possibility of the truth of the sentence, because if the truthmaker exists, the truth of the sentence cannot fail to obtain. Thus, Rodriguez-Pereyra contends that truthmakers are the best candidates for explaining the relevant data.

Granting that we need an account of truthmakers, and given that all of the other sentences that need explaining have the same truthmakers as sentences like (e), it follows that what needs explaining is how it is that \( a \) has the property it does.

\[(e) \ a \text{ is } F.\]

Giving such an explanation will require multiple truth-makers, for surely, assuming that not every (a) type sentence is necessarily true, sentences such as ‘\( a \) is white,’ and ‘\( a \) is spherical,’ and ‘\( a \) is large’ do not have all and only the same truth-makers. Thus, the problem of universals requires an account of these diverse truthmakers. That is, it requires an explanation of how a single particular, \( a \), exemplifies multiple properties. This is the problem of the many over the one.

Paul Gould, I believe correctly, points out that Rodriguez-Pereyra is mistaken when he assumes that the problem in need of explanation is one of how the truth of these sentences is possible. Moorean facts are actual, and therefore, possible. Furthermore, if

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the question is how these facts are possible, then a truthmaker makes only negligible progress, because one can just as easily ask how it is possible that the truthmaker exists, especially since the truthmakers Rodriguez-Pereyra appeals to are qualitative and resemblance facts. “What makes the qualitative and resemblance facts possible?” seems like just as legitimate a question as the one he attempts to answer.

D. A Problem of Character

For this reason, Gould, Loux, and Armstrong, among others, believe that the problem of universals is, at base, a problem of giving a metaphysical account of the character of particulars—a view that incorporates (I) and (III) into a single account (IV). Since it seems uncontroversial to assume that it is the properties of each particular that give it the character that it has (when we affirm that ‘a is F,’ we mean that a has the property of being F), we may conclude that what we really need when we try to solve the problem of universals is a theory of properties.16 Understanding the metaphysical character of particulars would provide a satisfactory response to the range of questions that are typically associated with the problem of universals. Presumably an adequate theory of properties would tell us how multiple particulars can have the same property (the problem of the one over the many) and how a single particular can exemplify multiple properties (the problem of the many over the one). It would tell us something about the relationships at work in the mind-language-world nexus, and thus help us understand how the metaphysical character of particulars impacts knowledge, truth (subject-predicate

16 One might think that a particular’s substance kind determines the things character—a view that I will endorse later—but even in this case, properties partially explain the character the particular has. I ignore this at present only because it is common place in the current literature to assume that properties are the only things that explain character.
discourse and abstract reference), and causal powers. Though this approach does not enjoy a consensus, it is by far the most popular understanding of the problem among contemporary metaphysicians,\textsuperscript{17} and it is the one I will adopt for the purposes of my present project. In what follows, I assume that the problem of universals is a problem of character, demanding a theory of properties as its solution.

II. Theological Considerations

In the final section of this chapter, I will summarize the most prominent theories of properties on offer in the literature with an eye to the theological implications of each. That is, I will ask what each theory of properties entails about the relationship in which God stands to particulars and their properties. To answer this question, we must first clarify what theological considerations are relevant to the discussion and what commitments I presuppose.

There are two theological commitments which historically circumscribe the sort of answer that Christian philosophers have given to the problem of universals: the aseity-sovereignty doctrine and the doctrine of divine omniscience.\textsuperscript{18} The aseity-sovereignty doctrine unites two distinct but related beliefs about the nature of God. God does not

\textsuperscript{17} Loux. "Perspectives on the Problem of Universals," 605.

\textsuperscript{18} Though I myself approach this question from within the Christian tradition, the theological commitments relevant for this project I believe to be shared by most traditional monotheists. Therefore, I think the overall project may be of interest not only to Christian philosophers, but also to Jewish and Muslim scholars.
depend on anything distinct from himself\(^\text{19}\) for his existence—the aseity doctrine—and everything distinct from God depends on God for its existence—the sovereignty doctrine. Though there is plenty of disagreement among philosophers of religion about the nature of dependence, it is fairly uncontroversial that a supreme being must not depend on anything outside of itself for its existence. In his famous ontological argument, Anselm of Canterbury seeks an argument that “would by itself be enough to show that God really exists; that he is the supreme good, who depends on nothing else, but on whom all things depend for their being….”\(^\text{20}\) To do so, he argued that if God exists, he must be that, greater than which cannot be thought.\(^\text{21}\) One can always conceive of a being greater than one that depends on something else for its existence—namely an independent one. While one may not think this argument conclusive as a proof for God’s existence, it does serve as a helpful description of what God must be like, if such a being in fact exists. The existence of a dependent being always demands further explanation. One must posit an independent being—a being that exists \(a \, se\)—in order to avoid an infinite regress. Thus, talk about God as the first cause and as that, greater than which cannot be thought points to the aseity doctrine. Indeed, one need not even look to traditional monotheism to find this sort of reasoning. In Neoplatonism, the One is the ultimate ground for all being, though it surpasses being and exists of itself, \(a \, se\). Thus, if there are such things as universals, the aseity doctrine provides a \textit{prima facie} reason to reject any account of God

\(^{19}\) Throughout this project, I refer to God using a masculine pronoun. I do so because this convention is wide-spread in the literature with which I interact. However, I do not mean to suggest that I believe that God is masculine or that God has any gender at all. I think it would be just as accurate to use a feminine or a gender-neutral pronoun.


\(^{21}\) Ibid., 99 ff.
or universals on which God himself depends on universals for his character or his existence.  

As I have described it above, the aseity doctrine partially motivates the sovereignty doctrine. If one of the reasons that God must exist a se, if at all, is to avoid explanatory regress, then it follows that everything distinct from God must depend on him; otherwise, the regress problem will raise its ugly head. The foundations of the sovereignty doctrine in the Christian tradition begin to emerge in the Hebrew Torah in the story of creation, and the doctrine is, arguably, appealed to repeatedly both in the wisdom literature and the prophets.  

It also appears in the Christian scriptures of the New Testament and in the traditional creeds of the Christian church. The prologue to John’s gospel is perhaps the most explicit treatment. Using language that reflects both Neoplatonic and stoic concepts that played a role in the historical development of the problem of universals, John claims that through the Word all things were made, and without the Word nothing was made that was made.  

Furthermore, in the text of the Nicene Creed, Christians assert that they believe that God is the creator of all that is, both seen and unseen.  

In so far as we have construed the problem of universals as a problem about the character of particulars, the sovereignty doctrine provides us at least a prima facie  

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22 As we will see in the next chapter, this is merely a prima facie reason. It is in principle defeasible if it can be shown that the sort of “dependence” that dependence on universals captures does not undermine the doctrine. In the next chapter we will see that some theist philosopher take this stance.  

23 Genesis 1; See, for example Psalms 8; 89; Isaiah 44. Nicolas Wolterstorff argues that these passages have only theological, and not metaphysical, significance. These passages are intended to show that God is worthy of their worship, not that everything, including abstract objects, is created by him. On Universals, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970), 294-5.  

24 John 1:3; Consider also Colossians 1:16-17, which describes the Son as him through whom all things, visible and invisible were made and hold together.  

*facie* reason to think that if something answering to the description of a universal actually exists, the relationship in which it stands to God must be one of a created thing to its creator or of something identical to the creator. ²⁶

In addition to the aseity-sovereignty doctrine, traditional theism is committed to divine omniscience. As with every doctrine, there is debate over what this requires and what it entails. Much of that debate is intertwined with debates over the nature of time, determinism, and the mode of divine knowledge. Do propositions about the future have truth-values? Is God’s knowledge of the future compatible with human free will? Is God’s knowledge propositional? Does propositional knowledge encompass all of God’s knowledge?²⁷ The number of questions demanding answers only increases when one brings this topic into the context of the problem of universals. Many ancient and medieval philosophers thought that knowledge is always knowledge of the universal.²⁸ That is, if I come to know that the wine is red, I have somehow apprehended or abstracted the universal from the particular, and it is in virtue of having done so that I have obtained something that counts as knowledge. Certainly, this knowledge comes to me through the senses, but I only know or understand what I am sensing once I have abstracted the universal. If this view is correct, one must wonder how God’s knowledge of particulars is related to knowledge of universals.

²⁶ Though, as we will see in the next chapter, some Christian Platonists argue for a more narrow reading of these texts.


²⁸ Aristotle, for example, thought that the form or redness somehow travelled through the air to my eye, producing a miniature impression of the form of redness on my eye.
For now, I want to leave these quandaries aside. At the very least, we can say that an omniscient God knows the truth-values of all propositions however he knows them and whatever else and however else God knows. Surely we also want to say that God knows the character of everything he creates when he creates it. Insofar as God creates everything, and insofar as we have concluded that the problem of universals is a problem about the character of particulars, God must know both the character of all things distinct from himself and whatever grounds that character. Presumably he also knows himself. So he also knows whatever (if anything) accounts for his own character.

It follows that any explanation that the theist gives of the character of particulars should be such that both the character and existence of particulars depend on God, that God does not depend on them, and that God knows them all. In the following section, we will consider several answers to the problem of universals and how we might make sense of the aseity-sovereignty and omniscience if we were to adopt them.

III. Theological Implications of a Theory of Universals

There are more solutions to the problem of Universals on offer in the literature than I can possibly do justice to in this chapter. Even if I could present every school of thought, I would not be able to account for the diversity within each of those groups. However, I

29 This grammatical structure is a bit awkward. I use it to avoid using “is creating” which suggests that God’s act of creation is somehow extended in time, a view incompatible with divine timelessness. Though my arguments in this work will not depend on a doctrine of timelessness, insofar as I am committed to this doctrine, nothing I say should depend on its denial.

will attempt to present the most compelling defenses of each of the more popular views. I can almost guarantee that proponents of each will feel that I have failed to give the most gracious account available, and I apologize in advance for this inevitability, hoping that the reader will read the insufficiencies of my descriptions charitably.

Historically, the problem of universals, when interpreted as the problem of the one over the many, has been given one of three kinds of solution: something answering to the Aristotelian definition (though not the Aristotelian theory) of a universal exists outside of the particular and accounts for its character; something answering to the Boethian criteria exists in the particular and accounts for its character; or something answering to Aristotelian definition exists in the mind of language-users that accounts for the predication of the same term to multiple particulars. The first two solutions have been broadly called ‘realist’ (extreme and moderate realism, respectively, in the middle ages; transcendent and immanent realism in the contemporary literature) accounts, while the latter has been called ‘nominalist.’ We will consider medieval proponents of each of these views in a later chapter. In the present literature, this nomenclature has been largely followed, though there is increasing awareness that it often serves more to obscure rather than to elucidate the various possible solutions. In what follows, I adopt this vocabulary for familiarity’s sake. However, it will be important to notice that certain approaches embrace aspects both of realism and nominalism. Trope-nominalism, for example, is a form of realism with respect to properties and nominalism with respect to universals (i.e., it denies that properties, which have real existence, are properly understood as ‘universals’).

31 Though, perhaps not completely answering to that definition. Unlike the Mediævals contemporary metaphysicians tend not to think that there is a special kind of universal—a genus, substantial form, or substance-kinds—that constitutes the particular in a way the property universals do not.
Evaluating the theories presented in this chapter requires that we adopt some principles of evaluation. The first criteria I will take into account is explanatory power. I will ask how well each theory explains the relevant facts about properties. I take these facts to be as follows: particulars apparently exemplify properties; individual particulars apparently exemplify multiple properties; multiple particulars apparently exemplify identical properties; it is, at least in principle, possible to speak truly about the character of particulars; and it is, in principle, possible to know (something of) the character of particulars. In addition to explanatory power, we will want a theory that demonstrates inner consistency. Finally, I will give metaphysical economy some weight, but only as it balances with explanatory power. Metaphysical economy will only push the scales in favor of a theory if the two are equal in explanatory power and both are compatible with the theological commitments described in the previous section.

A. Nominalisms

a. Concept and Class Nominalism

Concept nominalism and class nominalism (also called set nominalism) both explain properties in terms of group membership. According to concept nominalism, a particular has property F if and only if (henceforth iff) it falls under the concept F. The

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32 This view is alternately referred to as set or class nominalism. The preference for the term “class” arises from doubts about the ontological status of abstract objects such as sets, as well as some other troubling problems that arise from the use of set theory. If a set has all of its members necessarily, then it would not be possible for there to be more red objects than there actually are. This outcome is at least counterintuitive.

class nominalist claims similarly that a particular has a property F just in case it is a member of the class of F things. On the first theory, group membership is primitive in a certain sense. A concept is the sort of thing that exists in some mind. Thus, for a particular to fall under a concept, some rational being must have that concept. However, once the concept is conceived, the particular’s falling under it is just a primitive fact about that particular. For example, once someone somewhere has conceived of the concept “being red,” it is just a primitive fact that this glass of wine and that rose fall under that concept. Class membership is even more primitive insofar as classes may exist whether or not any rational being has conceived of them. Thus, being a member of the class of F things is just a primitive fact about all things to which the claim “x is F” truly applies. All of the red things are red because they are members of the set of “Red” objects.

D. M. Armstrong argues that both of these views reverse the most natural order of explanation. It makes intuitive sense to say that a particular falls under a concept or is a member of a class because of the character the thing has. Both concept and class nominalism reverse the explanatory priority by claiming that membership somehow determines, grounds, or explains that character, but it is hard to see how this could be. Furthermore, insofar as causal powers are aspects of a particular’s character, it is hard to see how falling under a concept or being a member of a class can explain why a particular has the powers it does. While these two approaches are ontologically economical—they only require that one accept the existence of concepts or classes (or sets)—they lack the sort of explanatory power that one might hope for.

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34 Ibid., 28
Undoubtedly, the concept or class nominalist could respond to Armstrong’s objections in the following way. “Concept and class nominalism do not purport to explain what it is in the particular that causes that particular’s character. If you want to know that, you need to ask a scientist. Only a scientist can explain what gives things the causal powers that they have. Concept and set nominalism are only intended to explain what grounds the truth of our discourse about the character that those particulars have. If you ask why what I say is true when I claim that ‘The wine is red,’ it is perfectly reasonable for me to claim that it is because the wine falls under the concept ‘redness.’” If the only fact one wanted to explain via one’s theory of properties was the truth of subject-predicate discourse, these theories might hold some promise. But as a theory of properties, they lack prima facie plausibility.

In terms of their compatibility with the aseity-sovereignty doctrine and divine omniscience, it appears that the theist who holds to one of these views has two options. Either she can claim that a particular falls under a concept “being F” or is a member of the class of F things because God created the particular in a certain way—in which case the character of the particular explains set and concept membership rather than vice versa—or she can claim that when God creates the particular, he looks to the class of F things or to some concept of “being F” and then makes whatever fits the criteria he sees there. In the latter case, the particular’s character would depend on God’s creative act in one sense, but it would also depend on something outside of God in a metaphysically relevant way. The theist would also be left in need of an account of how the concept or the set of F things depends on God for its existence, in order to fully satisfy the aseity-sovereignty doctrine. In fact, theist philosophers such as William Lane Craig have
argued that the existence of God is incompatible with the existence of any abstract objects such as sets. If Craig is correct, the theist would also have to provide a satisfactory nominalist account of sets in order to find this view attractive.

Furthermore, in the case of concept nominalism, it would not be absurd for the theist to believe that God could have created particulars with the character they have even if he had chosen not to create finite knowers such as ourselves, or if those finite knowers had failed to conceive of the concepts that they in fact conceive of. In such a case, the theist might want to identify the relevant concept with divine, rather than human, concepts.35 As this dissertation will show, I am partial to such a solution to the problem. However, I think there are good reasons to take Divine Conceptualism to be a form of realism rather than as a version of nominalism. This claim will be explored more fully in the next chapter when we consider Greg Welty’s Theistic Conceptual Realism—a view that is a form of conceptualism, in so far as universals are identified with God’s concepts, but also realist insofar as universals are mind-independent for all finite knowers and are causally prior to the metaphysical character of particulars.

A final problem for this family of view, which will arise in some fashion or another with all of the views, is that they both entail that if one is inclined to accept that God has a nature (and exemplifies various properties), then one must accept that God has his properties because he falls under a particular concept (ours or his own) or is a member of a set of things. There may be good reason to think that this violates the aseity doctrine.

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35 I will argue later that once one makes this move, she has all of the commitments necessary to embrace Theistic Conceptual Realism.
b. Resemblance Nominalism

Resemblance nominalism incorporates some of the commitments of set nominalism, but rather than stopping explanation at set membership, posits a ground for that membership in the character of the particulars that comprise the set. In this way, it can overcome the counterintuitive claim that character depends on membership, which afflicted the previous two systems. According to resemblance nominalism, particulars enjoy set membership in virtue of primitive resemblance relations that hold among the members of that set. A particular has property F just in case it is a member of the maximal resemblance class C. Within a maximal resemblance class, each particular resembles each other member of the class, and every nonmember fails to resemble at least one member.36

The resemblance relations, rather than class membership, are primitive for this sort of nominalism. Like concept and class nominalism, resemblance nominalism maintains what Armstrong calls a “blob theory” of particulars.37 Particulars have no internal structure. They are not built up out of combinations of properties or other constituents. In fact, properties do not enter into their ontological make up at all. Rather, resemblance is a primitive, internal relation that exists between unstructured particulars. It is just a fact that this particular resembles all of the members of class C and fails to resemble all of the members of class C’. Resemblance determines properties, not the


other way around. This approach leads to certain technical difficulties such as the
problems of coextension, companionship, and imperfect community.\(^{38}\)

The problem of coextension arises because it could be the case that every
particular with property F also has property G and vice versa (e.g., everything that is
triangular is trilateral and everything that is trilateral is triangular). Resemblance
nominalism doesn’t have the resources to distinguish between these two properties
because all of the things that have them will form only one maximal resemblance class
and, therefore, should exemplify only one property when, intuitively, there are actually
two. Imperfect community is a case in which each of the members of a group resembles
at least one other member without them all sharing a common property. In a world in
which only \(a\), \(b\), and \(c\) exist and in which \(a\) has properties F and G, \(b\) has properties G and
H, and \(c\) has properties H and F, each would resemble each other member, and no non-
member would resemble all of them. The three form a maximal resemblance class
without sharing a common property. And finally, the companionship problem arises
when the class of things instantiating one property is a proper subclass of those
instantiating another property (‘having mass’ and ‘having mass m’). The proper subclass
does not form its own maximal resemblance class because each of the members of the
class of which it is a subclass will not fail to resemble at least one of its members.
Various attempts have been made to solve these problems, but none of them is
conclusive. In fact, Alexander Paseau argues that the most satisfactory attempts
necessarily sneak in realist assumptions.\(^{39}\)

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\(^{38}\) Paseau, 362

\(^{39}\) Ibid., 376 ff.
On this theory, God’s knowledge of things in the world would be radically particular. God knows a, and b, and c, and so on. Each particular is a structure-less unity that God knows. What he knows when he knows that a and b are both red, is that a and b resemble every other member of the class of red things. There do not seem to be any obvious problems with this. Presumably, God can know both the particulars and all of the resemblance relations in which they stand in one eternal moment. It may be tempting to think that God would only know the character of any given particular in virtue of knowing all of the other particulars and the relations that hold between them, but this might not be the correct way to conceive of things. Perhaps this knowledge is simply not propositional, for without appeal to resemblance facts, particular a is not of any particular kind. The only propositional fact to be had without appeal to resemblance facts is that a exists. But perhaps God’s knowledge of the particular is the knowledge of direct acquaintance. God would then know the particular completely, just as it is. The resemblance relations hold in virtue of the nature of the unstructured particular, not the other way around. So, God would know the resemblance relations in virtue of knowing the particulars.

While there do not appear to be any obvious inconsistencies between resemblance nominalism and God’s knowledge, God’s nature might raise more serious worries than it did within concept and class nominalism. If God has a nature, then each property he exemplifies would be a way that God resembles all of the members of a class of things. However, many of the properties that theists believe that God exemplifies are properties unique to God, such as aseity, divinity, omniscience, etc. If they are unique to God, there will be only one member of the maximal resemblance class for each of them: God. Thus,
they must be the very same property. The same issues that raise the problem of coextension entail that God has only one property unique to himself. All the other properties that he has, he has in virtue of membership in a class along with other things. The proponent of this view has two options: either she can say that all of God’s properties are unique, in which case there is really only one, as proponents of divine simplicity claim, and the motivation for claiming that God has a nature may disappear altogether; or she could say that at least some of his properties are not unique and that God’s nature is determined by the relationship in which he stands to entities distinct from himself. If this were the case, there is a certain way in which the aseity doctrine is violated. Of course, this objection is not conclusive evidence against resemblance nominalism since it does not arise for those who do not accept that God exemplifies multiple properties.\(^\text{40}\)

c. Trope Nominalism

Trope nominalism differs from other nominalist theories in that it admits of properties, which enter into the metaphysical structure of particulars, rather than giving properties a reductive analysis. However, it does so without appealing to universals. Thus, trope nominalism is a realist theory with respect to properties, but a nominalist theory with respect to universals. Each particular’s particularized properties, called tropes, are numerically distinct from every other particular’s properties. This rose’s redness is numerically distinct from that glass of wine’s redness, even if the rednesses are identical in shade. Unfortunately, positing the existence of tropes does not, by itself, explain the continuity among the properties of numerically distinct particulars. If \(a\)’s \(F\) trope is

\(^{40}\text{I will take up and defend this view again in chapter 5.}\)
numerically distinct from b’s F’ trope, what justifies referring to both tropes as Fs? The trope nominalist must appeal to one of the aforementioned accounts for an explanation: tropes are tropes of a particular kind because they resemble one another, because they are members of the same class, or because they fall under the same concept. Appealing to one of these explanations will only be satisfying to the degree that the account itself can provide a sufficient explanation of continuity. Concepts and classes appear to raise the same problems when they are invoked to account for identity of tropes as they do when used to explain the identity of properties. However, many of the difficulties faced by resemblance nominalism fall away when the theory is combined with trope theory. Unlike particulars, which often (perhaps always) exemplify multiple properties, each trope is a single particularized property; therefore, the difficulties of coextension, imperfect community, and companionships do not arise. Thus, if a metaphysician is inclined to think that explanation can or should cease at the level of resemblance, she may find a satisfactory theory in the combination of trope and resemblance nominalism. Properties exist, but they are singular, particular things. D. M. Armstrong takes a similar stance, arguing that the combination of these two views is the strongest theory on offer in the literature if one is disinclined to accept the immanent realism to which he subscribes.

On trope nominalism, God both creates and knows particular things. What he knows when he knows the character of these particulars, is the tropes they have and the relations in which those tropes stand to every other trope. Thus, this approach appears to be no more or less problematic in relation to the sovereignty doctrine and the

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41 I know of no one who actually explains tropes via conceptual nominalism.

omniscience doctrine than is resemblance nominalism. If each of God’s properties is a unique trope, then one need not worry about their identity depending on resemblance relations. Indeed, for properties that finite creatures apparently share with the divine, one might think that they are what they are in virtue of the resemblance relations in which they stand to the divine.

A final approach open for a theistic nominalist who wishes to maintain nominalism while avoiding some of the disquieting consequences outlined in this section is to claim that questions about God’s knowledge and creation with respect to nominalism are misguided. Such a person might argue that properties are just a function of the human schemata for understanding the world, but have nothing to do with the “God’s eye point of view.” God simply knows each particular directly. Knowing their properties, as something distinct from knowing them, is an accident of the type of propositional knowledge that humans enjoy, but there is no reason to think that God must know them in this way. While there is something quite attractive about this view, it amounts to interpreting the problem of universals as a pseudo-problem as Quine, Devitt, and Craig do. While it is theologically convenient (and thus has been supported by theists who find the existence of abstract objects to be particularly theologically problematic), this view will not be metaphysically satisfying if one accepts, as I do, that the problem of universals is a real problem about the character of particulars.

B. Realisms

Among realists, there are two predominant views: immanent realism and transcendent realism. Both theories explain character, attribute-agreement, subject-predicate
discourse, and abstract reference in terms of exemplification of a universal. Michael Loux explains these three phenomena in the following way:

(V) Where particulars $a$ and $b$ agree in attribute, there is at least one universal. ‘$U$’, which $a$ and $b$ exemplify.$^{43}$

(VI) Where a predicate-term ‘$F$’ can be truly applied to all and only the objects, $a...n$, there is some universal, $U$, which all and only $a...n$ exemplify.$^{44}$

(VII) When a predicate-term functions in a position of abstract reference in a true subject-predicate sentence, it serves to pick out or refer to the universal, $U$, which is exemplified by all and only the objects of which it is truly predicable.$^{45}$

What distinguishes the two realist theories is the way they account for the relationship between these universals and the particulars that exemplify them. The two views are sometimes referred to as Aristotelian realism and Platonic realism, insofar as they take their primary intuitions from Aristotle and Plato respectively—the immanent realist claiming that universals exist only in particulars and the transcendent realist claiming that they exist apart from particulars in some abstract realm.

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$^{43}$ Loux, *Substance and Attribute*, 4. One might think that the vocabulary of exemplification, rather than instantiation, presupposes transcendent rather than immanent realism, but I do not mean it to do so.

$^{44}$ Ibid..

$^{45}$ Ibid., 15.
a. Immanent Realism

On an immanent theory of universals, universals answer, more or less, to the definition given by Boethius at the beginning of this chapter. There are universal entities that exist wholly and simultaneously within the metaphysical constitution of distinct particulars. On this view, universals are not eternal. They exist only when the particulars that exemplify them exist. Prior to the existence of any of those particulars, and after all of them pass back out of existence, the universals simply do not exist. Neither are all universals necessary. That is, many can exist in one possible world—the world in which their particulars exist—and fail to exist in another. And none exist unexemplified, for they come into and go out of existence with the particulars that exemplify them. This understanding of universals is sometimes referred to as a constituent ontology since those who subscribe to it usually understand universals as “parts” or constituents of the particulars that instantiate them. As a result, many philosophers in this camp do not think of universals as abstract objects at all, since it is hard to see how something abstract could constitute the nature of something concrete. Indeed, it is not even clear what it would mean for an abstract object to be in a spatio-temporally located object. However, some proponents of a broadly Aristotelian constituent ontology, such as J. P. Moreland, understand universals as abstract objects in the traditional sense while maintaining that they can exist in the things that exemplify them. Though, to be completely honest, I don’t fully understand what he means by this.

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46 At least not on standard theories of possible worlds.

47 Some universals might be necessary, if one thinks that being self identical and other things that are true of all particulars map onto real properties. They would exist in every non-empty world.

Immanent realism avoids some of the difficulties that afflict transcendent realism, as we will see below. However it is not without its own difficulties. Perhaps the most serious of them is that it is not completely clear exactly how it is possible for anything answering to Boethius’s description of a universal to exist at all. How can a single entity manage to exist wholly and simultaneously at multiple points in space? Such an entity seems either magical or impossible.\textsuperscript{49} To overcome this tension, Armstrong, who champions the view, suggests that we understand universals as constituents of states of affairs—namely, as “ways” things can be. It is easy to imagine how things in the world can be arranged “in the same way” without any sort of magic.\textsuperscript{50} This interpretation removes the motivation for a commitment to unexemplified universals; for “ways” things can be arranged only exist when things actually are arranged in that way.\textsuperscript{51}

This is happy news for the theist. If universals are of this sort, they are neither as mysterious nor as problematic as is often thought. God could have created universals in virtue of creating particulars, for one cannot exist without the other; and God can know what universals are possible by knowing what things he is capable of creating. However, as Peter van Inwagen points out, it is not clear that concrete particulars are the only entities to exemplify universals—universals themselves, numbers and propositions may

\textsuperscript{49} E. J. Lowe has argued that recent work in physics suggests that such entities are not magical at all. In fact, he takes the ability to exist at multiple points in space at a single moment as a necessary condition for a successful account of properties. See “Immanent Universals” Documenti e studi sulla tradizione filosofica medievale 18 (2007): 623-36.

\textsuperscript{50} One might think that this is a cop-out. The problem of universals asks, in part, for an explanation of kinds. To say that kinds are just “ways” of being, without any explanation of what makes this “way” the same as that “way” leaves us in the same place as the nominalisms we saw above.

\textsuperscript{51} Armstrong, Universals, 96-98. Though, it isn’t entirely clear to me that this is the case. Things could be arranged in a way that they are not in fact arranged. The immanent realist needs to have something to say about that status of these possibilities.
all exemplify universals as well. For example, one might think that numbers, which are abstract objects, if they exist at all, can exemplify the property “being prime,” and that the universal “redness” exemplifies the property “being a color.” Furthermore, the claim that universals come into and go out of existence raises problems for a realist account of certain facts. The realist may want the proposition, ‘A horse is a four-legged animal’ or ‘Murder is wrong’ to be true, even in a world in which God creates no horses and moral agents never kill one another unjustly. If one accepts the immanent account then it seems that either these sentences could lack truth-values or that their truth can be accounted for without reference to a universal. This is not necessarily a problem, but if it turns out that the truth-value of some sentences can be explained without universals, it may cast doubt on the motivation to account for the truth of any sentences in that way. Again, it may be the case that philosophers have been mistaken in thinking that universals play a primary role in accounting for the truth of discourse, but to so claim would be a rejection of at least one aspect of the classical understanding of the problem of universals. We may end up deciding that such a rejection is warranted, but one would have to decide that the other theories all do a worse job with reference to the criteria discussed above.

As with the previous perspectives, immanent realism raises its own problems for God’s nature. If universals enter into the metaphysical constitution of those things that exemplify them, then, universals partially account for God’s metaphysical constitution. This may conflict with the aseity doctrine. The only plausible way to avoid this outcome is to claim that a whole does not metaphysically depend in any way on its parts.

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b. Transcendent Realism

The transcendent realist posits universal entities that exist apart from particular things in the world. On this view, universals are most often conceived of as “abstract objects.” It is often thought that if abstract objects exist, they exist necessarily and eternally. They do not come into or go out of existence; they exist in every possible world; and since the particulars that exemplify them are not all necessary (i.e. do not themselves exist in every possible world), universals can exist unexemplified.

These entities answer to Aristotle’s definition of a universal insofar as they can be predicated of many. It is less clear whether or not they answer to Boethius’s definition since, while transcendent universals do account for the character of particulars, they don’t enter into metaphysical constitution in exactly the same way as an immanent universal would. Transcendent realists are usually more partial to a relational, rather than a constituent, ontology because it is not clear what it would mean for an abstract object to exist in some particular spatio-temporal location. On a relational ontology, particulars have the properties they do by standing in some relation to the universals that they

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53 There is significant debate over the criteria for “abstractness.” Does it mean only that the entity is nonmaterial, or that it is unable to enter into causal relationships, or something else? This question is of special import to the theist, since she is likely to be unhappy with any definition on which God turns out to be an abstract object, since we tend to think that no abstract object could be a person. Thus, van Inwagen argues that abstract object cannot enter into causal relations. As such, neither God nor anything else can create or annihilate them. To do so would be to causally interact with them.

54 That they can be predicated of many does not entail that every universal is in fact predicated of many. There are possible worlds where only one dog exists. But in that world, ‘dogness’ would still be a universal.

55 They account for the metaphysical character of particulars, but are not constituents of it.

56 This is a generalization. Some have suggested constituent ontologies that invoke abstract universal objects (see Moreland, Universals, and Gould, “How does an Aristotelian Substance have its Platonic Properties?”). I myself am unable to comprehend what it might mean for a non-spatiotemporal entity to inhere ‘in’ a spatiotemporal object as its constituent. Though, if one is inclined to accept body/soul or mind/body dualism, then one might be more sympathetic to the proposal than I.
exemplify. This relation, called the “exemplification relation” is notoriously difficult to elucidate. As it stands, it appears to mean just “whatever relation in which particulars must stand to their universals.” What that relation consists in goes undefined. Furthermore, opponents of this view have often argued that the very idea of an exemplification relation is fraught with insurmountable inconsistencies. For example, if exemplification is, indeed, a relation then there must be a universal in which that relation participates, and we are off on an infinite regress.

Starting with Plato, and throughout the Middle Ages, many proponents of what I am calling transcendent realism explained the relation we call exemplification in terms of participation. The idea is that the particular somehow takes part in the being of the form or universal in which it participates. Carl Vaught argued that participation in Plato’s Parmenides simply means imitation or resemblance of the Form that is participated in. I think this view holds significant promise for the theory proposed in this project, but it will need refinement to show how it might actually work with the system of universals I will propose later in this work.

Transcendent realism is the least ontologically economical system. It posits a vast, perhaps even infinite, number of entities with which, on most construals, we cannot interact. Our only grounds for accepting their existence is the theoretical work that they do. Whether or not we are justified in accepting such a robust ontology depends on just how well they do the necessary work. Proponents argue, that like immanent realism, transcendent realism can explain how it is that both this rose and that glass of wine are exactly the same shade of red. It is because they both exemplify the very same universal,

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redness. Both views can explain how it is that this particular exemplifies multiple properties. Where transcendent realism surpasses the immanent theory is in its ability to explain the “eternal truths” that seem to hold apart from the existence of any particulars that exemplify them. For example, transcendent realism has no difficult explaining why “Kindness is a virtue” is true even when there are no kind entities. Or why “Horses are four-legged animals” would be true even if no horse existed. It also allows for a unified theory of universals and other abstract objects (if universals are, in fact, abstract objects). On this account, physical particulars, universals themselves, numbers, and propositions can all exemplify universals, and that exemplification can be explained in the very same way. In light of all of these strengths, the transcendent realist claims that what her view lacks in parsimony, it makes up for in explanatory power.

The theist, however, faces significant difficulties if he wishes to accept this view. First, it appears to violate the sovereignty doctrine. If universals exist eternally, then there was no time when they came into being. One might want to argue that God eternally creates them. Indeed, Aquinas argued that there is nothing logically or philosophically inconsistent about a created universe existing eternally. Even if this is correct, there is still a difficulty with the necessity of abstract objects. If abstract objects indeed exist necessarily, the God could not have failed to create them. But presumably God’s sovereignty should allow that God could freely refrain from creating anything that he actually creates. Thus, there would be a possible world in which these abstract entities do not exist. On a possible-worlds account, abstract objects would not be necessary. Therefore, it seems that they do not depend on God for their existence.

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58 *Summa Theologica*, I. 45.
Perhaps the most troubling tension arises with regard to God’s own nature. If one accepts that God has a nature, then not only do universals not depend on God for their existence, but God depends on them for being the kind of being that he is. Historically, Christians have found this conclusion objectionable. If God has his goodness derivatively, but some abstract object has its goodness *a se*, then it seems that the abstract object is somehow superior in goodness to God.\(^59\) This conflicts with the traditional belief that God is the being, “greater than which cannot be thought.” If a theist wants to be a Platonist, he must either reject a strong aseity-sovereignty doctrine, or explain how one might formulate Platonism in a way that doesn’t conflict with it.

IV. Conclusion

The first section of this chapter concluded that the problem of universals is a real problem about the character of particulars. The second found that the aseity-sovereignty doctrine and divine omniscience are of particular interest in reconciling a theory of universals with traditional theism. Finally, in the last section, we considered the relative merits and failures of six different theories. Of the nominalist theories, the combination of trope and resemblance nominalism appears to offer the most explanatory power with the smallest conflict with the doctrines in question. The disadvantage is that explanation stops at the level of resemblance. We cannot explain why two tropes resemble one another, for resemblance is primitive. It is also left as an open question whether the lack of continuity

\(^59\) Even if one denies that goodness is itself good (i.e. that it is self-exemplifying), it still exists *a se*, and imparts God’s goodness on him.
among particulars may cause other theological difficulties for the theist. Among realist positions, transcendent realism offers greater explanatory power and a more unified theory, but it conflicts most seriously with the aseity-sovereignty doctrine. My own philosophical commitments push me in the direction of transcendent realism. Thus, if it turns out to be compatible with traditional theism, I take it to be the theory of choice. However, over the past three decades the possibility of both God and abstract objects like universals co-existing has come under significant scrutiny. Theist philosophers are divided both on the compatibility of these two views and on how to respond if they are incompatible. We will consider the three major responses in the next chapter.
Chapter 2

God and Abstract Objects: The Contemporary Landscape

Despite the apparent tension that arises from accepting the coexistence of God and abstract objects as traditionally construed, a surprising number of theists are realists about universals—even transcendent realists. More surprising is the fact that so few theist philosophers seem to have recognized the apparent tension between these two commitments. While the relationship between God and universals was considered at length in many treatises on the problem of universals in its glory days in the high Middle Ages, it is only over the past few decades that the question of their compatibility and relationship has become a point of serious discussion in the contemporary literature. Indeed, even now, only a handful of theist scholars have done serious work on the subject. Because of this dearth of scholarship, it will be helpful to expand our sphere of consideration in this chapter from arguments concerning the relationship between God and universals in particular, to the literature on the relationship between God and abstract objects in general. In chapter three, I will put forward a positive defensive of a theistic account of transcendent universals: Theistic Conceptual Realism. The review of the literature in this chapter will reveal that a successful version of Theistic Conceptual Realism about universals must provide satisfactory accounts of a number of important
issues. Most notably, it must account for the content of divine concepts, whether divine concepts are properly understood as perfect exemplars or as universals, the metaphysical constitution of particulars, and what makes TCR a realist rather than a nominalist account of universals.

As we proceed we must not allow that conversation to confuse or unnecessarily limit our options. Transcendent Realism, which I seek to defend, typically understands universals as abstract objects, which stand in relation to particulars. However, if a universal is primarily a functional term, as Peter van Inwagen and Greg Welty suggest, then the relationship between transcendent realism and abstract objects may not be a necessary one.¹ That is, if the problem of universals is essentially a problem of explaining the character of particulars, then whatever does all of the relevant explanatory work might properly be called a universal, even if it happens not to be abstract. It is at least theoretically possible, as we will see below, to imagine a theory, which could correctly be characterized as a form of transcendent realism about universals, because whatever does the work of a universal is outside of particulars and finite minds, while also denying the existence of abstract objects as traditionally understood. Even though the literature on the relationship between God and abstract objects will be illuminating in various ways, it need not circumscribe the range of possibilities for reconciling traditional theism with transcendent realism.

Unfortunately, the expansion to include abstract objects in general is not entirely straightforward on another front. There is no universally accepted definition of an

abstract object. Some take the distinction to be between those things that have spatio-
temporal locations and those that do not, while others take the distinction to be between 
those entities that can enter into causal relations and those that cannot. For our current 
purposes our general, non-technical understanding of the term should suffice. We can 
assume the category includes at least the standard abstract entities: sets, propositions, 
numbers, mathematical entities, properties, and the like. We will leave as an open 
question whether or not universals are necessarily abstract objects. We will also assume 
that whatever account of the abstract/concrete distinction we accept should issue the 
result that God is not an abstract object.

Among those who have attempted to define the relationship between God and 
abstract objects, three primary approaches have emerged. Some metaphysicians respond 
to the tensions described in the previous chapter by arguing that they are merely 
apparent. These I call the Platonic Theists. The Theistic Nominalists, on the other hand, 
claim that the conflict provides strong theological grounds for the theist to reject 
Platonism in favor of some form of nominalism, fictionalism, or anti-realism. A third

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2 For a complete list of the various approaches to abstract objects see: Rosen, Gideon, "Abstract 

3 Notice that on the first definition, God meets the criteria for abstract object, if one thinks that 
God is outside of space-time. On the second, however, he does not, insofar as he does enter into causal 
relations on most monotheistic accounts, and certainly according to the aseity-sovereignty doctrine. 
Perhaps this is not necessarily the case, but it seems at least plausible to assume that no person is an 
abstract object, and that God is a person (or analogous to a person).

4 Nicholas Wolterstorff, On Universals, 263-97; Peter van Inwagen, “God and Other Uncreated 
Things” in Metaphysics and God: Essays in Honor of Eleonore Stump. Ed. Kevin Tempe, (New York: 
Routledge, 2009), 3-20.

5 William Lane Craig, “A Nominalist Perspective on God and Abstract Objects,” Philosopha 
approach relieves the tension by identifying abstract objects with ideas in the mind of God in a way reminiscent of Augustine’s Neo-Platonism. Because both Platonic Theists and Theistic Nominalists reject the Neo-Augustinian approaches on various grounds, it will be helpful to begin with this view to prepare the reader to understand the subsequent critiques.

I. Neo-Augustinian Approaches

Thomas Morris and Christopher Menzel’s Theistic Activism (TA) and Greg Welty’s Theistic Conceptual Realism (TCR) are two theories that draw inspiration from Augustine’s metaphysics and theology. Just as Augustine resolves the tension between the existence of Platonic forms and the nature of the Christian God by identifying the Forms with Divine Ideas, this family of view identifies universals with God’s concepts, propositions with God’s thoughts, and possible worlds with God’s knowledge of maximal possible groupings of those propositions. The primary difference between these two views is that TA conceives of God’s concepts and thoughts as something eternally


7 Paul Gould presents a thorough account of the various options and approaches in this debate in his article: “The Problem of God and Abstract Objects: A Prolegomenon.” Philosophia Christi 13. (2011): 255-74. I can hardly hope to provide a more enlightening account than his, and am indebted to him for my division of the positions.

8 We will consider the details of Augustine’s argument in the next chapter.
created by God, not unlike the way that thoughts and concepts are generated by finite minds, while TCR conceives of God’s concepts and thoughts as uncreated and eternal but metaphysically dependent upon him. If the central claim of these two views correctly captures the nature of universals, then there is no tension between that claim that universals exist necessarily and eternally and the belief that everything distinct from God depends on God for its existence.

A. Theistic Activism

To the best of my knowledge, Theistic Activism, presented in Morris and Menzel’s 1986 paper, “Absolute Creation,” is the first contemporary proposal by an analytic philosopher of a Neo-Augustinian approach to abstract objects. As the title suggests, Morris and Menzel argue that God can be, and in fact is, the absolute creator of all of reality, both necessary and contingent, concrete and abstract. Their thesis claims that, “[A] strongly modalized Platonism and a theism stressing absolute creation are indeed consistent, and can be integrated together into what may be the most powerful, comprehensive theistic metaphysic that can be constructed.”  They propose that properties and relationships are the products of God’s intellectual activity, “a causally efficacious or productive sort of divine conceiving.” Properties and relations are dependent on God’s intellectual activity as their cause.

The most apparent danger of embracing such a view is that it may lead to universal possibilism. If modality is the product of God’s thoughts, then perhaps God could chose to think different thoughts that he in fact does, and therefore conceive of

\[\text{Morris and Menzel, 354.}\]
different maximal groupings than he in fact does. Morris and Menzel respond to this concern by pointing out that this question is tantamount to asking what would be possible if what is possible were different. That is, if God’s thoughts produce the set of all possible worlds, there is no way for us to get outside of that framework to say what other framework there might have been. We are forced to say that God necessarily creates the framework of necessity that we have, because we cannot place ourselves outside of the framework to evaluate it. Thus, it is not possible that logically false sentences could be true, and the threat of universal possibilism is averted.

This response raises a second worry. In what sense is God free if he necessarily creates the metaphysical framework that he in fact creates? Morris and Menzel respond to this worry in the same way that other analytic philosophers have responded to claims that moral constraints on God—the fact that God cannot do evil, for example—limit God’s freedom and undermine the praiseworthiness of God’s moral goodness. They argue that to think in such terms is to conflate external constraint with acting in accordance with something’s nature. If only moral actions issue from the nature of God, God is free to act however God wishes. This is not the absence of freedom, but the presence of it in the truest and most robust sense.

Neither of the previous two rebuttals have been subject to much critique. However, there is a final worry, often referred to as “the bootstrapping problem,” that most believe to be a noose that hangs the Theistic Activists’ entire project. This problem arises when we turn to consider, not the properties and relations that exist between things out in the world, but God’s own nature. If universals are the result of God’s intellectual activity, and God himself has a nature, it seems that God’s nature—the fact that he is
good, beautiful, and divine, for example—is the product of his own intellectual activity.

It appears that God pulls his nature into existence by his own metaphysical bootstraps.

As Michael Bergman and Jeffrey Brower frame the problem, if God creates the property, “being able to create a property,” he must already exemplify it in order to have the capacity to create it.\(^\text{10}\) In a recent article Paul Gould formalizes the bootstrapping problem in the following way: \(^\text{11}\)

(1) The concept \textit{being divine} = the property \textit{being divine}. (Activist claim assumed for \textit{reductio})\(^\text{12}\)

(2) The property \textit{being divine} is logically prior to God (that is, the divine substance). (From Principle of Character Grounding)\(^\text{13}\)

(3) God (that is, the divine substance) is logically prior to the thought that he is divine. (Premise)

(4) If God (that is, the divine substance) is logically prior to the thought that he is divine, then God is logically prior to any necessary constituents of the thought that he is divine. (premise)

(5) The concept \textit{being divine} is a necessary constituent of God’s thought that he is divine. (Premise)


\(^{11}\) Paul Gould, “Theistic Activism,” 127-139.

\(^{12}\) Presumably Gould means that God’s concept \textit{being divine} is equivalent to the property \textit{being divine}, since it seems at least possible some of the concepts held by various humans may differ from God’s own.

\(^{13}\) The Principle for Character Grounding: Properties explain the character things have, 130.
(6) Therefore, God (that is, the divine substance) is logically prior to the concept
being divine (From 3, 4 and 5)

(7). Therefore, God (that is, the divine substance) is logically prior to the property
being divine. (From 1 and 6 and the law of identity)

(8) ~(2 & 7). (From the fact that logical priority is asymmetrical)

(9) Therefore, ~(1) (from 2-7 by reductio)

While Morris and Menzel acknowledge that the theory appears to lead to an
unacceptable form of bootstrapping, they argue that such bootstrapping is not vicious.
Using the example of a ‘materialization machine,’ they envision a machine perpetually
materializing its own replacement parts as the old ones wear out. They claim that if this is
not problematic as an account of the machine’s continued existence, then they don’t think
that God conceiving his own nature is a problematic account of God’s existence. Even if
the example fails to adequately capture the nature of divine bootstrapping, they state that
“it just seems to [them] that there is nothing logically or metaphysically objectionable
about God’s creating his own nature in precisely the way indicated.”14 Strong as this
intuition may be for them, it appears that no other philosophers share it. Others,
including myself, worry that the materialization machine already existed with all of its
parts and capacities prior to creating its own replacement parts. In God’s case, however,
this is not so. God cannot exist before his nature in the proper sense in order to be able to
create it by divine conceptualization.

14 Morris and Menzel, 360.
B. Theistic Conceptual Realism

Rather than taking on the entire abstract horde, Greg Welty proposes a theist account of truth. As we saw in the first chapter, it is fairly standard to think that the truth of subject-predicate discourse and abstract reference depends on a theory of universals. Welty presents the theory as incorporating aspects of three of the more standard accounts of universals: concept nominalism, predicate nominalism, and transcendent realism.\(^{15}\)

Like TA, TCR suggests that the divine mind can provide the metaphysical basis for universals. However, rather than understanding divine mental activity as something that creates divine concepts, TCR suggests that God’s concepts are an uncreated aspect of the divine mind, and, thus, the divine nature. Welty offers two considerations in favor of believing that God has ideas, or something like ideas. First, God is the intelligent creator of everything that is distinct from himself. This suggests a correspondence between his ideas and the world that he creates. Second, God is omniscient. “If this knowledge includes belief as an essential component, and if belief presupposes the possession of concepts, then presumably divine omniscience entails the possession of a multitude of concepts, or ideas.”\(^{16}\)

Understanding universals in this way entails that TCR is a form of conceptualism. Rather than being abstract entities, universals are identical with particular, concrete (at least on some understandings of the term) divine concepts. Things in the world have the properties they do in virtue of falling under these divine concepts rather than others. Welty points out that TCR could alternately be interpreted as a form of predicate nominalism, if one was inclined to believe that concepts are necessarily language-

\(^{15}\) Greg Welty, "Truth as Divine Ideas," 55-69

\(^{16}\) Ibid., 58.
dependent. On this account, “a has property F if and only if a falls under God’s predicate F” rather than because it falls under some human predicate. This view has the added difficulty of requiring that God entertain predicates of some divine language, which, while not impossible, would at least require a bit of philosophical work to motivate. Finally, TCR should be interpreted as a form of transcendent realism. Universals are mind-independent for all finite minds in virtue of being in the mind of a transcendent being (as opposed to traditional conceptualism), they do not exist in particulars (as opposed to imminent realism), and they can exist unexemplified (as maintained by transcendent realism).

We saw in the first chapter that each of the standard accounts of these theories face significant difficulties. All three of theories (certainly the first two and possibly the last) face what Welty calls the “Intuition of Independence.” It just does not seem right to say that a particular has the character it does because it falls under a concept or a predicate. Rather, we tend to think that something falls under a concept or a predicate because of the character it has. In the case of Transcendent Realism, one might imagine the abstract universal ceasing to exist while the particular remained. It isn’t clear why the character of the particular should change in such a case, since abstract objects are causally effete. Concept and Predicate Nominalism also face the challenge of their

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17 Ibid., 60. I find this interpretation less plausible than the first, since presumably something only falls under God’s predicate in case it falls under his concept. Because predicate nominalism requires the existence of a divine language, something which may be problematic, it seems like a significantly weaker candidate than Concept nominalism.

18 These challenges are outlined by Armstrong in *Universals: an opinionated Introduction*, whom Welty cites in the text.

19 We will see an argument similar to this in Craig’s work later in this chapter. It is a controversial claim insofar as the antecedent is at least plausibly thought to be impossible. If it isn’t possible for the universal to cease to exist, the statement is true in an uninteresting way.
finitude. We saw that there simply are not enough human concepts and predicates to go around. It seems at least theoretically possible for particulars to have properties that no human being has ever conceived of or constructed a predicate to describe. Finally, particulars have causal powers. However, it is rather odd to think that a human concept or a human predicate makes it the case that a particular can cause the things that it can.

In the case of TCR, the independence problem is avoided since, as we saw above, all particulars are causally dependent on divine concepts in a way that they do not and cannot depend on human concepts. If particulars are causally dependent on divine concepts, then it is not possible for there to be a property that God has failed to conceive (or a predicate that he has failed to construct). God could plausibly have an infinity of concepts or predicates, which is plenty to go around. It is equally unproblematic, and even necessary, for the causal powers of particulars to depend on the concepts of their Creator.

While TCR avoids the classic objections to these three theories, it may fall prey to at least one of the bootstrapping worries presented in the previous section. Since God’s mental activity does not create universals, one need not worry that God creates his own nature in the same way that Morris and Menzel’s materialization machine creates its own replacement parts. However, there does seem to be a circularity of dependence of the kind that Gould’s objections reveal. God’s nature must be metaphysically prior to his thoughts about his nature, but his thoughts about his nature determine the properties of his nature. If Welty’s theory is to fare any better than TA, it must supply a reply to this concern.20

20 Something that I will do in Chapter 5.
II. Platonic Theism

Neo-Augustinians turn to the Christian philosophical tradition for resources to maintain a strong realism and a classical form of theism. Platonic Theists, on the other hand, respond by adopting a weaker reading of the aseity-sovereignty doctrine in the Christian tradition than the one I have proposed. According to this reading, it isn’t the case that all things, in an absolute sense, depend on God for their existence, and it isn’t the case that God depends on nothing, in that same absolute sense, for his existence. Rather, the aseity-sovereignty doctrine applies only to dependence relations in a particular domain—the domain of concreta. Nicholas Wolterstorff and Peter van Inwagen argue for this perspective. Both first endeavor to demonstrate that it doesn’t make philosophical sense to think of abstract objects as depending on God, and then argue that the theological motivations for the stronger reading of the aseity-sovereignty doctrine are misguided.

A. God Cannot Create Abstract Objects

In his article, “God and Other Uncreated Things,” van Inwagen argues that the existence of free abstract objects is compatible with the Nicene Creed, which claims that God is the creator of all things “visible and invisible.”\(^2\) On van Inwagen’s definition, a free abstract object is one that does not enter into causal relations. He points out that if creation is a causal relation, as it certainly is, then it follows by definition that God cannot create free abstract objects. However, one might wonder what should motivate us to accept that there are any free abstract objects to begin with. Unfortunately, van Inwagen does not

\(^2\) Peter van Inwagen, “God and Other Uncreated Things.” He admits to believing that all abstracta are free, but does not defend the stronger claim, 7-8.
defend his commitment to the existence of such objects in this particular work. However, as I mentioned in the last chapter, in an earlier article he argues that metaphysicians cannot get away with being nominalists about properties.22 Since a number of sentences with references to properties cannot be appropriately paraphrased without such references, we must accept that properties exist. According to his theory, these properties are “unsaturated assertibles.”23 Since “something that can be said of something” is certainly not a concrete thing, it must be an abstract object.24 Furthermore, assertibles are not the sorts of things that could exist contingently. If the “something that can be said of something” did not exist, it would not even be possible for it to exist, for, if it were possible, then one could say it of something. Therefore, if assertibles were contingent, the accessibility relation would not be symmetrical—which seems like too high a price to pay for contingent properties.25 Still, this does not necessarily show that assertibles cannot enter into causal relations. For though it is tempting to equate being necessary with being uncreated, this can, and has been, reasonably denied. Van Inwagen admits to being unprepared to offer any good arguments in favor of equating the two. So, even though it is intuitive to think that assertibles are not the sorts of things that could cause anything or be caused themselves, we still lack an argument for the view that there are

22Peter van Inwagen, "A Theory of Properties."

23Ibid., 132.

24Ibid., 133.

25Ibid., 138.
free abstract objects. Nonetheless, the discussion does set the stage for van Inwagen’s arguments against alternatives to his view.26

The theist might want to avoid weakening the aseity-sovereignty doctrine in the face of these arguments by appealing to an Aristotelian theory of properties—what I called immanent realism in the previous chapter. As we saw in the first chapter, if Aristotle was correct, and universals exist in things rather than apart from them, then God can create properties by creating the particulars of which the properties are constituted. God creates redness in virtue of creating red things and the property being a cat by creating cats. However, van Inwagen critiques this view as a solution to the problem of abstract objects on three primary grounds. First, as I mentioned in the previous chapter, it is not at all clear that an abstract object—one that does not have spatio-temporal location—can exist in a spatio-temporal object. In fact, it is not at all clear what the claim that it can would even mean, since in is a spatial locator, which presumably fails to apply to anything that is not spatio-temporally located.27 Second, immanent realism entails that there are no uninstantiated universals, so the existence of even one uninstantiated universal refutes it. van Inwagen thinks that such counter-examples are

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26 The problem with van Inwagen’s view is that while it is “Platonist” in the sense that it admits the existence of abstract objects like assertibles, it does not provide a solution to the problem of universals as we have defined it. According to our criteria, a theory of properties would not only give us a non-vacuous (though very nearly vacuous by van Inwagen’s own lights) theory of properties, it would also suggest what metaphysical realities ground that theory. On van Inwagen’s theory, abstract objects called assertibles ground the existence of properties, but we are offered no idea of what makes applying this assertible to this particular object appropriate and its application to that object inappropriate. If properties in no way enter into the constitution of the particular, what relation do they bear to the particular, and to what aspect of the particular do they bear it?

27 At this point van Inwagen distinguishes between being in a concrete object and being a constituent of a concrete object. But strangely, the example he gives to illustrate is of a concrete object that is a constituent of the abstract object (on some accounts), rather than an abstract object being a constituent of the concrete one. I am unsure whether van Inwagen genuinely conflates the two, or if the introductory sentence is merely a typing error—one that should read “an abstract object’s existing in a concrete object is not the same as …a concrete object’s being a constituent of an abstract object” rather than vice versa.
quite easy to produce. Anything that *could* be said of something, but cannot be said *truly* of anything, is an uninstantiated property. One could say of something “that it is a woman who was the president of the United States in the twentieth century.”\(^{28}\) Since this cannot be said truly of anything, it is an uninstantiated property. Thus, if van Inwagen’s theory of properties as unsaturated assertibles is correct, universals are not Aristotelian. This is hardly a surprising outcome, because the argument presupposes van Inwagen’s own theory. van Inwagen’s third objection is also one we saw in the previous chapter. Particulars, or concreta, are not the only things that instantiate properties. Numbers, properties, and relations all exemplify properties as well. If any of these are free, then God cannot create the properties they exemplify simply by creating them.

Thus, van Inwagen claims that we have an independent reason to reject the Aristotelian approach, and we can conclude that, if free abstract objects exist, God cannot create them. One might respond by accepting the truth of this claim, but denying that either the antecedent or the consequent are true. Certainly it is true that God could not create free abstract objects, but there simply aren’t any such things. In the absence of an argument that forces us to accept their existence, this approach seems legitimate. Indeed, on the Neo-Augustinian accounts presented in the previous section, it is not entirely clear whether abstract objects end up being free.\(^{29}\)

Rather than assuming the existence of free abstract objects, Nicholas Wolterstorff points to properties that most realists would want to accept, and then demonstrates that they are neither exemplified by God nor created by him. For example, God does not

\(^{28}\) van Inwagen, “God and Other Uncreated Things,” 10.

\(^{29}\) Though it isn’t entirely clear that the things we usually think of as abstract end up being truly abstract on those accounts.
exemplify the property ‘being either true or false,’ and it is not the case that all exemplifications of this property are brought into existence by God.\textsuperscript{30} The proposition ‘God exists’ exemplifies the property ‘being true or false,’ and God did not bring this proposition into existence at any point in time, so God could not have created the property that it exemplifies.\textsuperscript{31} At the very least we have one property that God could not have created. Neither this nor van Inwagen’s argument demonstrates that God cannot create \textit{any} abstract objects; however, if one accepts that there are \textit{some} that God cannot create, this removes a great deal of the motivation for claiming that God creates the others. In accepting that there is at least one thing that doesn’t depend on God for its existence, one has already violated—and thus been forced to weaken or reject—the sovereignty doctrine. If one does so for one case, there seems to be no reason to avoid doing so in the others, even if one can. Therefore, one would need a reason independent of the aseity-sovereignty doctrine to propose that \textit{some} but not \textit{all} abstract objects depend on God for their existence.

\textit{B. Abstract Objects cannot be identical with God’s thoughts}

If God could not have created all abstract objects, then perhaps the theist will want to follow the Neo-Augustinians in claiming that the metaphysical heavy lifting that we usually think is done by abstract objects can actually be done by God’s concepts. Both

\textsuperscript{30} Presumably, Wolterstorff thinks that this property is only exemplified by propositions. Otherwise, Jesus’ claim that he is the truth might motivate the belief that God \textit{does} exemplify this property. However, even if Wolterstorff’s example fails, it seems plausible that we could find another property to fit his description.

\textsuperscript{31} Wolterstorff, \textit{On Universals}, 292
van Inwagen and Wolterstorff reject this approach, arguing that it is founded on fundamental misunderstandings.

Wolterstorff argues that the medieval proponents of the view that Forms or universals are identical with ideas in the mind of God were led astray by conflating being a universal with being a paradigm or perfect exemplar. He thinks that if they had understood this distinction more clearly, they would not have made such absurd claims. According to Wolterstorff, the confusion originated in Plato and, from there, was passed on to Augustine and Aquinas. Plato spoke of the Forms alternately as universals and as perfect examples of themselves. So, while he claims that a just thing is just in virtue of exemplifying justice, he also often referred to “the Just Itself” or “Justice itself.”

The difference between these two ways of understanding the forms may become clearer if we consider the notorious “third man problem” from Plato’s *Parmenides*—the dialogue that raises a series of difficulties for Plato’s theory, or at least for the common interpretation of Plato’s theory. When the form of justice is understood as a universal, one can think of it as that in virtue of which a particular thing is just—more specifically, the particular is just in virtue of standing in the proper sort of relation to the form of justice. However, if the form is also understood as a paradigm or perfect example of justice, then all of the particular things that are just and the form justice all have something in common—namely, that they are just. Therefore, some third thing is needed—a second universal *Justice*² in virtue of which the particulars and the form have some common property. In other words, if things are only just in virtue of justice, and the form is a paradigm of justice, then the paradigm must stand in the proper relation to some universal justice.
Some scholars acknowledge Plato’s inconsistency on this matter, while others assume that he would not have made such a blatant mistake, and therefore try to interpret the passages that seem to present one of these understandings in terms of the other. Wolterstorff takes the former approach, and makes the further claim that Augustine’s and Aquinas’s belief that the forms were ideas in the mind of God was based on this fundamental misunderstanding.

As we will see in the next chapter, part of Augustine’s justification for locating the forms in the mind of God is that God must have an idea or plan for creation when he creates, otherwise he would create irrationally. And an idea or plan for creation is something like a paradigm or perfect exemplar. Indeed, Aquinas later refers to God’s ideas as exemplar causes, and acknowledges that in this limited sense, Plato’s theory is exactly right. But this poses a problem. What would it mean for God’s ideas to be perfect examples or paradigms? According to Wolterstorff’s argument, a perfect example of justice must itself be just. But it doesn’t seem to make good sense to say that an idea, even God’s idea, is itself just. A person can be just, and an action can be just, but an idea of justice is not itself just. Ideas are not the sorts of things that can be just. In the same way, God’s idea of a dog or a horse is not itself a dog or a horse. There may be certain paradigms that are self-exemplifying. It might make sense to say that God’s idea of a good thing is itself good. However, as mentioned above, if God’s ideas cannot account for all forms, the motivation for claiming that God’s ideas account for any of the forms is significantly reduced. Furthermore, in the case of these self-exemplifying ideas,

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32 Wolterstorff thinks it problematic that Aquinas alternately talks of God’s ideas as exemplar causes and God himself as the perfect exemplar. For now, we will leave this distinction aside and return to it in the next chapter when we consider Aquinas theory in more depth. At that point, I will show that this is not the result of confusion.
we may still run into the third man problem. One could still legitimately ask, in virtue of what God’s idea of goodness is itself good. A perfect example must be a perfect example of something. The fact that God must know what he creates when he creates does not provide an account of universals. It issues an account of paradigms, and even this fails the test of consistency. At least, so Wolterstorff claims. This, together with the examples he offers of universals that God apparently cannot create provides *prima facie* motivation to reject the idea that universals somehow depend upon God for their existence.

Both Richard Davis and Peter van Inwagen also devote considerable space to considering whether or not God’s thoughts, ideas, or concepts might be identified with abstract objects. They both conclude that abstract objects such as properties and relations cannot possibly be identified with anything in the mind of God. However, they diverge on their assessment of whether or not propositions can be so identified. Since Davis’s view on propositions aligns more closely with the commitments of Theistic Conceptual Realism, we will not consider his argument in favor of it here.

Van Inwagen rejects the possibility of identifying abstract objects with God’s thoughts on the grounds that we don’t have a clear enough idea of what a “thought” is. Since we cannot identify “God’s thought” of anything, we cannot use this as the grounds for explaining abstract objects. He begins by claiming that while he has no idea what a concept or an idea of a property or a relation might be—because while we can think *about* a property or a relation, we cannot simply think the property or relation—it might make sense to identify true propositions with God’s thoughts. God’s thought or belief that I ate toast and jam for breakfast is the proposition ‘Michelle Panchuk ate jam for breakfast.’ However, to make sense of this claim, we need a clearer idea of what we
mean when we say “God’s thought that...” van Inwagen suggests that it only makes sense to claim that thoughts are mental event-tokens. He then appeals to Jaegwon Kim’s account of events—pointing out that he has no better ideas of what an event might be—according to which event-tokens are episodes of property exemplification.

Unfortunately, van Inwagen thinks that this view is metaphysically profligate, for it suggests that in addition to the object and the property, there is this additional thing called an event. There are only objects, properties, and times. Since he is inclined to think that there are no such things as events, there are no thoughts, only thinkers who think. Thus there are no thoughts in God’s mind that are identical to true-propositions or to any other abstract objects.

Even if this is incorrect and God’s thoughts are mental events of a God in time, there is no way to identify which of those mental events is the relevant mental event—for example, which one is, say, the thought ‘Michelle Panchuk ate toast and jam for breakfast’—without an appeal to properties, since events are cases of property exemplification. Thus, thoughts have properties as their constituents. This means that for abstract objects to be God’s thoughts, God must be the creator of the properties that are their constituents. And van Inwagen doesn’t think that anyone can give an account of how this is possible. If one counters this by claiming that the work normally done by abstract objects is done by particular ideas in God’s mind, so that there is nothing abstract or universal about them, then van Inwagen rejects the theory on the grounds that it is a form of nominalism, and not a form of realism. Since he has argued extensively against nominalism, he takes it for granted that those arguments will be equally successful against this sort of theory. However, he does not respond to Welty’s arguments in favor
of seeing a theory that lacks abstract objects as traditionally understood as a form of transcendent realism.

Davis provides a different, and I believe more powerful, argument against identifying properties and relations with God’s ideas. Rather than claiming that he simply doesn’t know how to identify them, Davis points out two absurdities that apparently follow from the claim that properties and relations are God thoughts. If one is a bundle theorist, and properties are identical to God’s thoughts, then it seems as though material things are nothing more than bundles of divine ideas (i.e. one is forced to become a Berkeleyan Idealist). If, on the other hand, one is partial to substratum theory, according to which bare substrata are the property-less bearers of properties, then there are things that exist and are what they are precisely because God has no concept of them. This is troubling, since a bare particular is a concrete thing, and all of the philosophers whom we consider in this chapter agree that God is the creator of all concreta. However, the problem goes beyond mere theological problems. It is also self-referentially incoherent.

It looks as though Socrates is the result of God’s conceiving of [a bare particular] in terms of the divine concept being human, which is strange enough. However, matters are ever worse; for $b$ [Socrates’ substratum] is a thing with no properties of its own, which on [property-concept conflation] simply means that God does

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33 Which is an odd objection on van Inwagen’s parts since it doesn’t seem that philosophers of mind have any one way of precisely identifying which of our thoughts are which, but that doesn’t seem to prevent them from including thoughts and beliefs in their metaphysics.

34 Davis doesn’t seem to address the differences between constituent and relational ontologies in his paper. While his claim seems particularly powerful in the case of a constituent ontology, it is less clear that it succeeds as an objection to a relational ontology.
not have a concept of it; in which case Socrates is the consequence of God’s conceiving of a thing of which he has no conception.\textsuperscript{35}

Either of these outcomes—Berkleyan idealism or incoherence—would be devastating to the project of identifying abstract objects with something in the mind of God. As far as I know, no other proponent of a Neo-Augustinian view has responded to this objection. Later chapters of this project will amend that unfortunate state of affairs.

\textit{C. Sacred Texts do not Require that Abstract Objects Depend on God}

Since their arguments conclude that God cannot create abstract objects either as something distinct from himself or as the creator of his own thoughts, van Inwagen and Wolterstorff claim that the theologians who support the strong aseity-sovereignty doctrine that we saw in the previous chapter have misinterpreted the meaning of the relevant texts, giving those texts metaphysical rather than exclusively religious significance. van Inwagen argues that just as Matthew did not mean to infer that God can cause contradictory states of affairs to exist simultaneously when he wrote that “with God all things are possible,” it is not inconsistent to think that when the Biblical writers wrote of God as the creator of all things, they did not have \textit{literally} all things in mind. Thus, van Inwagen suggests that we restrict the scope of the “all” in the Nicene creed to refer only to things that may enter into causal relations.

Similarly, Wolterstorff points out that neither the Old nor New Testament writers had abstract objects in mind when they describe God as the creator of all things.\textsuperscript{36} This

certainly is not definitive evidence, as Morris and Menzel point out. 37 The Biblical writers didn’t have quarks or photons in mind when they wrote of the absolute creation of God, but that does not seem like a good reason to think that we cannot legitimately infer from those texts that the biblical authors would have said that God created quarks and photons if they had known that such things existed. Nevertheless, Wolterstorff argues that the function of the relevant passages was not abstract metaphysical inquiry but religious doctrine. He cites a number of passages to suggest that the writers used teaching about God’s creation to illustrate two religiously significant claims. First, God has a claim on the praise and obedience of human beings. Second, humans can trust God without fearing that he is lacking in power. Few would want to argue against these two religious applications. However, the religious significance and metaphysical significance are not mutually exclusive. In fact, religious claims often require metaphysical grounds. Indeed, if no metaphysical or ontological conclusions can be drawn from teaching that has primarily religious significance, then much of what is done in contemporary philosophy of religion is misguided. Of course, this alone is not reason to reject Wolterstorff’s claim. Perhaps analytic metaphysicians are fundamentally misguided in our philosophical project; however, unless we have good reason to deny the metaphysical consequences of the religious teachings, it seems natural to assume that they do, in fact, follow. Thus, I believe that the weight of this argument depends on the success or failure of Wolterstorff’s arguments against the possibility of universals depending on God.

36 Though, this may not be as straightforward a claim as it appears, insofar as some New Testament authors seem to be fairly familiar with Hellenistic philosophy. This hints that they might have been familiar with the notion of forms. See, for example, John’s use of Logos as it relates to Stoicism and Neoplatonism, Paul’s use of cynicism and, what appears to be references to platonic ideas by the writer of the Hebrews. It is not impossible that these authors were aware of theories of such objects and had them in mind in their writing.

37 Morris and Menzel, 354.
Similarly, it seems that the success of any Platonic theism will depend on the degree to which the arguments against the alternatives are successful. If either Neo-Augustinian or nominalist approaches can provide a coherent account of the character of particulars, it seems preferable to maintain the strong aseity-sovereignty doctrine that has historically been considered part and parcel of Christian orthodoxy.

III. Theistic Nominalism

While the Platonic theists start with questions of philosophical consistency when considering the relationship between God and abstract objects, theistic nominalists start with theological considerations. William Lane Craig not only starts with the assumption of the existence of God (as have we), but with a very specific theological framework. He argues that these commitments force one to choose between theism and Platonism. Brian Leftow, on the other hand, argues that if one already has God in one’s ontology, then one has theoretical reasons to be a nominalist.

A. Theological Grounds for Rejecting Abstract Objects

In an early article, co-authored with Paul Copen, Craig asserts that “[a] consistent Christian theist then cannot be a Platonist.” In a more recent article, he states even

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more strongly that “if Platonism is true, then, there literally is no God.” Not only can Christians not consistently be Platonists, but no theist of any kind may be one, on pain of contradiction. In both cases, Craig cites the aseity-sovereignty doctrine and creation ex nihilo as the theological grounds for this claim. He points out that Platonism not only allows that there is something in the universe that does not depend on God for its existence—a threat to the aseity-sovereignty doctrine in itself—but that those things which do depend on God are “an infinitesimal triviality utterly dwarfed by the unspeakable quantity of uncreated things.” Furthermore, with so many uncreated, necessary entities in the universe, “God himself is reduced to but one being among many.” The strength of these claims is a bit odd since, in the earlier article, he endorses restricting our understanding of theological terms when failing to do so leads to contradictions. In particular, he addresses the debate over whether or not the denial of universal possiblism is compatible with the Christian doctrine of omnipotence. He sees

39 William Lane Craig, “A Nominalist Perspective on God and Abstract Objects,” 305.

40 Though Craig does not provide a definition, it appears that he equates Platonism with a belief in the existence of abstract objects—something that I refer to as metaphysical realism (about universals, since I am interested in only one sort of abstract object). However, some of his other comments suggest that by Platonism he may mean as very specific sort of transcendent realism. In various places in the 2004 text, he contrasts Platonism with both medieval and contemporary constituent ontologies. However, his brief discussion of this distinction seems a bit confused since he claims that a constituent ontology suggests that properties are concrete part of material substances. While this is probably an accurate gloss on some medieval theories, it is certainly not true of all of them and of contemporary constituent ontologies. No one to my knowledge understands universals as concrete particulars (See Robert Pasnau’s “Substantial Form” in Metaphysical Themes). It appears that he may be conflating three different theories: trope nominalism (properties are concrete particulars), immanent realism (universals are abstract, but in the particulars that exemplify them), constituent ontology, (universals are non-material metaphysical principles parts of the things that exemplify them).

41 He does not address possibility of weakening the aseity-sovereignty doctrine or restricting the scope of “all” in the relevant texts on creation, as we saw suggested in the previous section.

42 Copen and Craig, 173. One can imagine Wolterstorff and van Inwagen pointing out that this claim misses the vast and important ways in which God is different from and superior to abstract objects. Abstract objects after all are not persons, do not create, do not love, and do not save their creation.
no reason that “restricting God’s power” to logically consistent possibility should be considered a restriction on divine power at all. Yet, he assumes that restricting the scope of creation would “rob God,” in various ways, of what is rightfully his purview.\textsuperscript{43}

In \textit{Creation out of Nothing}, Craig and Copen consider whether the “absolute creation” described in the first section is a viable version of Platonism for a theist to hold. In addition to worries about bootstrapping and divine freedom, which we considered above, Craig argues that theistic activism threatens the scope of creation \textit{ex nihilo}. He thinks that the doctrine of creation \textit{ex nihilo} “implies a temporal beginning of [the] existence of created things…Hence, scarcely anything, relatively speaking, is created \textit{ex nihilo} by God. The overwhelming bulk of things is merely sustained in being, but not, properly speaking created by God.”\textsuperscript{44}

Without speculating on the background assumptions that lead Craig to assume that eternal creation cannot be creation \textit{ex nihilo}, it is worth mentioning that Thomas Aquinas suggests that an eternally existing universe is consistent with God’s aseity, sovereignty, and creation, even if not with the biblical revelation.\textsuperscript{45}

As I mentioned in chapter 1, Craig denies that the problem of the one over the many is a real philosophical problem. This means that in denying Platonism, Craig is not concerned with being able to answer the question of what makes it the case that \textit{a} and \textit{b} both exemplify the very same property. He believes that causal-mechanical explanations can be given in lieu of metaphysical explanations. However, he acknowledges two phenomena that require some sort of explanation in the absence of a Platonic framework.

\textsuperscript{43} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{44} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{45} \textit{Summa Theologica}, I. 45. 2
In his 2004 work, he expresses a worry about the truth of mathematics and scientific investigation without numbers and other mathematical concepts existing as abstract objects. And, as we have already seen, in his later work he presents abstract reference as at least an apparent problem for the anti-Platonist. Rather than offering what he takes to be the correct approach to mathematics and abstract reference, in both works he suggests two alternatives that may be viable for the theist who accepts his argument. In *Creation out of Nothing*, he suggests either Fictionalism or Divine Conceptualism, while in “A Nominalist Perspective on God and Abstract Objects,” he suggests Fictionalism or Structural Nominalism.\(^{46}\) Since we considered Craig’s argument in favor of nominalism in the previous chapter, we will only consider Fictionalism and Divine Conceptualism here.

As the name suggests, fictionalism is the view that none of the things that we say, which include references to abstract objects, are literally true. Rather, numbers, properties, kinds, and relations are just convenient fictions that we use to communicate.\(^{47}\) Following what Mark Balaguer calls “nominalistic scientific realism,” Craig suggests “that the nominalistic content of empirical science is for the most part true, though its Platonistic content is fictional.”\(^{48}\) I am not entirely sure what to make of this claim, since it isn’t standard to talk of the nominalistic vs. Platonic content of a proposition, sentence, or discipline. It is more common to speak of nominalistic or Platonic interpretations, or truth-conditions, for sentences or propositions, but this has to do with one’s philosophy of

\(^{46}\) While the absence of conceptualism in the 2011 work may lead us to assume that he no longer views it as a viable option, in a recent newsletter he mentioned that he will be including it as a strong contender in the book he is currently writing on the subject, though he ultimately settles on the side of anti-realism.

\(^{47}\) It is not entirely clear to me what they communicate, if they fail to refer to anything at all.

\(^{48}\) Copen and Craig, 181.
language and theory of truth, not any content that is intrinsic to the sentences or
propositions themselves. So, I am unsure what content of what sentences within science
he believes to be intrinsically nominalistic and what content he thinks is intrinsically
Platonic.

Leaving this aside, and assuming that some sense can be made of the claim,
Craig’s proof that the literal truth of mathematics is unnecessary for the truth of natural
science is that, since abstract objects are causally effete, if the entire Platonic horde were
to disappear, its disappearance would not have any impact on the physical world or on the
nature of science. He argues that this entails that the literal truth of mathematics,
provided for by Platonism, is unnecessary for science. We only use mathematics because
it is a helpful way to describe the natural world in quantifiable terms. Here, just as in his
argument against the problem of universals, Craig assumes that if something can be
explained in a causal-mechanical way, then nothing else is metaphysically necessary for
that thing’s existence or the truth of claims about it. It may be worth noting that
proponents of Platonism take the antecedent of the material conditional that he
suggests—the Platonic horde disappears—to be metaphysically impossible. So, the
Platonist might agree that his statement is true in some sense, but only trivially so.

Drawing on the Christian Neoplatonic tradition, Craig also suggests that a form of
divine conceptualism may be an option for theists. In many ways, Craig’s suggestions
mirror those of TCR; however, Craig’s suggestion differs in one important way—a way
that requires that his view be categorized as a sort of conceptual nominalism, rather than
contceptual realism.49 Craig argues that “explanatorily prior to the abstraction of its

[49] Welty and Craig’s papers were published in the same year, so Craig may not have been aware of
Welty’s work.
properties, a concrete object does not exist as a characterless nothing, a bare particular, so to speak, but as an object replete with its various particularities." That is, on this account, universals are not explanatorily prior to the character of particulars; rather, the character of particulars explains the universals. This amounts to a denial of the principle of character grounding; though, it shouldn’t surprise us, given that Craig denies that the character of particulars needs any more explanation than can be given through causal mechanical accounts. As Craig points out, this conceptualism would solve the bootstrapping problem raised by TA, but it does nothing to solve the problem of universals as we have defined it.

B. Theoretical Grounds for Rejecting Abstract Objects

Like us, Leftow is interested not in abstract objects broadly construed, but more particularly in the interplay between theism and a theory of properties. Theists, just in virtue of their theism, allow at least one significant non-physical entity into their ontological framework. That entity is God. Leftow argues that, assuming that ontological economy is a virtue of a theory of properties, if the God of the theist can account for properties without introducing anything new into his system, doing so would be theoretically preferable. He proposes Theistic Concept Nominalism (TCN) as a means of doing so. On this view, a particular has the property x, just in case it falls under God’s concept of ‘x.’ This definition differs from the standard conceptualism considered in chapter 1 only in that God’s concept, not any human concept, determines what properties a thing has. Although Craig does not develop the technical aspects of his conceptualism

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50 Copen and Craig, 193.
to the same degree as Leftow, it appears that the two views are essentially the same. Leftow first argues that we can make sense of God’s concepts and mental states without presupposing the existence of Platonic universals. Second, he demonstrates that TCN adequately avoids each of the objections that Armstrong raises against standard concept nominalism. These objections will be familiar to the reader from our discussion of conceptualism in chapter 1. Finally he demonstrates that his view differs in significant ways from traditional Platonism.

As we saw in van Inwagen’s argument, one way a Platonist can attempt to undercut any argument depending on divine mental content is to claim either that talking of the content of divine thoughts is nonsensical, or to claim that such talk presupposes the truth of Platonism. Without referencing van Inwagen directly, Leftow responds to two arguments that are of particular interest to our project. First, one might wonder, along with van Inwagen, what makes it the case that God’s thought has the particular content that it does, and not another. Leftow states that “before Creation, one divine state was God’s knowing that 1.) were there any cats, they would be mammals, not 2.) were there any cats, they would be vegetables.” But why? The Platonist will want the answer to be that the mental state required for (1) grasps the universal ‘mammals’ while the other grasps the universal ‘vegetable.’ Grasping different abstract objects produces different mental states. In the absence of Platonic universals to distinguish them, Leftow argues

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51 Leftow also considers the implications of Aristotelian realism for his view. But we will not consider this aspect of his article here.

52 Interestingly enough, Leftow argues that his view is almost identical to Plato’s, except for the substitution of divine concepts for forms. However, he contends that Plato himself was a strange kind of nominalist, not a Platonist according to contemporary usage. It is rather odd that Plato turns out not to be a Platonist at all. This is because Leftow stipulates that Platonists must believe both in uninstatiated universals and in immanent universals, neither of which are the case for his view, 339.
that we take the content of mental states to be a primitive fact about them.\textsuperscript{53} Why is God’s thought accurately described as (1) and not (2)? Just because it is. God’s thoughts are ultimate.

Leftow suggests thinking of God’s thoughts as ‘targeting’ some content or another. He uses the human capacity to imagine as a helpful example. Since it makes sense to think that humans grasp uninstanitated attributes by imagining something that has them, then “it would be the case that something about the act of (say) imagining, logically before it produced the content, perceiving which constitutes grasping an attribute, makes the act ‘target’ one imaginative content, and so one attribute, rather than another.”\textsuperscript{54} This sentence is a bit hard to follow. However, it seems clear that Leftow wants having a particular content or another to be a primitive fact about imagining (if one can properly use such language with respect to God) or conceiving. Thus, even “before” creation, when there are no particulars with attributes that God might ‘grasp,’ he can ‘target’ particular content simply by thinking, because, for God, content is primitive.

One might also want to raise concerns about the causal consequences of divine conceiving’s. God’s knowing (1) and not (2) is what results in God creating warm, furry kitties, rather than nutritious, leafy kitties.\textsuperscript{55} The Platonist will want the Platonic universal, which also gives the state its content, to give the thought its causal direction. However, Leftow argues that it is not clear that such a claim would help the explanation. If content is primitive, it may make sense to say that some mental states play the causal role that they do just because this is the way they are. “The real thing that accounts for

\textsuperscript{53} Ibid., 329.

\textsuperscript{54} Ibid., 334. And aren’t we glad that he did?!

\textsuperscript{55} Ibid., 330.
the difference in causal role is not some constituent of the state but simply the state itself.”56

In both of these cases, Leftow appeals to primitive facts about God’s mental content. Anything that appears to need a Platonic universal is actually not in need of any further explanation. Paul Gould criticizes him rather harshly for this extensive appeal to brute facts. Gould suggests that TCN’s ontological economy might be outweighed by its lack of “ideological economy.”57 While I am sympathetic to Gould’s concern and will attempt to give more satisfactory answers to these questions than Leftow does, it may be worth acknowledging that there is something appealing about Leftow’s brute facts. Within monotheism, God is the ultimate reality. Explanation always comes to an end once one arrives at the being of God. Appealing to brute facts to explain the content of God’s mental life may just amount to a commitment to God being who God is.

If Leftow’s arguments are enough to free TCN from Platonic assumptions, Leftow must also show that his view does not fall prey to any of the difficulties of standard concept nominalism. The reader will remember from chapter 1 that there are three primary difficulties facing concept nominalism, two of which Welty responded to in defense of his conceptual realism. First, things would have the properties they do even if no human had ever existed or conceived of those properties; second, properties determine the causal powers that things have, while human concepts do not; and finally, we apply human concepts because of the properties that things have, not the other way around. Leftow’s theistic assumptions, like Welty’s, make quick work of these difficulties. Since God is omniscient, he has all possible concepts. Because God is creator, his concepts are

56 Ibid., 331.
causally prior to the causal powers that things have. And finally, in the case of God, things have the attributes they have because God creates them in accordance with those concepts. 58

If Leftow’s argument succeeds, then he has offered a theory of universals that is as ontologically economical as nominalism, with more explanatory power, and which avoids doctrinal difficulties. Leftow points out that all of God’s concepts are particular, concrete things, rather than abstract objects. For this reason, he claims that his theory counts as a form of nominalism. A question we will consider later in this project is the degree to which Leftow’s theory differs from the realist Neo-Augustinian approaches.

IV. Conclusion

I concluded the last chapter with the confession that my broader philosophical commitments predispose me to prefer Transcendent Realism to the alternative theories of properties. However, we saw in this chapter the best theistic arguments in favor of this view require significant weakening of the aseity-sovereignty doctrine—a doctrine that I believe is worth preserving if at all possible. The Neo-Augustinian interpretations are the only theories on offer that reconcile the two. This approach is also particularly attractive because of its strong foundation in the Christian tradition (though I view this as a defeasible reason, I nonetheless consider it a strength). But as we saw, they face

58 Leftow, 339-340.
significant difficulties of their own. The arguments in this section make it clear that the success of such a theory requires a coherent response to each of the following questions:

i. Can we find a way to talk about the ‘content’ of God’s thought that is coherent but avoids overly anthropomorphic assumptions?

ii. How do we understand properties as God’s concepts in a way that does not conflate a universal with an exemplar?

iii. What is the metaphysical constitution of particulars if their properties are identical to God’s concepts?

iv. How do we distinguish between the Neo-Augustinian approach and theistic nominalism if both deny that abstract objects, as traditionally understood, actually exist?

In the last two chapters of this dissertation, I will defend a theory of universals with the Neo-Augustinian framework. As such, the above questions lay out the demands on that theory. I will address questions (i) – (iv) in chapter 4 where I present primary commitments of my view and explain how it does all of the work we expect of a theory of properties. However, before we get lost in the technical forest of the metaphysics of God and universals, it may be helpful to give a bit more attention the fact that theory I am proposing has its inspiration in the history of philosophy. Though it has its roots in Augustine, numerous philosophers throughout the high Middle Ages and even into the Renaissance accept similar views. It would be foolish to begin our endeavor without first taking stalk of the serious work already done on this project
Chapter 3:

God in the Medieval Debates on Universals

It is no secret that the problem of universals both preoccupied and deeply divided the medieval philosophical world. Somewhat less discussed is the degree to which theological considerations shaped the landscape of that debate. However, the doctrines of creation, the Eucharist, divine illumination, and divine omnipotence (to name a few) all informed, and at times circumscribed, the viable solutions to this divisive problem. Because discussion of the relationship between God and universals is a relatively new and underdeveloped topic in the contemporary literature, we would be remiss to ignore the wealth of reflection available from those who have thought carefully about it before us.

To fully appreciate this topic one must first have a clear idea of the nature of the problem of universals as understood by the medievals. Though related to the contemporary controversy described in the first and second chapters, important differences exist both in the central question of the debate and in the vocabulary used to discuss it. In this chapter, I first identify how the problem of universals was understood in the middle ages and then consider what relationship, if any, select figures believed to exist between God and those universals. Entire books have been written on this medieval
problem, and almost every medieval thinker had a perspective. There is simply no way that this chapter could provide even an overview of the plethora of nuanced positions put forward. Instead, I consider several thinkers who are representative of a variety of the perspectives on universals and who explicitly address their understanding of relationship between them and God: St. Augustine, Peter Abelard, Robert Grosseteste, Thomas Aquinas, William of Ockham, and Nicolas of Cusa. From Augustine we may glean a helpful, and I believe correct, understanding of the implications of the doctrine of creation for a theory of properties. Abelard raises critical questions about the accessibility of the divine ideas to human knowers. Grosseteste helps sketch out the causal connections that exist between universals in God, in particulars, and in our understanding via abstraction. In Aquinas we get the first explicit attempt to reconcile a doctrine of divine ideas with a commitment to divine simplicity, while Ockham forces us to acknowledge just how difficult that task is. And finally, Cusanus offers us a wealth of examples to help us understand how the simple divine nature might serve as that exemplar for all of the multiplicity and diversity of the created world.

I. Identifying the problem

Several ancient and medieval texts were central the medieval understanding of the problem of universals. The first is Aristotle’s definition of a universal that we considered in the first chapter. “By ‘universal’ I mean what is apt to be predicated of many.” On this definition, the problem of universals asks whether terms (or words) are the only things
predicated of multiple particulars or whether extra-linguistic realities may also be
predicated in this way. Second is Porphyry’s *Isagoge*, which supplies much of the
vocabulary for the medieval discussions and introduces the central questions to which
most medieval thinkers attempt to provide answers.

For example, I shall beg off saying anything about whether genera and
species are real or are situated in bare thoughts alone, whether as real they
are bodies or incorporeals, and whether they are separated or in sensibles
and have their reality in connection with them. Such business is profound,
and requires another, greater investigation.¹

In attempting to answer these questions, the medievals distinguished between three
modes of being that a universal might have. A universal might exist *separately* from, but
metaphysically related to, particulars. These are called universals *ante rem* (before the
thing). Plato’s forms are examples of this type (if despite the argument to the contrary
we saw in chapter 2, one thinks he conceives of them as universals). A universal might
also exist *in* the particular that exemplifies it as a metaphysical constituent of the whole.
These are universals *in re* (in the thing). Finally, it might exist as a mental concept
abstracted from sense experience of particulars. These are universals *post rem* (after the
thing).² The philosophers who acknowledge the existence of universals *in re or ante rem

¹ Porphyry, “Isagoge,” in *Five Texts on the Mediaeval Problem of Universals*, edited by Paul

² Claude Panaccio, “Universals” in *The Oxford Handbook of Medieval Metaphysics* (Oxford:
generally fall into the category of realists,\(^3\) while those who only accept the existence of universals \(post\ \text{rem}\), fall into the category of nominalists.\(^4\)

Boethius’s influential definition, which we also saw in the first chapter, clearly defines his position with regard to first and last of the Porphyrian questions. He describes a genus as something that “is supposed to be common [to many singulars] in such a way that the whole of it is in all its singulars, and at one time, and also it is able to constitute and form the substance of what it is common to.”\(^5\) Clearly, if something constitutes and forms the substance of something else, that thing must have its reality in connection with sensibles. From Boethius onward, the debate during the high and later middle ages focused almost exclusively on the existence, or absence, of universals \(in\ \text{re}\). They all agreed that something universal arises in the mind as a result of abstraction (\(post\ \text{rem}\)), and most thought that God has concepts of the genera and species of particulars that are causally prior to the actual genera and species of created particulars. Where they differed most strongly is on whether or not things have universal, repeatable natures or numerically discrete natures. This is largely due to the fact that, as Boethius’s definition suggests, the medievals were substance ontologists. For them, the particular, on the most basic level, is the composite of matter and a substantial form. The substantial form is what makes it the case that a particular exists at all and accounts for the fundamental nature of that particular. It also accounts for all of the necessary accidents (\textit{propria}) of

\(^3\) It may be worth noting that virtually all the realist also acknowledged the existence of \(post\ \text{rem}\) universals formed by the intellect on the basis of sense experience.

\(^4\) This is, to some degree, an oversimplification. I assume here, for example, that conceptualism is a sub-type of nominalism. I also assume that someone like Aristotle is an \textit{in re} realist. This is due, not to any position I take with respect to Aristotle’s texts, but to the most common interpretation of his work in the middle ages.

\(^5\) Boethius, “From His Second Commentary on Porphyry’s \textit{Isagoge},” 22.
the substance. Thus, in focusing on substantial universals, the medievals are primarily concerned with universals accounting for the identity of the substance (e.g. humanity, caninity), as opposed to universals accounting for accidents (e.g. redness, kindness), though the latter are not ignored completely.

In addition to the above considerations, as in the contemporary debate, phenomena in epistemology, philosophy of language, and metaphysics were what demanded explanation: knowledge of universal truths, quantification (or what the medieval used in the absence of this concept—supposition), subject-predicate discourse (predication), and attribute agreement. Thus, we see that the contemporary and medieval debates overlap and diverge at various points.6

II. The Philosophers Speak

A. St. Augustine’s Divine Ideas

Though Augustine makes reference to the Platonic forms as ideas within the mind of God frequently throughout his writings, he only addresses them at any length or in any detail in his short treatise “On the Ideas.” There, Augustine suggests that Plato’s forms are actually eternal ideas in the mind of God and explains the theological motivation for this thesis.7 He does not set up the problem, as many later thinkers do in terms of knowledge,


predication, or attribute-agreement. Instead, he suggests that we need a doctrine of the
forms as ideas in the mind of God in order to account for God’s creation of the world.
Augustine appeals to what I have been calling the aseity-sovereignty doctrine to suggest
that if something like the forms exists, they cannot exist outside of God as uncreated
entities. If they did, there would be something distinct from God that does not depend on
God for its existence. Furthermore, the doctrine of immutability requires that, if the ideas
are in God’s mind, they must be eternal and unchanging. So far, Augustine’s account
coincides with the contemporary literature on the relationship between God and
universals that we considered in the last chapter. However, in a final move, he points out
that God cannot create the world irrationally, or without reason. Here the reason is the
thing to which God looks to guide his creation. In other words, God must know what he
is creating when he creates it in the same way that an artist knows what she intends to
sculpt when she embarks on the project. An idea in God’s mind must provide his
“reason,” just as the idea of the sculptor provides the artist’s reason. Furthermore,
Augustine argues that the differences among particular things (the existence of attribute
disagreement) imply a multiplicity of reasons, and, therefore, a multiplicity of ideas.
Throughout the rest of the passage, he refers to God’s plan for the creation of the world.
In other words, Augustine is saying that if God intends to create horses, and what comes


8 He articulates this view again in his more mature work, The City of God XI.XXIX.

9 Here Augustine uses “reason” a bit differently than we are inclined to. In English, when asked a
question about our reasons, we can answer either with a “because” or an “in order to.” However,
throughout his writings, Augustine refers to the divine ideas as the “seminal reasons” for creation. Earlier
in this treatise he explicit takes up the question of whether or not it is appropriate to use this word, since it
translates the greek logoi rather than idees and differs from the usual Latin vocabulary of forms and
species. He concludes that “whoever wants to use this word will not be in conflict with the fact. For Ideas
are certain principal, stable and immutable forms or reasons of things.”
into being at his will is in fact *horses*, then two things must be true. First, the idea of the thing must exist in God’s mind logically prior to his creation. Second, the things he creates must stand in some particular relation to those ideas. Augustine’s other writings suggest that he is drawing on Neoplatonic influences in his conception of this relationship. The Neoplatonic account of the relationship between particulars and “ideas” from which they come is participation—a relation according to which particular things are both like and derive their being from the thing in which it participates.

Following Plotinus, who situates the forms within Nous\textsuperscript{10}—the second of the three primal hypostases, which emanates from The One’s simple and perfect fullness—Augustine locates the ideas within the second person of the trinity, the Word. When the Torah says that God spoke at the creation of the world, Augustine understands this as the expression of the ideas within the Word. When John says that all things came into being through the Word, Augustine again relates this to the causal role the ideas within the Word play in God’s creation of the world.\textsuperscript{11}

As with Porphyry, there is something anachronistic of speaking of Augustine as contributing to the problem of universals, since he writes long before the controversy, as such, developed. Yet, his attempt to “plunder” the Neoplatonists on this topic laid the groundwork for much of Christian theology and philosophy in the future. Most notably, Thomas Aquinas adapts and develops Augustine’s basic intuitions into a much more sophisticated and philosophically rigorous position, but we will also see significant traces of his influence in the works of Robert Gorsseteste and Nicolas of Cusa. Augustine is helpful in his own right, though, because he is the first to point out something that is

\textsuperscript{10} *Enneads*, 6.9.2

\textsuperscript{11} *On a Literal Interpretation of Genesis*, 5.15.33.
overlooked in the contemporary literature presented in the previous chapter—namely, that God’s ideas are *causally prior* to the natures of particular things. To be sure, van Inwagen considered the position that God creates universals by creating particulars, but Augustine is making a slightly different claim. He argues that God’s ideas are both logically and causally prior to the natures things have. The particulars, thus, depend on them for their character in a unique way. In the next chapter I will argue that this view must serve as the foundation for the theory of universals I develop there.

**B. Peter Abelard’s Statuses**

After debunking two realist theories of universals, Abelard presents his own view of universals as “words only.” His presentation can be divided into three sections. In the first, he analyzes the nature of a universal on his nominalist account. In the second, he asks and answers three questions about the relationship between universal words, the common cause of those words, and our concepts of universals. Finally, in the last section, Abelard turns to the questions raised by Porphyry in his *Isagoge*. For our present purposes, we will consider only the first two of these sections.

Abelard begins by admitting that if words are the only things that possess true universality, we may have difficulty understanding Aristotle’s definition of ‘universal’ quoted above. Since Aristotle is an authority on these matters, this would be a problem. Abelard argues that on a nominalist understanding of universals, the ‘what’ at the beginning of the definition should be taken to refer to a single word, understood in a univocal sense. When a universal word is “invent[ed],”12 it is as something that is apt to

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12 Abelard, Peter. "Glosses on Porphyry." In *Five Texts on the Mediaeval Problem ofUniversals,* 84
refer to many things when used in this single sense, which the inventor has in mind. The term ‘predicated’ in Aristotle’s definition should also be understood in terms of linguistic function. A word is predicated of another if it can be truly joined to the other by means of the copula. For example, the word ‘man’ is truly predicated of Socrates, because man can be join to Socrates by means of the copula to create the true proposition: ‘Socrates is a man.’ And finally, ‘of several’ “groups names with respect to the diversity of what they name.” The word ‘man’ is not only joined to Socrates truly, but also to Plato and to Aristotle.

Given the definition with which Abelard is working, the question naturally arises: to what are these universal terms apt to refer? If, as Abelard has already claimed, “all things [subsist] discretely in themselves and [do] not agree in any thing,” and if universals cannot refer to many things in virtue of their difference, it appears that universal terms refer to nothing at all. And if they refer to nothing at all, they cannot confer on us any understanding, for an understanding must be an understanding of some subject. However, Abelard insists that this “is not so. For universals ‘signify’ diverse things by naming them, not by establishing an understanding that arises from them but one that pertains to each of them.” Universals actually name all of those things of which they are predicable. Nevertheless, the mechanism by which the word refers to all

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13 Ibid, 38 §67
14 Ibid, §70
15 Ibid, §76
16 Ibid, 40 §78, refers to arguments in §59-62
17 Ibid, 40 §86
of these things is not by conjuring an understanding of something that is in each of these particulars, and is common to all of them. Rather, the word establishes an understanding of something that pertains to each particular. But what is this something that pertains to all without being common to all?

In order to explain just how universal words refer to individuals without referring to any thing that these individuals share, Abelard asks three questions:

(1) [W]hat is the common cause in accordance with which a universal name is imposed?  
(2) [W]hat is the understanding’s common conception of the likeness of things?  
(3) [Is] a word…called “common” on account of the common cause things agree in, or on account of the common conception or on account of both together?

The first of these is a metaphysical question. In fact, it is related to our question about the nature of properties. What is it about the particular that makes it appropriate to apply universals terms to it? The second is the epistemic question. The last question is a concern for philosophy of language. Do we call term a universal because of something about metaphysical structure of the particulars or because of the universal structure of the concept that we have?

Abelard begins his answer to the first question by confirming the essential difference among individuals. Each particular has a discrete essence and form. As a

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18 Ibid, 41 §88
19 Ibid
20 Ibid
result, there is no thing in which two distinct particulars may agree. Socrates and Plato
do not agree “in man” (i.e., they don’t have a single constituent—the form of humanity—
common to each of them). However, they are both called man because both are men.
They agree in being man. But this “being man” is not a thing any more than the failure to
be something is a thing. For example, both a horse and an ass agree in “not being a
man,”21 but we do not say that there is some thing in them that they have in common.
We can call this “non-thing” their status. Two men agree in the status of being man,
though their share no common essence. Therefore, their status is the common cause in
virtue of which the person who conferred this universal term on them conceived of their
likeness.22

Abelard’s answers to the second and third questions are interconnected and seem
to be given simultaneously. Our concept of the commonality of these things comes about
according to the typical Aristotelian framework.23 After repeated exposure to particulars
that have the same status, our mind forms a confused, but common, “image of many
things.”24 Thus, when we hear the universal word, it conjures a “kind of model”25 of
these things that is related to single men in a way “that is common to all of them and
proper to none.”26 There is something intuitive about the Aristotelian account of
abstraction. It seems to track the epistemic and linguistic development of children quite

21 Ibid, 42 §90
22 Ibid, §92
23 Posterior Analytics, II, 19.
24 Ibid, 44 §102
25 Ibid, § 103
26 Ibid
well, for example. After seeing many horses and hearing the sound of the word ‘horse’ associated with all of them, when I hear the word horse, I do think of a sort of generic horse. The mental image is like all of the horses I have seen, yet I cannot say that my image is an image of any one of those horses. This is the primary concept that arises from the universal word. In coining a new term, the “baptizer” attempts to apply it according the natural likeness in status. Therefore, it is more correct to say that the common cause—the status—is the reason why the word is called common, though it may be appropriate, Abelard acknowledges, to say that it is on account of both that common cause and the concept in the understanding.

Abelard has already established that universals signify things by naming them. But, given that particulars do agree in status, and given that they do so because they were created by God to do so, Abelard considers the possibility that universal terms are actually proper names for the intelligible genera and species in the mind of God.\textsuperscript{27} Abelard acknowledges that God, as the “builder” of nature, does have these common concepts and that particulars are “put together according to the likeness of [these mental] forms.”\textsuperscript{28} Thus, we can infer that things have the statuses they do just because they were created in accordance with certain forms in the divine mind, and that particulars agree in status because they were created according to a common form. However, Abelard asserts that such concepts are correctly attributed only to God, because substances are God’s work, not man’s. Furthermore, the genera and species that we infer to exist via abstraction are only properly attributed to God because only he knows his creation

\textsuperscript{27} Ibid, 35 §111
\textsuperscript{28} Ibid.
perfectly through the created things themselves, as well as through the forms that are prior to them. Because human beings only experience particulars through the senses, the accidents in that the particulars prevent humans from perfectly grasping the true nature of any particular. As a result, we have obscure, imperfect conceptions of the statuses of things. God, however, who knows particulars perfectly in themselves and who knew them perfectly even before the creation, can distinguish the statuses clearly because matter is not an obstacle.

Unlike Augustine, who took the causal relationship between God’s concepts and the nature of particulars to be critical for “the problem of universals,” Abelard rather quickly dismisses this point as almost completely irrelevant to the discussion. He does this because, having already refuted the notion that something universal exists “within” the metaphysical make up of multiple particulars simultaneously, Abelard is concerned more with epistemology and philosophy of language than with the metaphysical questions. Therefore, the answer to his questions must be something to which humans have epistemic access. Since humans have access neither to the divine concepts nor to the true natures of particulars, God’s concepts are not directly relevant to the discussion. However, as will become clear in my argument in the next chapter, it seems that Abelard neglects something important. The reader may notice the ambiguity and, one might even venture to say, vacuity, of Abelard’s appeal to statuses. It isn’t at all clear what makes it true that two things agree in status. Unless status is a primitive, it demands some

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29 Clearly this wording is anachronistic since Augustine did not take himself to be working on “the problem of universals,” which didn’t yet exist, but explaining how a teaching of Plato might be piously and correctly situated within a Christian framework.


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further explanation. And even if it is primitive, it is not at all clear how a primitive that is not a thing could make it the case that something is what it is. However, an appeal to the causal connection between God’s concepts and statuses would provide the needed grounding, allowing Abelard to avoid the problematic implications of universals in re to which he points earlier in his argument. The critical question is whether or not such an appeal can help make sense of the appropriate phenomena associated with the problem of universals, given the lack of epistemic access to God’s concepts and to the nature of things, which limit human knowledge.

C. Robert Grosseteste’s Synthesis

Robert Grosseteste approaches the problem of universals from an epistemic perspective by raising a standard question facing the realists of his day. How can there be eternal truths such as, ‘All men are mortal,’ if the truth of the proposition depends on the existence of universals, and those universals are corruptible? Though he fails to provide a philosophically interesting or original response to the question, the metaphysical and epistemic work he does along the way provides an interesting reconciliation of the Neoplatonic view of knowledge (which depends on Divine Illumination) with the Aristotelian view (in which sense perception accounts for knowledge).  

Grosseteste saw the world of the “forms” divided into concentric circles of ever more perfect universals, which serve both as principles of cognition and principles of being. According to Christina Van Dyke,

31 This read is not universally accepted. Some scholars see him as primarily an Augustinian while other see him as a straightforward Aristotelian.
Access to the highest level of these principles entails access to the truths of all actual and possible natures, including God’s, while access to the next level entails access to the truths of all actual natures, not including God’s; access to the third level entails access to truth just about the natures of thing in the material worlds, but including their causal ideas, and access to the final level or levels entails access to the truths about the natures of things in the material world *simpliciter.*

At the highest level are the ideas in the mind of God. These universals serve both as principles of knowledge (theoretically, but rarely actually) and of the being of particulars; however apart from special divine illumination, human beings do not have access to the divine ideas, and thus these universals are not the principles of knowledge commonly used in the demonstrative sciences. At the next level are the “causal ideas” and “exemplar forms” found in “the intelligences” or angels. Within this framework, God creates the world through the mediation of angels; thus, they contain the incorruptible “causal ideas” of all created things. Some people, although they cannot see the first light directly, are “irradiated” by the intelligences. For them, these incorruptible ideas serve as genus and species. However, such people are the few, holy and blessed. At the third level are the universals “of terrestrial species” in the celestial spheres. These too are principles both of cognition and of being. Finally, at the last level we have the Aristotelian forms in particulars. These are (theoretically) accessible to any human being with sense perception and reason.

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33 Some take the “intelligences” to be a reference to the “agent intellect.” Here, I follow Van Dyke’s interpretation.

34 Like most astronomers of his day, Grosseteste believed that one could arrive at a higher knowledge of things in the terrestrial world by studying the stars.
Grosseteste gives a straightforwardly Aristotelian account of human knowledge via abstraction of the universals in particulars through repeated sense perception. This is the process at work in the demonstrative sciences. However, he makes room for divine illumination by claiming that God illumines the genera and species in the particulars. Rather than understanding illumination as an act in which God gives knowledge directly to the human mind, Grosseteste understands it as God shining light on the principles of knowledge already present in things outside of the human so that the human intellect can grasp them. However, as van Dyke puts it, some humans are “so bound up with material consideration and phantasms that, even with God’s illuminating help, they never manage to abstract all the way to the universals instantiated in material particulars.”35 Such people “know things only through the accidents following from the true essences of things.” That is, some people cannot abstract out the true natures of things. Rather, they recognize the accidents (either necessary accidents—properia—or non-necessary) of things—such as the four-leggedness of dogs—and think that they have grasped the true nature of the thing. But of course, such accidents, while still accounted for by universals, are not the universals associated with the nature of the thing—the genera and species. Thus, they are only principles of knowledge, not of being; and the person who grasps them has a lesser sort of knowledge than the person who grasps the true essence.

I find Grosseteste’s account interesting for two reasons. First, it points to a difficulty we began to notice in Abelard’s account. If universals truly are contained in the divine mind, and human beings lack access to them, then it is difficult to see how universals can play any role in accounting for human knowledge. Indeed, it would seem that we cannot even successfully refer to such universals, much less know them.

35 Van Dyke, 166.
Secondly, Grosseteste suggests the beginnings of an answer to the question that Abelard’s account lacked. At each step in his hierarchy, the universals play a causal role with respect to the next. The universals at levels one through three are the causes of the particulars, and thus of the genera and species in the natural world, in addition to being principles of knowledge (for those fortunate or holy enough to see them). At the fourth level, at least some of the universals—the substantial form universals—are a sort of internal efficient cause of most of the accidents of the particular. Only once we arrive at the level of accidents does the universal cease to play any causal role. This suggests that while humans may rarely, if ever, catch a glimpse of the divine mind, the universals accessible to them via sense perception are causally related to those ideas and resemble them. This provides at least some hope that the conceptual framework we abstract from sense perception is related to the divine ideas, even if we cannot be sure how closely our concepts map onto God’s. We will return to this perspective in the final chapter of this project.

D. Thomas’s Aquinas’s Exemplar Causes

Following Aristotle, Aquinas argues that species, genera, and accidents can exist only in their various instantiations, rather than as forms in some Platonic heaven. ‘Humanity’ exists only in Socrates, Plato, and other men, and is that in virtue of which we predicate ‘man’ of them. This satisfies Aristotle’s definition of a universal. However there is some debate over whether or not Aquinas conceives of things like genera and species as multiply-instantiable universals or as something more akin to our modern conception of tropes. On the former read, the ‘humanity’ in Socrates is numerically identical with the
‘humanity’ in Plato and satisfies the Boethian definition of a universal, while on the latter, Socrates’ humanity is distinct from Plato’s, and something distinct from both of them must account for why both are properly called ‘humanity.’ In this chapter I am less interested in defending any particular interpretation of Aquinas stance on the problem of universals as such; rather, I am interested in considering his claim that there is a sense in which Plato’s theory of the forms is actually correct, despite his rejection of abstract forms.36

In various points throughout his writings, Aquinas follows St. Augustine in arguing for the existence of divine ideas. These ideas do much of the same work as Plato’s forms are posited to do. In the first part of the Summa, Aquinas asks 3 questions about the divine ideas.

(1) Whether there are ideas.

(2) Whether there are many ideas.

(3) Whether there are ideas for everything God knows.

Thomas answers the first question in the affirmative. Like Augustine before him, he appeals to God’s creation as the evidence for this answer. The world did not come into being by chance. Thus, its form must be in the mind of God just like the form of an artifact is in the mind of the artisan. He says, “there must exist in the divine mind a form to the likeness of which the world was made. And in this the notion of an idea consists.” Elsewhere, including the third question, Thomas calls the idea in the mind of an artisan an exemplar. Indeed, throughout his writing, he uses the notion of an exemplar cause to explain the relationship between the divine ideas and the creation. As such, it is worth

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36 Summa Contra Gentiles, I, c. 54
exploring what he has to say about exemplar causation. In *De veritate*, Aquinas offers four characteristics of an exemplar cause: form, imitation, intention, and *telos*. A divine idea is the *form* according to which God creates individual things in the universe. It is not the substantial form within the thing itself; rather it is an extrinsic form, which stands in relation to the substantial form of the thing. The relation of the extrinsic form to the substantial form is one of *causality*, and the relation of the substantial form to the extrinsic form is one of *imitation*. This assimilation of substantial form to its exemplar takes place because of the *intention* of the agent who creates it. Thus, the agent must both know what he creates and will to create it. Finally, the *intention* of the creator determines not only the *end* of his creative act, but also the *telos* of the entity that he creates. The creator intends a form that has a certain *end*. The ability to determine the end of the thing created is what differentiates exemplar causation from natural causation. In natural causation, the individual can determine the end of her own action, but not the end of the thing produced. Humans may choose to procreate, but they have no control over the form the child whom they parent will have. An artisan, on the other hand, can determine the purpose for which the artifact exists. She creates the chair, and the end of the chair is to hold up the person sitting in it. God’s creation of the world, of course, is more like the later. Thus, we must accept, according to Thomas, that God has ideas that serve as the exemplar causes of creation.

The second question arises because the claim that a perfectly simple God has multiple, discrete ideas of all particular things appears contradictory. Thomas responds by explaining that the ideas must be many, because God does not just create the first

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thing, which goes on to cause everything else. Rather, God creates the order of the entire universe. To have an idea of a whole requires that one has the ideas of all of the parts. Thus, God must have multiple ideas if he creates all of the parts of the order of the universe. Aquinas explains, however, that this is not at odds with the doctrine of simplicity because God does not have multiple images in his mind, which he forms on the basis of external things. Rather, the ideas are identical to his divine self-knowledge. God can know himself in two ways—as he is in himself and as he can be participated in by finite creatures. Each species participates in the divine essence in its own unique way and measure. Thus, the multiplicity is only from the perspective of the creation, while the object of knowledge is the simple divine nature.

One might wonder whether or not this completely solves the problem for simplicity. After all, even if there is only one simple object of knowledge, knowing the different ways and degrees by which particulars can imitate the divine nature seems to require knowledge of discrete things. God would have to know that particular a is like him in this way, and that particular b is like him in another way. If these propositions are distinct, then it seems like God’s idea are really distinct in him. Thus, we may need to do more work to reconcile these two doctrines regarding the divine nature, but I leave this for a later discussion.

In answering the third question in the affirmative—whether there are ideas for everything that God knows—Aquinas makes a helpful distinction. Ideas in the divine mind play two different roles. They can be either a principle of knowledge or a principle of generation. As a principle of generation, the divine ideas are called exemplars, as I mentioned above. Ideas are only exemplar causes of things that God creates: actual
substances, like dogs, cats, and humans. As a principle of knowledge, the idea is a type. Since God knows himself as capable of creating even things that he does not, in fact, create—like unicorns and the ‘possible fat man in the doorway’—he does have ideas of those things as types.\footnote{This distinction has been used by some philosophers of religion of late to ground modality. A world is possible just in case God knows that he has the capacity to create it. If this is right, modality is grounded in the divine ideas as types, rather than as exemplar causes.} This distinction can be applied to the ontological constituents of particulars. God has exemplars of the particular things that he creates, but since the genera have no existence outside of the species, which exists only in individuals, God has exemplars of the species, but not of genera. Still, since God knows the genera, the ideas exist in him as a type. The same is true of separable and non-separable accidents, and so forth.

Thus for Aquinas the universal \textit{in re} is created by God via the exemplar causality of the ideas that are eternal and unchanging in God. God in one eternal and simple moment knows his own nature as imitable by creatures. There is a sense in which universals are eternal and immutable, as they exist in God \textit{apart from} their instantiations. But there is another sense in which universals are created by God and can exist only \textit{in} their instantiations. This approach could be loosely understood as a combination of eminent and transcendent realism. Universals \textit{in re} come into and out of existence as they are created by God, but an \textit{ante rem} universal necessarily and eternally exists apart from particulars and explains the nature of the universals \textit{in re}. 

\footnote{This distinction has been used by some philosophers of religion of late to ground modality. A world is possible just in case God knows that he has the capacity to create it. If this is right, modality is grounded in the divine ideas as types, rather than as exemplar causes.}
**E. William of Ockham’s Nothings**

Ockham is most widely known as one of the first nominalists. It may seem odd to include him in a chapter on medieval perspectives on the relationship between God and universals. If there are no universals, there can be no relationship between them and God. However, despite his adamancy that everything that exists is particular, he does acknowledge, in some sense, the existence of divine ideas. This makes him an interesting case study, insofar as he demonstrates that there may be good reasons, apart from metaphysical realism about Platonic forms or universals, to accept the divine ideas thesis. We will see, though, that the ideas have a very different sort of identity and existence in Ockham’s theory than they do in those previously considered.

Some have argued that Ockham’s nominalism preserves God’s absolute power at the expense of order in the natural world. The idea is, if there are no universals, than nothing circumscribes the extent of God’s creative power. But when one only accepts particulars into one’s ontology, then there is no real, or objective, principle of ordering. For example, Gilson claims that, “At the top of the world, [is] a God whose absolute power knew no limits, not even those of a stable and intelligible nature endowed with a necessity and intelligibility of its own. …Having expelled from the mind of God the intelligible world of Plato, Ockham was satisfied that no intelligibility could be found in any of God’s works.” However, this sentiment applies more to Ockham’s rejection of universals in re, than to his attitude toward the divine ideas. Ockham’s revision of the

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sort of divine ideas thesis presented by both Augustine and Aquinas is actually an attempt to preserve divine simplicity rather than divine omnipotence.

Ockham follows Augustine in claiming that it is necessary to postulate divine ideas, to which God looks when creating particulars, to maintain the rationality of God’s creation. For Ockham, these ideas are not ideas of properties, universals, or relations, but of particulars—things that are creatable. Since properties, universals, and relations have no existence outside of the mind, they are not creatable, and therefore unnecessary to preserve the rationality of Divine creation. Furthermore, Ockham rejects the Thomistic thesis (though in Ockham’s argument he presents the objection as a rejection of Scotus’s view) that the ideas are identical to the divine essence conceived of by God as imitable by creatures, because of worries similar to those I mentioned above. Augustine has already pointed out for us that there are many ideas, “but,” Ockham claims, “the divine essence is unique and cannot be multiplied in any way.” Further, “It was [Plato’s] intention, not that the divine essence would be an idea, but that some other things known by God…were ideas.”

What are these “other things” that are known by God and which serve as the exemplars for creation? Ockham is in a bind here. God needs to have ideas to create rationally, but if they cause any multiplicity in him, then his simple divine nature is compromised. Ockham’s solution to this tension is to say that the divine ideas are nothing other than the particulars themselves. In other words, it is by looking at the thing

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42 Ordinatio I, d. 35, q. 5, quoted in Marilyn McCord Adams,1052.
that he is going to create that God’s creation is not performed irrationally. He says that “[God] truly looks to the creature and by looking to the creature He can produce it.” Marilynn McCord Adams suggests that this claim is motivated not only by Ockham’s desire to preserve the doctrine of simplicity, but also by his desire to be a direct realist in epistemology. That is, God must know the thing by looking at the thing itself, not by looking at anything else. Ockham thinks that a direct sort of knowledge can help avoid the simplicity problem because the particulars exist eternally in God as ideas, but, in God, they have only objective, rather than subjective, or real, existence. Thus, it appears that, at least early on, Ockham thinks that only something with real, subjective existence can compromise the unity of the divine nature, and ideas are that sort of thing. However, later in his career, he appears to change his mind on the subject. When he writes the *Quodlibeta* IV, he argues that the ideas in God prior to creation are nothing at all. They are “nihil” in God until God creates them. What this amounts to, and how it accounts for the rationality of God’s creation, Ockham says is beyond our ken.

Ockham’s claim that the ideas are identical to the particulars themselves seems to me a blatant violation of logical and metaphysical priority. Something must come first. Either God’s idea comes first, and the particular is based on it, or the particular comes first, and God’s idea is based on that. But to claim that God’s creation is rational because

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43 This seems to me to be a clear violation of the logical and metaphysical priority at work in the rationality of creation.

44 Adams, 1055.

45 The reader should remember that “objective” is used in the middle ages differently than in our contemporary parlance. Subjective means something more like “real,” because subjects are what exist, and objective, means as an object in relation to some subject. Here, it means that the ideas exist in God only as objects that God knows, not as things that really exist.

46 Adams, 1059.
he looks at the thing he is going to create is circular. Thus, in preserving the unity of the
divine nature, it appears that true rationality is lost. If Gilson worried about the
intelligibility of the created order, we must worry about the intelligibility of the act of
creation.

Still, Ockham’s position points to the monumental difficulty of maintaining a
version of the divine ideas thesis that does not conflict with the doctrine of divine
simplicity. If Thomas’s account proves unsuccessful, the task of offering a coherent
alternative will be difficult indeed.

F. Nicolas of Cusa
Though Cusanus lived much later than the other philosophers considered here and is
usually considered a Renaissance rather than Medieval scholar, I would argue that his
views are continuous with the medieval authors investigated above, especially with
regard to his theory of universals and their relationship to God.47 In On Learned
Ignorance, Cusanus takes up the nature of universals.48 In this discussion he makes three
major claims around which we may organize our investigation. First, Cusanus claims
that God alone is the absolute universal. Second, he affirms that universals exist only
contractedly and only in particular things. And finally, universals are not merely rational
entities, though the mind does create likenesses of universals by means of abstraction.

47 Cusanus scholarship is deeply divided on the nature of Cusanus’s thought. Some see him as a
traditional Aristotelian (See Jasper Hopkins, Nicholas of Cusa’s Metaphysic of Contraction (Minneapolis:
The Arthur J. Banning Press, 1981), and “Nicholas of Cusa (1401-1464): The First Modern Philosopher?”
in Midwest Studies in Philosophy 26 (2002), 13-29.), while others see him as a proto-kantian (This view
has been suggested by a number of Cusanus scholars including Ernst Cassirer and Norbert Henke.). Some
argue that at bottom he is a pantheist, with others maintain that he is a traditional theist.

48 II.6
From the first claim we may infer Cusanus’s connection to the Neoplatonic Christian tradition. Like Augustine, Aquinas and Grosseteste above, he sees God as fundamental in an explanation of universals; however, his claim seems to go a bit further than any of the afore-mentioned authors. For this reason he may contribute to the conversation in a unique way. The second reveals Cusanus’s acceptance of universals in re and thus his connection with the medieval Aristotelian tradition. The last eschews the via moderna’s nominalism that dominated the faculties of philosophy, and many faculties of theology, of his day.

Cusanus’s Neoplatonic tendencies also manifest themselves in his acceptance of the via negative. We cannot properly or truthfully speak of what or who God is. Instead we can only acknowledge that God must be the infinite. For any finite thing, regardless of how great, one can always imagine something greater, just as for any number, regardless of how large, one can always count one higher.\textsuperscript{49} Thus, God, for Cusanus, is the maximum: that than which there can be nothing greater. While there is much more we could say about the conclusions Cusanus draws from this claim (e.g., that the maximum is necessary, it is beyond being and contradictions, it is pure unity, triune, etc.), the conclusion that is of interest to us is that since God is infinite, God must be the absolute universal.

After establishing that the maximum must be pure unity, or “oneness,” Cusanus moves forward to establish the relationship between the maximum and everything that is not the maximum by means of a mathematical metaphor.\textsuperscript{50} Just as all rational numbers presuppose oneness and are derived from the multiplication of oneness, so “the pluralities

\textsuperscript{49} DI I, 3. One can hear echoes here of Anslem’s ontological argument.

\textsuperscript{50} DI I, 5:13-14.
of things, which descend from Infinite Oneness, are related to Infinite oneness in [such way that] they cannot exist independently of it."51 Everything that exists is found in God, but in God, it is not other than God. It is God himself. Universals, if they exist actually, as distinct universals, only in particular things, also exist in God. But in God they are identical to God. They are not a multiplicity of universals that comprise God as a composite, nor are they distinct concepts in God’s mind as the Neoplatonist might have thought. To explain how it is possible for “all possible things” to be in God actually, but still be identical to God, Cusanus again turns to the mathematics of infinity for a metaphor that transcends our power of imagination, but is “graspable by the intellect.”52

Just as there can be only one maximum, so there can be only one infinite line, he claims.53 According to Cusanus, this entails that an infinite triangle, circle and sphere are necessarily identical to an infinite line. Consider, for example, the circle. An infinite circle is a circle the diameter of which is infinitely long. Because any given arch of a circle is more or less curved in proportion to the circle’s diameter, an infinite diameter requires a minimally curved line that is infinitely long, i.e., an infinite straight line.54 Thus, an infinite line and an infinite circle are one and the same. Cusanus expresses this relationship by saying that the infinite line is “enfolded” in the infinite circle. He gives similar proofs for the infinite triangle and the infinite sphere. This example is meant to prove that in the maximum, everything is enfolded infinitely, in perfect simplicity, and is

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51 Ibid., 14.
52 DI I, 14: 37.
53 I’m not entirely sure what to make of this claim. Perhaps he is thinking something like this: if there were two, all of their intrinsic properties would be the same, so it would just be the same line.
54 Ibid., 13: 36.
actually (not just potentially) identical to the maximum.\textsuperscript{55} So God is the essence of all essences because he enfolds all essences.\textsuperscript{56} “Since [He] is the Absolute Form of all formable forms, He enfolds in Himself the forms of all things…nevertheless in Him seeing is not other than hearing, tasting, smelling…and understanding.”\textsuperscript{57}

Cusanus’s claims represent a solution to the problems that arose from the adaptation of Neoplatonism into the Christian framework. When Augustine identified the Platonic forms as ideas in the mind of God, this created a difficulty for the doctrine of Divine Simplicity. However, if Cusanus’s reasoning, explained by his examples from mathematics of infinity, is successful, his framework may serve as a solution to this troubling problem, perhaps one the goes further than Thomas’s earlier suggestions.\textsuperscript{58}

If God is the ultimate universal, what is the relationship between him and the universals that exist in things? The reader will remember that in the text that we opened with from \textit{De Docta Ignorantia}, Cusanus makes two claims. Universals exist only in the things themselves, and they exist there only contractedly. The second claim is most significant for our present discussion. When Cusanus uses the word \textit{contracted} he means something close to \textit{restricted}.\textsuperscript{59} However, we must not infer from this that the universals in the external world are simply God, expressed in a restricted or limited manner. The strongest reason to avoid this interpretation is Cusanus’s own repeated claims that God

\textsuperscript{55} Ibid., 16: 42.
\textsuperscript{56} Ibid., 16:45.
\textsuperscript{57} Ibid., 3:9.
\textsuperscript{58} I don’t want to suggest that his mathematical claims are accurate. But his intuition that something infinite immanently contains everything else is suggestive in a helpful way. I will return to it in the fifth chapter.
contains no contraction and is uncontractable in himself.\textsuperscript{60} Furthermore, if God were the essence of things in a straightforward way—the kind of way that would infer that they are simple God restricted—then all individual entities in the world would share the same essence—God. They would be essentially the same and only accidentally different.\textsuperscript{61} Cusanus explicitly denies this in the paragraphs immediately preceding his treatment of universals in \textit{De Docta Ignorantia}. He says that the contracted quiddity of the sun is different from the contracted quiddity of the moon.\textsuperscript{62} This is so because, in eternity, God understood one thing in one way and another thing in another way.\textsuperscript{63} Nonetheless, they all bear a likeness to Him insofar as each contracted thing imitates the absolute maximum as much as it can, by being as perfect as it can be.\textsuperscript{64} Furthermore, in his other writings Cusanus makes it clear that God created the world \textit{ex nihilo}, not simply as a restricted expression of himself.\textsuperscript{65}

To put all of these claims together, it might be helpful to consider one of the metaphors that Cusanus uses when attempting to explicate this relationship. He compares the relationship between God and the created universe to the relationship between a face and that face’s reflection in a mirror. The reflection in the mirror only exists because the real face exists. In this sense its being is dependent on the being of the face it reflects. Yet, the reflection is not identical to the real face, so its being and

\textsuperscript{60} DI II, 9; II, 13; III, 1.

\textsuperscript{61} Hopkins raises similar considerations.

\textsuperscript{62} DI II, 4: 115.

\textsuperscript{63} DI II, 3: 108.

\textsuperscript{64} DI II, 4: 112.

\textsuperscript{65} Ap. 28:18-19.
essence is distinct from that face. “For God is the form of being, but is not mingled with creation.”\textsuperscript{66} The reflection bears a likeness to the real face, but only in a limited perspectival way.\textsuperscript{67} The creation, for Cusanus, has something somewhere between the being of God and nothingness. It is not God, but neither is it nothing.\textsuperscript{68}

Finally, we have to consider the nature of conceptual universals and their relationship to the universals in things. According to Cusanus, we construct the likenesses of the universals in things on the basis of our sense impressions of those extra-mental particulars. An overview of this process is provided in the following text from \textit{De Docta Ignorantia}, which we considered earlier.

Dogs and other animals of the same species are united by virtue of the common specific nature \textit{which is in them}. This nature would be contracted in them \textit{even if Plato’s intellect had not}, from a comparison of likenesses, formed for itself a species. Therefore, with respect to its own operation, \textit{understanding follows being and living}; for [merely] through its own operation understanding can bestow neither being nor living nor understanding. Now with respect to the things understood: the intellect’s understanding follows, through a likeness, being and living and the intelligibility of nature. Therefore, \textit{universals}, which it makes from comparison, \textit{are a likeness of the universals contracted in things}. Universals exist contractedly in the intellect before the intellect unfolds them by outward signs for them [emphasis mine].\textsuperscript{69}

\textsuperscript{66} DI II, 2: 102.
\textsuperscript{67} DI II, 2: 103.
\textsuperscript{68} DI II, 2:100
\textsuperscript{69} DI II, 6:126.
This passage leaves no doubt that Cusanus does not think that the categories, genus and
species, are only in the mind. Instead, the species outside the mind, the existence of
which is independent of the knowing subject, is described as metaphysically and
chronologically prior to the species in the mind.

In *The Layman: On the Mind* the unlettered man tells the philosopher that the
mind is something “from which comes the limit and measure of all things.”® Clyde
Miller is correct when he points out that it is impossible to interpret this claim correctly
without a robust understanding of the human mind as the *imago Dei.* Cusanus develops
this idea in chapter 3:

If you called the divine simplicity infinite mind, it will itself be an exemplar of our
mind. If you call God’s mind the totality of truth about things, you will call our
mind the totality of the assimilation of things, so that it may be a totality of ideas.
For in God’s mind conception is the production of things; in our mind conception
is the knowledge of things…All things are in God, but there as exemplars of
things; all things are in our mind, but there as the likenesses of things.

On the basis of this passage, Miller suggests the following analogy: God’s mind is to the
Created world as the Human mind is to the conceptual world.® God’s conception of
things creatively generates the external world, and human conception actively and

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® *DM*, 1.

® Clyde Lee Miller, “Introduction” in *The Layman: About Mind*, (New York: Abaris Books,
1979), 20.

® While this analogy accurately captures Cusanus’s sense, the chart Miller provides on 21 is a bit
misleading. In the chart, both the created world and the human mind are designated as “image [imago].”
This is inconsistent with Cusanus explanation of the relationship in chapter 4. He says that only the mind is
the *imago* of God. Creatures without mind are the unfolding [explicatio] of what is enfolded in God, but
are not an *imago* strictly speaking.
creatively generates the conceptual world. While Cusanus does not understand the human activity of concept formation as the mere passive reception of forms conceived of by Aristotle, he still thinks it is fundamentally related to the universals in things themselves because the mind strives to create concepts that are likeness of the extra-mental reality. This goal, however, is not perfectly achievable. Insofar as universals in things are presented only contractedly in changeable matter, and no member of a species can attain to the limit or perfection of that species, and insofar as the mind receives these contracted universals in an imperfect way, the mind never grasps the true essences of things.  

Because the true universals in which things share are unfoldings of the one infinite enfolding, a perfect understanding of one thing would provide perfect knowledge of all other things, which are themselves unfoldings of the same enfolding, and thus would provide perfect knowledge of the infinite God. But since there is no proportion between the infinite and finite, this knowledge remains eternally out of our reach. All knowledge for finite knowers is a conjectural attempt to liken the conceptual world as much as possible to the external world, which in turn is a likeness of God.

The reader will remember that the primary reason that Abelard rejected the possibility of God playing a significant role in an account of universals was because of human beings’ lack of epistemic access both to God’s concepts and to the actual natures of things. Cusanus, acknowledges the very same epistemic gap but denies that it derails an account of universals that refers to God. It would only do so if one expected human discourse to be absolutely true—for there to be a perfect correspondence between our predicates and our concepts and the universals that exist in particulars and in the mind of

73 DM, 2.

74 Ibid., 3.
God. For Cusanus, at each level as one moves away from God to the particular and eventually to the mind, the universal becomes an increasingly more obscure reflection of the true Universal.

III. Conclusion

This chapter has only scratched the surface of the wealth of the debate on the problem of universals in the middle ages. We have seen that all of our authors accepted the existence of divine ideas, and all those who accept the existence of universals acknowledge a causal link between them and the divine ideas. Even those who don’t think that universals exist accept a connection between the divine ideas and the character of particulars.

One thing that stands out from this discussion is the contrast between the worries that medievals had with regard to the divine ideas and those that preoccupy the contemporary debate. As we saw in the last chapter, contemporary philosophers of religion worry primarily about the bootstrapping problem. Because our thinkers were substance ontologists and because they accepted the doctrine of simplicity, this problem could not arise for them. They did not understand God as having a nature that is explainable via its relationship to multiple various universals. Thus, they are intensely concerned with preserving the unity of the divine nature and with the possibility of epistemic access that humans have to universals. Neither of these problems have been raised in the contemporary literature. After providing the basic framework for my own theory of universals in the next chapter, I will turn in chapter 5 tackling both the medieval
and the contemporary concerns that arise with respect to the divine nature. Then, in the last chapter I return to the problem of epistemic access and the limits of human knowledge.
Chapter 4:

A Case for Theistic Conceptual Realism about Universal

In the previous chapter we glanced briefly at the long history of maintaining that there is at least some connection between one’s theory of universals and the Divine Mind. Indeed, we saw that in some cases, theological commitments led the discussion. In this chapter I propose a theory informed primarily by St. Augustine’s and St. Thomas’s account of universals and properties. I argue that once one has accepted that God is the creator of particulars, one has good reason to believe that divine ideas serve as their extrinsic formal causes and that they provide the metaphysical underpinning for all of the phenomena associated with the problem of universals: property exemplification, attribute agreement, subject-predicate discourse, and abstract reference. The first section of this chapter shows that the relationship between God’s concepts and God’s creation is best understood as one of participation. The second section explicates the phenomena mentioned above within this system, demonstrating that Theistic Conceptual Realism (TCR) does as good a job accounting for each of them as traditional transcendent realism. To do so I propose adopting a two-step ontology including both universals and particularized property instances. The final section of the chapter addresses potential concerns such as the notorious regress problems facing accounts of universals.
Throughout this chapter, I point out how TCR provides answers to the first three questions posed at the end of chapter 2:

i. Can we find a way to talk about the ‘content’ of God’s thought that is coherent but avoids overly anthropomorphic assumptions?

ii. How do we understand properties as God’s concepts in a way that does not conflate a universal with an exemplar?

iii. What is the metaphysical constitution of particulars if their properties are identical to God’s concepts?

I. TCR as a Theory of Universals

In the second chapter, one of the central points of debate was whether or not it makes sense to think that universals fall within the scope of divine creative activity. What none of the theists there doubts, regardless of her view, is that God creates the particulars that possess or exemplify properties, whatever those turn out to be. It may make sense, then, for the theist to begin constructing a theory of properties from this point of agreement.

What does the doctrine of creation demand we believe about the divine mind? Following Augustine, I think that God must know what he creates when he creates it. It is contrary to the doctrine of omniscience to think that God might fail to have this knowledge. As Augustine puts it, for God to fail to know what he creates in a way that is logically prior to the creation itself would be for God to create irrationally and without
intention. So, what follows from thinking that God knows what he creates? Well, we might think that God’s knowledge of his creation entails that he has concepts of the objects of his creation. In addition to knowing what he creates, God knows all of the details of the nature and accidents of what he creates. It doesn’t make sense to claim that God knows that he creates a dog, but fails to know that this dog is brown and furry and so forth. Following the above argument, if God knows that the dog is brown, then God also has a concept of brownness. Therefore, if one accepts that God is creator, one could arguably be committed to God having concepts of all of the things he creates and all of the properties that those things exemplify.\(^1\)

One might worry that this claim is far too anthropomorphic. Perhaps divine knowing diverges so drastically from human knowing that we may not justifiably infer anything about the divine case based on our theory of human knowledge. Indeed, there is a long tradition, to which we will return in the fifth chapter, of believing that God’s knowledge is non-propositional just because God does not have to put things together bit by bit in order to comprehend them the way we do. I believe this worry is well founded. Nonetheless, I think we can still use the human case as a helpful, albeit rough, merely analogous, model. Since I think that something like a correspondence theory of truth is probably right (at least when we are doing metaphysics), I would want to say that God knowing his creation entails that something in the mind of God bears some appropriate correspondence relation to something outside of God. We may call this “something” a ‘concept’ by way of analogy, but we need not say anything further about the nature of

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\(^1\)We will remember from our discussion of Aquinas in the last chapter that he accepted that God had ideas of all of these things, but that God only has exemplar causes of the who particulars that he actually creates. God doesn’t create brownesses. He creates dogs that are brown.
those concepts or how God entertains them. If God’s mind had no connection to
anything outside of himself, we would be hard-pressed to justify the use of the word
“knowledge” with respect to him at all. To claim otherwise is to speak of something, I
know not what. Indeed, even Aquinas, who denies that God has propositional knowledge
argues that God does know things through himself, whose “essence contains the
similitude of things other than himself.” Here ‘similitude’ and ‘image’ (in the reply to
objection 2) seem to mean something like a concept, since it hardly seems plausible that
Aquinas thought that God literally has little snapshots of things in his mind. Thus, even
if God does not know things in the same way humans do, he does have something we can
call concepts of things, in virtue of knowing that to which his power extends.

This perspective provides a response to question (i): Can we find a way to talk
about the ‘content’ of God’s thought that is coherent but avoids overly anthropomorphic
assumptions? The reader will recall that van Inwagen raises worries about what God’s
thoughts might be.3 If we want to know which of my thoughts is a thought about cats, we
can say that it is thought that is correctly expressed by the English sentence ‘Cat’s are
warm fuzzy animals,’ but to give this sort of explanation in the case of God would make
God’s thoughts dependent on something else. However, if God’s concepts are something
like a plan or an exemplar of what he will create, like the plan a craftsman has in her
mind prior to making something, then we have a way of understanding what God’s
thought targets. God’s knowledge of his own power to create is the foundation. He need
not look to anything outside of himself. This claim raises a related question. If God’s

2 ST 1.14.5
3 Peter van Inwagen, “God and Other Uncreated Things” in Metaphysics and God: Essays in
concepts are foundational such that there is nothing metaphysically prior to them that they are *about*, then we might wonder why it is that God has the concepts that he actually has, rather than others. My response is a *tu quoque*. If it is satisfactory for the Platonists to claim that grasping a particular universal rather than another accounts for why mental content counts as this content rather than another, then surely it should be sufficient to say that God’s grasping or knowing himself accounts for the content of God’s thoughts. Like Leftow, we reply with an appeal to a primitive, but here the primitive is God himself, rather than the content. Given the nature of the current project, we should welcome this outcome.

A related objection, that carries more weight, is one raised by James Ross.\(^4\) One could think that God’s creation is logically prior to his knowledge of his creation, such that God knows the particulars only because he creates them, rather than the other way around. Indeed, Ross argues that this is the view of Aquinas. Similarly, Graham Oppy wonders why, in addition to God’s power to create a cat, we must also posit that he has a concept of a cat.\(^5\) If one is inclined to think this way, there is nothing blatantly illogical about it. In fact there is a long tradition of debate between the intellectualists and the divine command theorists involving this fundamental disagreement about the order of grounding. Is God’s choice grounded in his knowledge of his own nature as I claim, or is his knowledge grounded in his free choice? It seems to me that thinking that God only knows because he creates diverges rather strongly from our usual way of thinking—and,


indeed, the most intuitive read of Aquinas. Humans know prior to creating. Though this temporal language is inappropriate with respect to God, it seems odd to think that God knows less than we do, so there is arguably a sense of logical priority inherent even in God’s knowing. If God is omniscient, how could he fail to have a concept of that which he has the power to create? However, my opponent may object that we need not think that God’s creation is sufficiently like human creation for knowledge to be a prerequisite. Indeed, Ross claims that to accept that God’s knowledge must be logically prior to his creation is to weaken the meaning of creation ex nihilo in an important sense. It is because of our lack of power that we must form a mental image of what we want to make and then execute our intentions. In Ross’s view, God simply exercises his power to create—He says, “Let there be a dog”—and what comes into existence is a dog, which he then knows because he creates it. Ross is committed to this ordering because he thinks it would be incoherent for God to have concepts of non-existing things, and if God’s knowledge is logically prior to his creation, this would provide a strong reason to think that God does, or at least could, have knowledge of non-existing things—those things which he has the power to create but chooses not to. We will consider this objection and Ross’s reasons for it at greater length in the final section of the chapter. If it fails, it seems more plausible to claim that God creates in accordance with his knowledge than in its absence.

Thus far I have suggested that most theists accept two things: that God creates particulars and that God’s knowledge of his creation is logically prior to the act of creating. From this we can infer something of the relationship that holds between God and the particulars he creates. On the one hand, God’s creation out of nothing entails that
the particular derives its being from God. From the perspective of the temporal creation, creation is not only the act of a single moment but of God’s continual sustaining of the created order in existence through time. And not only sustaining its existence, but also sustaining the character of the particulars as what they are. For the dog to exist is for the dog to derive its being from God in the particular finite way that dogs do. On the other hand, God’s knowledge entails some sort of correspondence between the divine idea and the particular that he creates. The particular must resemble, be like, or imitate the divine idea of what God intends to create. We expect God’s will to successfully bring into being something like the thing that he intends to create.

As we saw in the previous chapter, when Aquinas adapts Augustine’s divine ideas thesis, he frames the relationship between particulars and divine ideas in terms of resemblance. According to Aquinas, the divine ideas are actually nothing other than God’s divine self-knowledge. God can know himself in two ways: as he is in himself and as he is imitable in an infinite number of ways by finite creatures. This means that the divine ideas are multiple only insofar as God knows himself as multiply imitable, while the object of knowledge is nothing other than the one unchanging divine essence.

However, there are reasons to think that my appeal to resemblance is problematic. Unlike resemblance nominalism which posits resemblance as a primitive, transcendent realism typically cashes out resemblance in terms of sharing properties. If \( a \) resembles \( b \), then \( a \) shares at least one property with \( b \). Furthermore, resemblance is typically thought to be a symmetrical relation. If \( a \) resembles \( b \), then \( b \) also resembles \( a \). Does this entail that, if \( a \) resembles God’s concepts, and God’s concepts are nothing more than God’s concepts?

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6 ST I. 15. 1.

7 ST I. 15. 2.
knowledge of himself as imitable, the proponent of TCR must accept that God and a share a property such that God also resembles a? Perhaps not. Consider the following example. Family resemblances are quite common, and we generally consider them causally asymmetrical even though they may not be metaphysically so. Even though, from a metaphysical standpoint, my daughter and my husband do share attributes, my husband’s attributes are causally prior to my daughter’s such that it seems correct to say that she resembles him and strange to say that he resembles her. In the case of God, there may be a certain sense in which it is correct to say that the particular shares an attribute with God. If to have the attribute is to resemble God’s concept, and the concept which God has is like God himself, then both God and the particular have the attribute, though in drastically different ways. However, there may be reason to think that God’s concept is perfect in a way that the particular’s resemblance is not. No resemblance or imitation ever captures the object of resemblance perfectly. Furthermore, God’s concept is causally prior to the particular’s imitation of it. Therefore, we may eschew the claim that God resembles finite things. If they do share an attribute, it is only in an analogical sense.

The causal priority at work in the explanation above points to an important connection between the two relations: *dependence of being* and *resemblance*. One might think that the creature resembles its respective divine idea just because it derives its being from it. And of course, it derives its being from it because it was caused in accordance with it (or, one might even say, by it, since the divine ideas are not distinct from the divine essence). In other words, the two relations are not separable; rather, they are two aspects of the one particular relation in which creatures stand to the creator. We might
call that relation *participation*. Though not as clearly defined in the Platonic literature as one might hope, from Plato onward, when something *participates*, it derives its being from the thing in which it participates and is like it in some important sense. For Plato, the forms in which physical things participate are more real than the physical things themselves and express their respective character in a purer way. A just man is just to one degree or another by his relation to Justice, but Justice itself is just in the truest and purest sense. For Plotinus, souls participate in the Intellectual Principle and derive their being from it. This relationship is often called emanation or procession. Though the traditional theist may want to deny that this procession happens inexorably, as the neo-Platonists were inclined to think, participation corresponds rather well to the Christian doctrine of creation ex *nihilo*. Indeed, for Aquinas, participation just is the relation of being both created by God and distinct from God.

If I am correct, a theist who is committed to creation ex nihilo and divine omniscience has good reason to think that particulars participate in the divine ideas as their exemplar cause. In what follows, I will argue that this relationship provides answers to all of the questions associated with the problem of universals such that it is appropriate to say that divine concepts are universals.
II. The Phenomena Explored

A. Property Exemplification

Consider first property exemplification. The reader may recall from the second chapter that Richard Davis and Paul Gould argue that the proponent of TCR faces an impasse once she tries to account for the relationship between divine concepts as universals and the particulars that exemplify them.\(^8\) Up to this point in the debate over the relationship between realism and theism that relationship has been largely neglected. Most of the work has been put into accounting for how divine thoughts might ground propositions. My best explanation of this neglect is that since transcendent universals are not usually conceived as being \textit{in} particulars the way that immanent ones are, and TCR is a case of transcendent realism, its proponents just assume that separate divine concepts can be easily substituted for the abstract objects. It turns out that things are more complicated.

The two most popular accounts of the relationship between a particular and its properties are bundle theory and substratum theory. Both obviously conflict with TCR. I explained in the second chapter that if the metaphysician is a bundle theorist, then she must accept that material objects are nothing more than bundles of divine ideas or aspects of God.\(^9\) Though Berkeley and Spinoza might be pleased with this result, most monotheists will object, since it does not allow for sufficient distinction between God and God’s creation. If, on the other hand, the metaphysician is partial to substratum theory

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\(^9\) Davis doesn’t seem to address the differences between constituent and relational ontologies in his paper. While his claim seem particularly powerful in the case of a constituent ontology, it is less clear that it succeeds as an objection to a relational ontology.
then there are things (i.e. bare substrata) the identity of which depends entirely on God not possessing a concept of them. This is particularly troubling for a Neo-Augustinian account like mine, since I claim that God necessarily has a concept of everything that he creates. This is the problem that raised question (ii) in the second chapter: What is the metaphysical constitution of particulars if their properties are identical to God’s concepts?

My account quite easily eludes the Berkleyan Idealism of bundle theory, since I suggest that particulars exemplify their universals by resembling them rather than by being constituted by a bundle of them. However, if something resembles a divine concept, there must be some thing that bears that resemblance, since resemblance is a two-place relation. Particulars cannot simply be bundles of resemblances. This might push us in the direction of substratum theory if it were not incoherent. Thankfully, Davis and Gould present a false dilemma. Though bundle and substratum theory are more popular, they are far from being the only two plausible accounts. In fact, a number of theories of the particular are compatible with TCR.

First, one could adopt what D. M. Armstrong calls a “blob theory” of particulars. On such a theory, particulars are not complex wholes “built up” out of a combination of more basic metaphysical entities. As a result, they have no internal structure. Properties, then, do not enter into the ontological constitution of particulars at all. The reader may remember that resemblance nominalism is an instance of such a view. For resemblance nominalists, resemblance is a primitive, internal relation that exists between unstructured particulars. It is just a primitive fact that this particular

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resembles all of the members of one class and fails to resemble all of the members of another one. That is, resemblance determines properties, not the other way around, as it is arguably more natural to think. Since we have elucidated the exemplification relation partially in terms of resemblance, this account of particulars may be attractive. The dog has the property being a dog because it resembles the divine idea, rather than resembling the divine idea because it is a dog.

A blobish version of TCR also evades the difficulties that arise from standard blobish accounts of particulars: the problems of coextension, companionship, and imperfect community.¹¹ The problem of coextension arises because resemblance nominalism doesn’t have the resources to distinguish between two properties when all of the things that have them form only one maximal resemblance class when, intuitively, there are actually two distinguishable properties. On a Neo-Augustinian blob theory, the relevant resemblance relationships are not the relations that hold among particulars, but the relation in which particulars stand to divine concepts. Thus, we can say that the set of things that resembles God’s concept of F is identical to the set of things that resembles God’s concept of G, but that these are two different properties, because they stand in relation to two (rationally) distinct concepts. Imperfect community is a case in which each of the members of a group resembles at least one other member without them all sharing a common property. On my view the fact that each of these will resemble each other, and no other things will resemble all of them, need not entail that they share a common property, because, again, the relevant resemblance relations are to God’s concepts. Finally, the companionship problem arises when the class of things

instantiating one property is a proper subclass of those instantiating another property (‘having mass’ and ‘having mass $m$’). We can answer this difficulty by assuming that in some cases bearing a resemblance relation to one of God’s concepts is a necessary condition for bearing another. Thus, particulars that exemplify the latter, also exemplify the former. With these troubles out of the way, blobish TCR may be more formally coherent than resemblance nominalism, and is certainly compatible with my current thesis.

A second account of the particular/property relationship compatible with TCR is a two-step bundle theory that invokes both property instances (sometimes called tropes, modes, or particularized properties and natures) and transcendent universals. A two-step account introduces metaphysical structure into the particular. Property instances constitute its nature. Rather than a blob ontology, we would have something akin to an ontological layer cake. Furthermore, the properties of the particular are themselves particulars, rather than universals, which has the metaphysical pay off of allowing properties to enter into causal relations. The redness of this apple is distinct from the redness of that wine. On traditional transcendent realism, properties are universals, which cannot themselves enter into causal relations. This makes it difficult to account for how we come to know the properties that a thing has if we cannot causally interact with them. Furthermore, Bundle theories typically face the additional difficulties of explaining the particularity of the particulars (if it is made up of a bundle of universals, what makes it particular?) and the identity of indiscernibles (two distinct bundles cannot

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exemplify all and only the same properties). However, if properties are themselves particular, these difficulties do not arise.

Unlike trope nominalism, proponents of the two-step theory do not invoke set theory to account for the identity of the property instances. Rather, the property instances have their identity in virtue of resembling one divine idea rather than another. Each property resembles exactly one divine concept, and does so because it is the realization of God’s intention to create such a particular. This apple’s redness is a case of redness just because it participates in God’s concept of redness that he intends to create when he creates this apple’s redness. This theistic version of bundle theory avoids Berkleyan Idealism and fares at least as well as standard bundle theory. Indeed, Armstrong argues that after immanent realism, the combination of trope nominalism and resemblance nominalism is the strongest theory of universals on offer on the ontological market. What I am suggesting provides all of the strengths of that combination, while avoiding the difficulties faced by resemblance nominalism and adding the benefits of transcendent realism. These external ontological considerations might recommend the “extravagance” of the two-step ontology well beyond the rather ad hoc need to defend TCR against the charge of incoherence.

If one is inclined, apart from the theological difficulties considered in this work, to conceive of particulars either as blobs or as bundles of particularized properties then I have demonstrated that one may do so while also holding a view of universals consistent with theism. However, there are reasons to be skeptical about the success of either of

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13 Again, “one divine concept” is to be understood from the perspective of the creation, not from the perspective of God’s nature, which is not divided or divisible. It is like God in one of the ways that God knows himself imitable by finite particulars.
these two theories. Since the difficulties have been discussed extensively elsewhere, I will only present them briefly here. One serious problem afflicting blob theories is that they (at least apparently) entail that every particular has all of its properties necessarily. Because there is no internal structure, the particular cannot but stand in all of the resemblance relations in which it actually stands. To come to lack one of the resemblance relations that it currently possesses would be tantamount to becoming a different blob altogether. It is difficult to account for identity through change over time if that is the case. Since it is counterintuitive to think that particulars exemplify all of their properties necessarily, this may constitute grounds to reject blob resemblance as a solution.

Introducing structure into the ontological make-up of the particular does not solve this problem. Bundle theory faces it as well. The identity of a particular bundle is constituted by its members, so to lose or gain a member is to become a numerically different bundle. One might object, claiming that identity may be maintained at a practical level as long as some critical number of properties remain constant through the loss or gain of other properties. But other difficulties lurk nearby. One might want to be able to give an account of different kinds of properties, since it seems like different properties have significantly different levels of centrality to the nature of the particular. Take the brown dog. On bundle theory, the brown dog is a bundle of the properties being a dog, and being brown, and being furry, and so on. We assume, prima facie, that the dog could lose some of its properties and maintain its identity over time. If the dog is shaved and comes to no longer possess the properties being furry and being brown, we would want to claim that it is still the same dog—just naked and pink. If, however, the
bundle that constitutes the dog came to lack the property *being a dog*, we would rightly believe that we are no longer dealing with the same entity, even if there was some sort of continuity in the material stuff that made up the dog. It does not appear that bundle theory has a ready answer to these sorts of considerations.

A third option—and the one to which I am most partial—is a substance ontology. Substance ontology has two primary advantages over bundle theory and substratum theory. First, a substance ontology preserves the common-sense particular as the possessor of the properties. On substratum theory it is not the dog that possesses brownness, but a property-less thing that possesses *doghood* and *brownness*. Likewise, on bundle theory it is not the dog—as opposed to any of the other properties—that possesses brownness, but the bundle of which it is a member. Yet there is intuitive plausibility about thinking that the *dog* should possess the brownness and not the *brownness* that possesses the doghood. This leads directly to the second advantage. I pointed out above that different properties seem to have different levels of centrality to the identity of the particular that exemplifies them. Some, like *being a dog* are essential, while others, like *being brown*, are not. Substance ontology takes this distinction quite seriously. It distinguishes between kind universals like *doghood* and *humanity* and property universals like *brownness*. Kind universals make it the case that the particular exists and is the sort of being that it is. They do not admit of degrees. A particular is either a thing of this kind, or it is not. Either Socrates is human, or he is not. He cannot be slightly human. Property universals, on the other hand, account for the various

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15 Not all versions of substance ontology will be compatible with TCR. For example, J. P. Mooreland has a theory of substances that he considers broadly Aristotelian, but which invokes bare substrata. For the reasons cited above, this will end up being incoherent if universals are understood as I argue they should be.
characteristics of the particular. Some of these properties will be essential to the kind, while others will not be. Furthermore, many of these properties admit of degrees. A particular can by very wise, somewhat generous, redish, and smaller. In fact, it makes sense to think that the kind universals cause the particular to exemplify the essential properties of the particular’s kind. For example, while being four-legged is not the same thing as being a dog, the fact that this particular is an instance of a dog explains why it is four-legged. One might want to call this internal causality a case of formal causality and think of kind universals as the contemporary incarnation of what the medievals called the substantial form. According to Aquinas, substantial form is what makes a thing exist simpliciter, while accidental form is what makes it exist in one respect or another.¹⁶

A second function of kind universals—at least for some contemporary substance ontologists—is to individuate.¹⁷ Above I pointed out that a particular cannot simple be a collection of resemblances. Resemblance is a two-place relation. There must be some thing that resembles God’s concepts, and that thing must be distinct from other things that resemble the very same divine concepts. We considered the possibility that tropes are the things that resemble God, but ran into difficulties. But according to substance ontology, particulars are instances of their kind. When God creates a dog he brings some thing into existence that resembles God’s concept of a dog. This particular dog is the bearer of all of its properties, so that the dog resembles God’s concept of a dog, and is also the thing that possesses the properties. This points to something important. Unless


¹⁷ This may be a departure from traditional Aristotelian metaphysics, according to which prime matter does the individuating. See Loux, Metaphysics, 112-113, where he calls kind universals “individuative universals” and uses the example of a cookie-cutter. See also, Lowe, “Form without Matter.”
we want to end up with an unstructured blob, then the dog must possess properties. These cannot be the divine concepts themselves or we are back to Berkeley or Spinoza. As a result, the combination of substance ontology with TCR requires a two-step account. The particulars are not identical to the kind universals and their properties are not identical to the property universals. Rather, both the substance and its properties are particular rather than universal. The substance is an instance of the kind universals and possesses particular properties (or tropes) that depend on the substance for their existence, but which resemble the property universals that are God’s concepts.

I noted above that a two-step theory might have ontological benefits that recommend it beyond the need to reconcile realism with theism. And, indeed, a two-step substance ontology has much to recommend it. What I am suggesting takes the best of Aristotelianism (i.e. immanent realism) and the best of Platonism (i.e. transcendent realism) and combines them into one coherent picture. One might even argue that this is exactly what Aquinas did. As we saw in the last chapter, in some places he suggests that Plato was right about the forms as long as one accepts that it is God’s ideas rather than abstract entities that function as forms. Furthermore, he claimed that God only ever creates particular things. Since the properties of particulars are themselves particulars, substance TCR acknowledges this as well. Thus, substance TCR is a more thorough-going Neo-Augustinian theory than either of the other two options.

A final point recommending a robust two-step ontology is that it reconciles different ways of thinking about the particular-universal relation. Some metaphysicians

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18 The property is a particular as opposed to a universal, but it is not a particular in the sense of being a complete entity. The properties are (usually) dependent for their existence on the substance. I put ‘usually’ in parentheses because of the medieval debate over whether or not qualities are separable. The Catholic doctrine of the Eucharist is at stake in this debate.
speak of the relationship between the universal and the particular as though the universal accounts for why the particular has the properties it does, while others speak as if the particular exemplifies the universal because it has certain properties. In the first chapter I followed Paul Gould in arguing that the problem of universals requires a theory of properties as its answer, suggesting that universals account for properties. However, Lowe points out that “it seems clear that there must be something about how, concretely, the apple is in itself which warrants the ascription to it of precisely this abstract universal, redness, rather than other.” Substance TCR acknowledges both of these intuitions. It is something about the apple itself which warrants the ascription to it of precisely this divine idea (as opposed to an abstract universal). But it is also God’s will in relation to precisely this divine concept that explains how it is that apple came to be what it is.19

B. Attribute Agreement

It is not difficult to extend this account of property exemplification to the phenomenon of attribute agreement. If God intends to create multiple particulars that resemble the very same divine idea, he creates two particulars that agree in attribute in virtue of resembling the same idea. For example, he may will to create two things that resemble the divine concept of doghood. Then, the two substances will each be their own particular dog-substance, but will resemble the very same divine concept. Unlike standard bundle theory, there is not difficulty accounting for how two distinct things might agree in all of

19 In addition to the first-order properties of concrete particulars, one might wonder about relations, the properties of abstract objects, and second-order properties. I think these too can be accounted for by the content of the divine mind, but will leave them aside for future work.
their attributes and still maintain their distinct identity. We can formalize our account of attribute agreement in the following way:

(I’) If \( a \) and \( b \) agree in attribute, then there is an concept in the mind of God which they resemble.

C. Subject-Predicate Discourse

Implicit in my theory is also a straightforward way of dealing with subject-predicate discourse. The resemblance relations in which things stand to divine ideas ground the truth of such discourse. The proposition ‘This dog is brown’ is true if and only if the dog resembles the divine concept of brownness. Formalized:

(II’) Where a predicate-term ‘\( F \)’ can be truly applied to all and only the objects, \( a...n \), there is some idea in the mind of God, which all and only \( a...n \) resemble.

However, more can be said on this score. Since we have already introduced property instances into the structure of the particular, why not ground the truth of subject-predicate discourse in the property instances of the particulars, rather than in the divine ideas in which those instances participate? It is not uncommon in the philosophy of language to think that to understand some proposition is to grasp its truth-conditions. If the truth-condition for the proposition is the particular’s participation in the divine concept, then one must not only believe in the existence of divine ideas, but one must also think that they account for the dog’s brownness—all in order to have a basic understanding of the
meaning of sentences in natural language. That seems like too stringent a requirement, since children and non-philosophers seem to grasp the meaning of natural language quite well (in fact, it often seems like it is the analytic philosopher who has the hardest time!). If, however, the particular property instances ground the truth of our discourse, then we do not face this difficulty. It is just the dog’s possessing brownness—the brownness that the child and the non-philosopher can easily see and interact with in a causal way—that is the truth-condition for the statement. This does not mean that we cannot talk about the further metaphysical grounding of the dog’s brownness. If we want to ask questions about the nature of the dog’s property instances—if we want to know what makes it the case that the dog’s brownness is a case of brownness and not something else, or why it is the case that this dog’s brownness is the same color as that dog’s brownness—then we ask a metaphysical question. It is perfectly natural for one to give a metaphysical answer. The answer would appeal to things that neither the child nor the layman is aware of, but that is not problematic. Therefore, my proposal entails that to have the correct metaphysics one must accept the existence of God, but it does not require that one accept his existence to have basic comprehension of natural language. Standard transcendent realism cannot make this distinction between abstract universals and the properties in particulars, and that, it seems to me, counts against it and in favor of TCR.

On the other hand, TCR faces difficulties at this juncture that fail to arise on standard accounts. If universals are abstract objects, there is no problem in the existence of universals such as evil, ugliness, being a gap, being a beach ball, and being red or blue. If it is not immediately clear why these pose difficulties for TCR, consider the following. My account is grounded in God’s identity as creator, but the theist has strong
theological and philosophical reasons to reject the notion that God intends to create things resembling any of the afore-mentioned universals. Consider first the hypothetical universal *evil*. The notion that God intends to create something evil (or evil itself) conflicts with the character of a supreme being. There is no moral problem with God intending to create something ugly *per se*, but I have argued that God’s concepts are identical to God’s knowledge of himself as imitable in finite ways. One might think it problematic to claim that *being ugly* is a particular way of being like God. Graham Oppy raises a related worry. TCR would entail that God has “bawdy thoughts, banal thoughts, malicious thoughts, and silly thoughts.” Further, beach balls are not created by God at all—at least not in any straight-forward sense. They are artifacts, not substances. Finally, gaps, cracks, the hole in my donut, and a host of other things that we talk about every day are not actually any *thing* at all, so it is odd to think of God creating them.

One answer to this quandary is to argue for the plausible view that there is no one-to-one correspondence between properties and predicates. There may be properties for which we have no predicates and predicates that fail to correspond to any real property. But then, TCR would be significantly deficient. It would not provide grounds for the truth (or falsity) of all of our subject-predicate discourse. One would need a good reason—one that I have yet to offer—to account for the truth of some of our discourse along TCR lines, and the rest in some other way. Indeed, TCR makes it impossible to account for the remaining discourse along standard realist lines. There are no universals outside of God to ground it, so one would have to account for the truth of the remaining portion of our discourse in a nominalist way. As it turns out, in the last chapter I will suggest a semantic dualism according to which the truth of some discourse is grounded

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20 Oppy, 105.
realistically and the rest anti-realistically. However, the motivation for that approach is not the difficulty posed by the sort of predicates we see here, and, indeed, that approach would not be an adequate response to them.

I propose again turning to the medievals to deal with properties that God would not create and properties that are not plausibly understood as ways of being like God. In the *Confessions*, Augustine argues that evil has no being or substance of its own; rather, it is a privation. As it happens, Augustine’s motivation for this is related to the present difficulty. Augustine does not believe that God could be the source of evil, but to acknowledge any other source of evil would require either falling back into the dualism of the Manicheans or endowing something other than God with the power to create *ex nihilo*. If we apply his hypothesis, it turns out that what we are really talking about when we speak of evil is the absence of goodness. When we describe someone or something as evil, we are actually describing their failure to be good in some way or another. We can extend this basic idea to some of the other categories that pose problems. Predicates like ‘ugly’ would refer to failures to be like God in a particular way. If something is ugly, it does not resemble God in the particular way that beautiful things do.²¹ Gaps, cracks, holes and so forth are also privations, but of a different kind. They are the absence of anything at all in a particular place. It doesn’t matter that we don’t consciously think of any of these predicates in this way. What matters is that there is a reality that grounds the truth of our discourse, whether or not we grasp the ontological structure of that reality.

²¹ Beauty is often considered a transcendental—one of those universals in which everything participates. If this is correct, one could think that ‘ugly’ refers to a failure to resemble God’s concept of beauty to the same degree as those things
Then there are artifacts. A popular way of dealing with artifacts is to claim that they do not exist in any proper sense. This tradition stretches all the way back to Aristotle, for whom the only true substances were biological organisms and the primary elements. Peter van Inwagan adopts this view, suggesting that there are no tables and chairs, just particles arranged table-wise and chair-wise. In other words, artifacts are non-substances built up out of something more fundamental that is a substance. How then do we account for the truth of discourse about artifacts? A few options are available. We could say that the truth of our discourse about artifacts is grounded in human concepts rather than divine ones. What counts as a table or a chair is determined by the general consensus of the community of humans who make and use them. This is a nominalistic way of dealing with this discourse. Another option is to point out that if humans can develop concepts of these artifacts, then surely God is aware of those concepts and understands them, such that the divine concept is the arbiter over and above the various, and possibly conflicting, human conceptions. Ultimately, they ground the discourse. I set aside the details of these two approaches for the concluding chapter when we will discuss them at greater length.

Finally, there is an array of what I call derivative properties—disjunctive properties and so forth. On one hand, there is no difficulty with God intending to create something that is red or blue. There is also nothing incoherent about being red or blue being a way of being like God. On the other hand, if these are genuine properties, then every particular exemplifies an infinite number of them. Insofar as God himself is infinite, he can have an infinite number of concepts that any given particular could

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22 *Categories*, 5.

resemble. However, if particulars are substances that possess property instances, there is a problem with each one of them possessing an infinite number of property instances—for that would be an actual infinite. The first thing to note in dealing with these predicates is that there would something indeterminate about God intending to create a particular that is red or blue. To do so, he must also intend to create something red or intend to create something blue. One or both of these definite intentions must accompany the indefinite intention. Another way to think about the difference is to note that if God creates a particular that possesses the property being red, this entails that it exemplifies the property being red or blue. If however God created a particular with the property being red or blue, this would not entail that the particular possessed the property being red. This provides grounds for thinking that the so called “disjunctive properties” are derivative. We coin the predicate on the basis of the logical entailment, but it does not map onto an actual property. The particulars are either red or they are blue.

In addition to the problematic predicates above, subject-predicate discourse referring to God poses even greater difficulties. I address this particular worry in the next chapter on the Divine Nature.

D. Abstract Reference

It is standard for realists to claim that cases of abstract reference are cases of referring to universals. For example, in the proposition ‘Wisdom is a virtue,’ Wisdom is an abstraction. Realists think that it refers to the abstract universal Wisdom. Following their lead, we might want to simply substitute divine ideas for universals to arrive at the following formalization:
When a predicate-term functions in a position of abstract reference in a true subject-predicate sentence, it serves to pick out or refer to the divine idea, \( I \).

This may be satisfactory if one doesn’t think that a conscious awareness of the nature of the thing referred to is a prerequisite to referring to it. If, however, the speaker must be aware of what she is referring to, then it may be problematic, for it is doubtful that humans have the epistemic access to divine concepts necessary to pick them out and refer to them successfully. The considerations of the last section do not provide a solution to this problem since TCR does not propose that \( Wisdom \), the universal, is in the particular human such that one might refer to it. Rather, \( wisdom^1 \), a trope, is in this particular woman and \( wisdom^2 \) is in that particular man. But of course, we usually don’t take ourselves to be claiming that only this particular instance of wisdom is a virtue, or even that all instances in existence are virtues, but that \( Wisdom \) is the sort of thing that is a virtue. \( Wisdom \), however, is in the mind of God. One might want to say that when someone utters the sentence ‘wisdom is a virtue,’ the word ‘wisdom’ refers to their concept of wisdom rather than to God’s concept of it. If one takes this route, however, one loses the ability to critique the abstract claims made by others, except on the grounds of deceit. If ‘wisdom’ refers to the speaker’s own concept of it, then whatever the speaker honestly asserts of it is true. If the speaker asserts that ‘wisdom is a vice,’ and her concept of wisdom is as such, then she deserves no critique. However, we want to be able to say that she is wrong. Wisdom is not a vice. But we have no grounds to do so unless there is something that links her abstract reference to the divine idea. Perhaps
when we say she is wrong, we are not claiming that her assertion is false, but that she has the wrong concept of wisdom. But to do that, we ourselves will need to be able to refer to something other than our own concept. Otherwise our critique will amount to nothing more than the claim that her concept differs from ours, which surely does not carry the appropriate weight. Therefore, we do not want abstract reference to refer to our own concepts. I pick up this topic in greater depth in the last chapter. For now, it should be sufficient to note that this difficulty is not unique to TCR. On standard realist accounts it is no clearer how individuals gain epistemic access to abstract, causally effete universals in such a way that they may refer to them. Thus, as a way of reconciling transcendent realism with theism, TCRfares just fine.

III. Questions Answered

A. Regress Problems

Each of the answers proposed to the problem of universals, both realist and nominalist, faces problems of infinite regress. Transcendent realism about universals is apparently vulnerable to three: the notorious third-man problem and two relating to the exemplification relation.

Our first recorded presentation of the third man problem is found in Plato’s dialogue *Parmenides*. In the text, Parmenides suggests that if Socrates claims that all large things are large in virtue of sharing in a single form—Largeness—and if he further agrees that Largeness is itself large (for how else could other things be large in virtue of
participating in it, if it is not large itself?), then Socrates will have to posit another form of Largeness in which all large things and the form of Largeness share. But then, Parmenides claims, we may ask in virtue of what this form derives its largeness, and so ad infinitum.  

Formulated in contemporary terms, according to a formalization similar to (I), but substituting abstract universals for divine ideas, $a$ and $b$ are both large in virtue of exemplifying the universal ‘$L$’. If one accepts Parmenides’ claim that ‘$L$’ is itself large, then $a$, $b$, and $L$ all share an attribute. Therefore, they must each exemplify a shared universal ‘$L_2$’. It is easy to see how this will lead to an infinite regress. This regress is quite vicious since what is meant to provide the grounds for the largeness of $a$ and $b$ needs further grounds, which needs further grounds, and it cannot be elephants all the way down.

The reader may recall from chapter 2, that Wolterstorff’s objection to the divine ideas thesis is related to just this point in Plato.  

contrary in our own experience. When I intend to build a house, I have an idea of the house, but that idea itself is neither brick, nor red, nor shaped like a house. The human idea does not itself exemplify the idea. God’s concept of a dog is not itself a dog, and God’s concept of redness is not itself red. Neither shares an attribute with the particulars that resemble them. Thus, when Aquinas refers to the Divine Ideas as exemplar causes, he does not mean that they are perfect instantiations of themselves, but that they serve as a pattern for their instantiations. I see no reason to assume that the case is different for God. Other concepts will be self-exemplifying—God’s concept of goodness is itself good; God’s concept of a concept is a concept. However, this need not pose a problem. Since each concept is identical to God’s knowledge of himself as imitable, it should not be surprising that God’s knowledge of himself as imitable is, at times, like himself.

As for being a universal—it is not clear to me that there is any consensus on what it is to be a universal, such that it could not be identical to an exemplar. Recalling Aristotle’s formulation—that which is apt to be predicated of many—there does not seem to be any reason why a divine idea, as an exemplar cause, might not be predicated of many. Boethius’s formulation, on the other hand requires too much, either for an exemplar or for a universal on any account other than immanent realism. Boethius requires that the universal by wholly within multiple particulars at one time. Transcendent realism denies that this is the correct characterization of the relationship between universals and their particulars to begin with. So while divine ideas may not be universals on one definition, they may well be on another. If this is correct, then Wolterstorff is wrong in thinking that Plato et al. have problematically conflated exemplars with universals.
Another problem of regress arises from the second thesis. According to formalization similar to (II), if ‘F’ is predicable of $a...n$, then $a...n$ all exemplify F-ness. But if the particulars exemplify F-ness, then the predicate ‘exemplifies F-ness’ (EF-ness) is also predicable of them. Therefore, they also exemplify EF-ness. If a large thing exemplifies largeness, then it also exemplifies exemplifies largeness and exemplifies exemplifies largeness. In this way $a...n$ exemplify an infinite number of universals in virtue of exemplifying one.\footnote{Michael Loux, \textit{Substance and Attribute: A Study in Ontology}. Philosophical Studies Series in Philosophy, eds. Wilfrid Sellars and Keith Lehrer (Dordrecht: D. Reidel Publishing Company, 1978), 24-25} Most realists have not seen this as a significant problem since exemplifying an infinite number of universals, while perhaps failing Ockham’s test, does not result in a failure to ground the notion of predication. It is not an infinite number of explanations, each in need of a further explanation, but an infinite number of implications, each of which implies the next. And this, it is claimed, may not be problematic. It would, however, be problematic for the property instances that I have suggested. Again, we do not want an actual infinite in the metaphysical make-up of particulars. But we have dealt with this sort of predicate already in the section on subject-predicate discourse.

The next regress following from the exemplification relation gives cause for worry: $a$ exemplifies ‘F’ only if $a$ stands in a particular relation to F-ness. But $a$ and F-ness can only stand in this particular relation to one another if the relation of exemplification stands in a particular relation to both of them. This relation can be called exemplification$^2$. It must also stand in relation to the first three, and so \textit{ad infinitum}. This regress problem has proven especially troubling because, like the third-man argument, it suggests that what is meant to be an explanation itself requires an infinite
number of further explanations. And an infinite number of explanations is equivalent to no explanation at all. Such a result suggests that realists cannot make coherent sense of what it means for a particular to exemplify a universal. Without this relation, the very notion of a universal as the grounds for predication breaks down. There are two things we must note about this regress: first, it is not unique to realism. Nominalisms face the very same sort of problem in accounting for properties. If the difficulty is not unique, it hardly counts against realism more than against any other theory of universals. Second, TCR can follow traditional realism, which claims that exemplification is not a relation but something primitive, and claim that participation is a primitive. For the proponent of TCR this amounts to the claim that participation/reshape is a primitive that holds between God’s ideas and anything that he creates. Given that creation _ex nihilo_ is unique, it should not be surprising that it generates a unique, primitive connection.

_B. Objections_

Objections to theistic accounts of universals take two forms: One objection argues that a Platonic construal of God’s ideas as _ante rem_ universals fails on formal grounds. The other sort points to further difficulties in accounting for the relationship between God’s ideas and the particulars that exemplify them.

The formal objection to TCR depends on the outcome in set theory that there can be no maximal or universal sets. For any set, _S_, one could form its power set, which will be larger than the set itself. Thus, if one has what one claims to be a universal set—one

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27 Alan, Donagan, "Universals and Metaphysical Realism," _Monist_ 47 (1963): 225; and Michael Loux, _Substance and Attribute_.

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containing everything of a certain kind—there will always be a set that contains more than it, which should be impossible if the original set is, indeed, maximal. Others have spelled out how this outcome afflicts Platonism about modality.\(^{28}\) One might think that a possible world is the set of all propositions (i.e., all divine thoughts) that God knows are compossible. However, for any such set, one could make a larger set including the propositions claiming that each of the propositions in the previous, “maximal” set is true.\(^{29}\) Do we get a similar sort of outcome when dealing with the set of all properties?

It seems that we could. Let’s imagine a world that contains only three properties, x, y, and z. The set of all properties would contain just these three, but then one could imagine the property “being property x” and “being property y” and “being property z.” Now we have six properties that should be included in the set of all properties. And of course the same thing could be done regardless of the cardinality of the set. However, this is only a problem if one thinks that properties like, ‘being the property x” and disjunctive properties, “being property x or y or z” and so forth are genuine properties. It seems to me that we can easily deny that these second order properties are properties in the proper sense. We will simply include them among the derivative properties we considered above, for the very same reasons.

James Ross offers an objection of the second kind. He argues that “it is inconsistent to postulate an external real relation of participation or ‘exemplification’ to account for what makes a thing to be of its kind or to be the individual that it is.”\(^{30}\) This


\(^{29}\) Pruss thinks that this problem is easily dealt with by distinguishing among different theoretical levels, ibid. 159.

\(^{30}\) Ross, 316. Emphasis his.
is because the particular must *already* exist in order to stand in any relation at all, but cannot exist as the particular that it is unless it is *already* a particular of a certain kind. The substratum theorist has a ready answer to this problem. A substratum theorist can acknowledge that *something* must already exist in order to stand in relation to God’s ideas, but deny that thing need be the particular straightforwardly understood. The substratum exists, and is the bearer of the properties—that is, the thing that stands in the external real relation to God’s thoughts. Only the substratum *plus* the external relations it bears—its properties—constitute the individual. However, for the reasons we saw above, I do not wish to adopt a substratum ontology. Instead, I argue that there is another “external real relation” that Ross himself both acknowledges and defends, in which a thing must stand in order to be the sort of thing that it is. In the case of this particular relation, it is incoherent to think that the individual must exist antecedently in order to stand in it. That relation is the ‘creation *ex nihilo*’ relation. It is unique in the following sense: *a* need not already exist in order to come to bear this relation to *y*. On the contrary, creation is the act that itself causes *a*’s existence. I argued in the first section that God’s intention to bring into existence a particular that resembles a certain divine concept is what determines the kind of thing the particular is. So, creation *ex nihilo simultaneously* makes it true that the particular exists and that it exists as a certain kind of thing. This dual function is why we articulated the relation between the particular and the divine idea as *participation*. The aseity-sovereignty doctrine commits us to thinking that everything that is not God bears this “external real relation” to God. This is not to say that the relation is identical to “being” per se—something to which Ross objects. To whatever degree it is appropriate to think of God as having “being,” we must say that
there is being apart from the creation ex nihilo relation. But for all finite, contingent beings, bearing this relation is both a necessary and sufficient condition for existence.

One final consideration worth attending to before we move on is the ontological status of the universals I have proposed. As traditionally construed, universals are abstract, rather than concrete, objects. Davis and Gould take universals to be paradigm examples of abstract objects, claiming that being a universal is a sufficient condition for being an abstract object. However, one might question whether or not TCR satisfies this criterion. Most theists are uncomfortable with categorizing God as an abstract object (and with good reason, I think). If God himself is not an abstract object, it is at least plausible to deny that his concepts are (this is especially true for those of us who want to deny a real distinction between God, the divine nature, and divine concepts). If God’s concepts are not abstract, then universals are not abstract either, according to TCR. The question we must ask is whether or not this constitutes a problem. The only relevant consideration, as far as I can see, is whether or not a divine concept can perform all of the functions that we expect from a universal. Aristotle’s definition, “what is apt to be predicated of many” is certainly fulfilled by divine concepts, since a single divine concept can be exemplified by infinitely many particular property instances. On Boethius’s characterization it appears that divine concepts cannot be universals, since they do not enter into the metaphysical make-up of the particular. However, the same is true of any transcendent theory of universals, so this should hardly count more against TCR than it does against any transcendent theory. In the contemporary literature, as I describe in the introduction, universals are introduced as the best explanation of certain

phenomena: property possession, attribute agreement and abstract reference. Above, I have defended the claim that the combination of divine concepts and particular property instances can fulfill each of these roles at least as well as transcendent realisms universals without violating the aseity-sovereignty doctrine to which many theists are committed. Furthermore, as Greg Welty nicely argues, part of what is at stake with the realist/nominalist distinction is that for realism, universals are mind-independent entities. On TCR, universals are, in fact, mind-independent from the perspective of human knowers, even if not from God’s perspective. Thus, we could say that TCR is a realist theory for us but a sort of conceptual nominalism for God. And we are primarily concerned with the nature of universals from our perspective. Thus there appears to be no reason, then, to reject a theory that is realist about universals simply because it might not turn out to invoke a realist theory of abstract objects.  

IV. Conclusion

Drawing on the work of Augustine and the medieval philosophers who followed him, I have argued that Divine Ideas, understood as the exemplar causes of God’s creation, do all of the work that realist typically invoke universals to do. Thus, we can say that universals are identical to God’s concepts. This thesis works best when coupled with a substance ontology of particulars and particularized property instances. What I think

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32 For a fuller discussion of what is at stake in the concrete/abstract distinction as it relates to this question, see the responses to Greg Welty’s article “Theistic Conceptual Realism” in Beyond the Control of God? Six Views on the Problem of God and Abstract Objects, 81-96, as well as the critique and Welty’s rebuttal, 97-111.
makes this theory attractive for theists, is that it follows from the doctrines that most already accept about the nature of God. There is a sense in which it is metaphysical robust (some might even say profligate), since it invokes two different kinds of universals, and property instances as well as universals, but that is another sense in which it is quite economical. The typical transcendent realist has a host, perhaps even an infinite one, of abstract objects in her ontology, in addition to God, and whatever things enter into the constitute of particulars. We, on the other hand, only accept the existence of particulars, along with all of their constituents, and God, their creator. Perhaps, Leftow is right. Once we have God in our ontology, it makes sense to let him do as much metaphysical work as possible, especially if the work we let him do, is the work we already believed he does.
Chapter 5:

TCR and the Divine Nature\(^1\)

As I have shown at length in chapters 3 and 4, Theistic Conceptual Realism is not a new theory. It is simply a new application of a view that Christian philosophers have held for centuries to a contemporary problem. If there is such an easy solution to the tension between the God of theism and transcendent universals, one would think that more theist philosophers would accept it, but we saw in chapter 2 that this is far from being the case. There are a number of reasons why this is so, but perhaps the most serious—the one that bothers even those who are positively disposed to the general thesis—is the bootstrapping problem. From a historical perspective, this is new worry. I have not found it anywhere in the medieval literature or in any contemporary work before Morris and Menzel’s groundbreaking paper. It is likely that this is the case because the bootstrapping problem arises from the logical and metaphysical relationship between God, his concepts, and his properties. If God is identical to his substance, which is identical to his properties, which is identical to his existence, questions of priority do not arise. Insofar as the medieval commenters on the problem of universals and divine ideas were committed to the doctrine of divine simplicity, as we saw, they were not plagued by this concern.

However, invoking simplicity as the solution to bootstrapping comes at a rather high price, not only because the theory itself has largely fallen out of favor with contemporary philosophers, but also because, even if it can be proven coherent, divine simplicity appears incompatible with the theory of divine ideas that it is invoked to save. I begin this chapter by considering two difficulties that follow from applying the Principle of Character Grounding to the divine nature: bootstrapping and property-identity conflation. I then consider an unsuccessful solution to the first. In the third section I argue that Principle of Character Grounding does not apply to an infinite being, and explain how we
may make sense of discourse about the divine in light of this. This move simultaneously solves the bootstrapping problem and defends the doctrine of simplicity against the standard property-identity conflation. Finally, in the last section I return to Thomas Aquinas and Nicolas of Cusa’s work for an explanation of how a multiplicity of exemplar causes might be found in a simple God.

II. God and the PCG

Implicit in the theory of universals that I am defending is the Principle of Character Grounding (PCG). ¹ The PCG says that properties explain or ground the character of the things that exemplify them.² If I want to know why the dog is brown, one reasonable sort of explanation is to say it is because the dog exemplifies the property being brown. We can call this the metaphysical ground of character (of course, there will also be other causal reasons any individual property is exemplified by a particular).³ According to my version of TCR, the metaphysical explanation is itself grounded in a deeper causal relation. Particulars have the properties they do because God created them with a particular divine idea as their extrinsic formal cause. Insofar as creation is a causal relation, the metaphysical relation referred to by the PCG is logically posterior to the causal relation to God. None of this should be surprising to the reader. We began our

¹ We have seen this principle already as part of Gould’s arguments in chapter 2.

² Here I am being purposefully ambiguous about the nature of the theory of properties. The PCG applies equally in constituent and relational ontologies.

³ An explanation having to do with genes and heredity, or with light wave lengths, for example.
project by looking for a theory of properties compatible with traditional theistic commitments. Among other things, we argued that such a theory would explain the character of particulars.

Initially, it may seem natural to apply the PCG to God in the same way we apply it to everything else. After all, we tend to think that God is not a characterless entity. We speak of him using a variety of distinct predicates. According to classical theism, God is omniscient, omnipotent, loving, and so forth. Even proponents of negative theology want to say that God is not evil, not capricious, etc. This entails that God has some positive character, even if we cannot define it in a positive way using impoverished human language. If this sort of predication is appropriate with respect to God, then it seems that the PCG must apply to him. Indeed, this is the conclusion that Alvin Plantinga draws in his 1980 monograph, *Does God have a Nature?*. He argues that God must exemplify properties because, according to the law of the excluded middle, for any predicable, we must predicate either that predicate or its negation of God. God either exemplifies the property *being holy*, or he exemplifies the property *not being holy*. He exemplifies the property *being cruel*, or he exemplifies the property *not being cruel*. Thus, properties are unavoidable. However, if we accept this claim, two difficulties arise.

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5 This claim makes clear that Plantinga assumes that there are properties corresponding to every predicate in language. As I explained in the last chapter, I see no good reason to accept such an ontology. However, rejecting it does not solve all of the problems in the direction that Plantinga points, so I will not argue against his view here.
A. The Bootstrapping Problem

The first difficulty is one we saw already in chapter 2. If the PCG applies to God, then a property like being divine is logically prior to God. However, if properties are identical to divine concepts as TCR argues, then the property being divine is identical to God’s concept being divine. It also makes sense to think that God’s concepts are logically posterior to God himself. Thus, the property being divine is both logically prior and logically posterior to the divine nature. It appears that God pulls his divine nature into existence by his own metaphysical bootstraps. Since I refer to steps in the argument in the next paragraph, I provide the reductio from chapter 2 again here for readability:

(1) God’s concept being divine = the property being divine. (TA and TCR’s claim assumed for reductio)

(2) The property being divine is logically prior to God. (that is, the divine substance). (From the Principle of Character Grounding)

(3) God (that is, the divine substance) is logically prior to the thought that he is divine. (Premise)

(4) If God (that is, the divine substance) is logically prior to the thought that he is divine, then God is logically prior to any necessary constituents of the thought that he is divine. (premise)

(5) The concept being divine is a necessary constituent of God’s thought that he is divine. (Premise)

(6) Therefore, God (that is, the divine substance) is logically prior to the concept being divine. (From 3, 4 and 5)
(7). Therefore, God (that is, the divine substance) is logically prior to the property being divine. (From 1 and 6 and the law of identity)

(8) ~ (2 & 7). (From the fact that logical priority is asymmetrical)

(9) Therefore, ~(1) (from 2-7 by reductio)⁶

One can respond to this difficulty in a number of ways. Taken as presented above, it provides a reason to reject TCR. Quite a few philosophers have gone this route. A second possibility, the one that Gould himself endorses, is to claim that there are different senses of logical priority at work in the *reductio*. When these senses of priority are elucidated, he thinks TCR avoids divine bootstrapping.⁷ Finally one could reject one or more of the premises of the argument. This is the approach for which I argue below.

Gould suggests that if we accept that substances are Aristotelian, we have reason to believe that there is both a metaphysical sense of priority and a causal sense of priority at work in the *reductio*. Step (2) should claim that the property being divine is *metaphysically* prior to God, while steps (3) - (7) should state that God is *causally* prior (in the sense of ‘final causality’) to his thoughts and concepts, and, therefore, to the property being divine. Gould argues that, “God’s essential properties partially explain God’s character (hence they are logically prior in the *metaphysical* sense). Still, the divine substance is a fundamental unity that is the final cause of its constituents

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⁷ Ibid.
Gould’s response embraces a broadly Aristotelian understanding of substance and invokes the Aristotelian notion of a final causality, yet we are given little explanation of how he conceives of Aristotelian substances or understands final causality. Each of these is critical to evaluating the success of his solution. In what follows I will consider each notion in turn, beginning with final causality.

According to Aristotle, a final cause is “the end, that for the sake of which a thing is done.” Final causes explain regularity in nature in a way that is more satisfying than mere coincidence. One can explain why a particular kind of animal always has teeth of a particular shape by claiming that the animal’s ability to eat certain food and, therefore, flourish, is the telos or end for which the teeth exist. That is, the flourishing animal is the final cause of that animal’s teeth. In the Physics, Aristotle explains that final causes and formal causes often coincide. The form of the house is the end or the goal in building a house. Turning to the Aristotelian account of substance, Gould offers the following analysis: “Substances are fundamental unities, logically prior to all of their metaphysical and physical parts.” He goes on to explain that the nature or essence of a substance

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8 Gould, “Theistic Activism,” 139. This same response is given in Gould, “The Problem of God and Abstract objects” in, Davis and Gould, “Modified Theistic Activism.” It is reminiscent of Morris’s claim that God’s nature is causally dependent on God, while God is logically dependent on his nature. See, Thomas V. Morris, Anselmian Explorations: Essays in Philosophical Theology (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1987), 176.

9 Physics II 3; Metaphysics V 2.

10 II 7.

brings into being all of the parts of the substance.\textsuperscript{12} These claims are reminiscent of the Aristotelian ontology of substances that was prominent throughout the high and later Middle Ages. I briefly mentioned this view when I laid out the medieval problem of universals in chapter 3, but given how little explanation Gould offers of the metaphysical and causal priority he believes to be at work Aristotelian substances, it may be helpful to sketch out their understanding of the relationship between a substance and its properties in a little more detail.\textsuperscript{13}

On the Aristotelian view, a substance in the strictest sense—I will follow Robert Pasnau in calling this the “thin substance”—is the unity of matter and substantial form. Aquinas claims that the substantial form is what makes the thing exist simpliciter, while accidental forms make it exist in some way or another.\textsuperscript{14} The substantial form includes all of the essential properties of the substance and is the internal cause of many of the substance’s accidental properties. The substantial form/matter composite, then, is the bearer of the substance’s accidents. The composite, together with all of the accidental properties it bears, constitutes the whole being—the “thick substance.”\textsuperscript{15} This thick substance is the final cause of the individual constituents. The thriving whole is the final cause of its parts. However, the thick substance can only be understood as the final cause

\textsuperscript{12} We can assume that he means “proper parts” since it would not make sense to think that something brings itself into existence, and every entity is an improper part of itself.

\textsuperscript{13} Obviously, there was no single theory of the relationship between a substance and its properties that was accepted by all philosophers throughout this period. But there were some things that were more generally accepted. My description here draws largely on Robert Pasnau’s work in \textit{Metaphysical Themes 1274-1671}, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2011), particularly chapter 24, “Substantial Forms,” 549-573.

\textsuperscript{14} ST 1a 76.4

\textsuperscript{15} We should not confuse the distinction between thin and thick substances with the absurd belief that anything actually exists solely as a thin substance. There are no thin substances running around “naked,” so to speak. Particulars only exist as thick substances, but this does not prevent us from distinguishing among that particular’s metaphysical parts.
once we have established the thin substance (the *essence*) that sets that end. Here again we meet Aristotle’s claim that formal and final causes coincide. We must first have a substance of a certain kind for it to make sense for the parts to be directed toward the end of the full expression of that kind. Given this framework, we can appreciate how a property may be simultaneously metaphysically prior and causally posterior (in the sense of final cause) to its substance. Consider a German Shepherd. On one hand, the property *being brown* is metaphysically prior to the dog. The property partially accounts for the character the dog has (according to the principle of character grounding cited above). On the other hand, the dog’s thick substance is the final cause of the dog’s exemplifying the property *being brown* and, thus, having brown fur. If this picture is correct, the sense in which a single property may be both prior and posterior to the substance becomes clear. A property is metaphysically prior to its thick substance, but is both metaphysically and causally posterior to the thin substance. For our purposes, the question arises: can this picture account for the metaphysical priority and casual posteriority of the property *being divine* that Gould suggests is at work in the *reductio*?

As pointed out above, a substance must be a substance of a certain kind for the notion of final causality to make sense with respect to it. The dog must be a *dog substance* for the thriving dog to be the final cause of its exemplifying the property *being brown*. This entails that the dog substance cannot serve as the final cause of a property like *being canine*, because the dog substance must already be a canine substance if it is to be a dog substance at all. In fact, *being canine* may just be another way of describing the substantial form, or this instance of the kind-universal, on the account I suggested in the last chapter. The same, it seems, must hold true for God. The divine substance must be a
divine substance (i.e., God’s substance) to be the final cause of any of its constituents. If this is correct, then Gould’s read of (3) - (7) in terms of final causality fails to solve the bootstrapping problem.

Gould might object to these claims on the grounds that his notion of Aristotelian substance need not invoke a substantial form at all. If one refuses to distinguish between different kinds of properties as the medievals did, and as I do, then perhaps all properties can be explained in terms of final causality. Though nothing in the article suggests that Gould does away with the Aristotelian notion of substantial form, in a more recent work he does consider a broadly Aristotelian approach to substance that does not invoke substantial forms or kind-universals, as far as I can tell: J. P. Moreland’s constituent ontology. Within Moreland’s framework, universals are exemplified by an underlying substratum—the bare particular—and inhere in the individual substance. Moreland claims that the substance itself, its essence, is the final cause of all of the properties it has—that is, all of the properties that inhere in it—both properties like being white and properties like being human.

Unfortunately, without the notion of substantial form, it is hard to see how to make sense of this claim of final causality at work in the reductio. If the substance is the final cause if its metaphysical parts, then, as I have already shown, the substance must already be a substance of a certain kind in order to direct the appropriate combination of properties, but on Moreland’s view, the substance, apart from the individual properties, is

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just a bare particular. To illustrate, let us compare Moreland’s account of the brown dog to the one I have given in the previous section:

[Consider the way a classic Aristotelian substance has a property, say some dog Fido’s being brown. On this view, Fido is a substance constituted by an essence which contains a diversity of capacities internal to, within the being of Fido as a substance. These capacities are potentialities to exemplify properties or to have parts that exemplify properties. The capacities are grounds for the properties like brownness that Fido comes to have. When a substance has a property, that property is “seated within” and thus an expression of the “inner nature” of the substance itself.]^{17}

The two descriptions share much in common. Both see the substance itself as an explanation of the properties that the substance has. The essence, like the substantial form described above, has the capacity to exemplify properties like *being brown*. However, on this account it is hard to understand *what* the essence might be. Either it is something like a substantial form, and we are back to grappling with the bootstrapping problem, or it is just a collection of properties. If it is a collection of properties that inhere in the substance in the same way that brownness inhere in the substance, then it is hard to see how it can account for the brownness in any special way or how the essence might itself be accounted for. The substance cannot be the final cause of its own essence in the same way that the essence may be the final cause of other properties and of the whole. Indeed, as Gould diagrams Moreland’s ontology, it appears that the properties

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that account for the substance’s essence (e.g. being a dog) inhere in the substance in exactly the same way that properties like being brown do.\(^\text{18}\) Taking this model for God, the divine essence is the final cause of the property being divine, but then there is nothing in the substance to set that end. In fact, the use of the phrase divine essence may be incorrect, for a divine essence cannot cause itself to be divine. Thus, on both reads of “Aristotelian substance,” the more traditional view and the contemporary one, I believe that it is incoherent to claim that God is the final cause of the property being divine.

**B. Property-Identity Conflation**

The second problem arises in the context of the doctrine of divine simplicity. Plantinga points out later in his monograph that if both the principle of character grounding (he does not use this particular language) and the doctrine of simplicity are true, then God is identical to a property. Simplicity entails that God is identical to his essence and that he has no properties apart from his essence. God is identical to God’s love, and to his power, and to his knowledge. If God is identical to God’s love, and being loving is a property, then God is identical to a property. Since Plantinga thinks that properties are abstract objects, he concludes that the doctrine of simplicity entails that God is an abstract object. “But no abstract object could have created the world,” so it seems that we must reject the doctrine of simplicity altogether.\(^\text{19}\) One sort response available to us is to accept that God is identical to a property, but deny that being so requires that he is identical to an abstract object. For example, William Mann has argued that while it may

\(^{18}\) Gould “How Does an Aristotelian Substance?,” 360.

\(^{19}\) Alvin Plantinga, *Does God have a nature*?
be objectionable to claim that God is a property, construed as an abstract object, there is nothing wrong with claiming that God is identical to his own properties, conceived of as concrete property instances rather than abstract objects. All people, thinks Mann, are identical to a special kind of property he calls a *rich property*, consisting of all of the time-indexed properties that they ever exemplify. There are a number of reasons why I think this approach is mistaken, but I will not enumerate them here. Instead I will simply say that I think that any account of simplicity that suggests that God is identical to, or exemplifies, any kind of property will ultimately fail.

We have seen in this section that the principle of character grounding creates an insurmountable difficulty for an otherwise very attractive theistic account of universals and makes most versions of the doctrine of simplicity seem implausible. Since neither of these doctrines—either theistic conceptual realism or the doctrine of simplicity—are essential to theism, we have two options. We can either reject them and maintain the principle of character grounding with respect to God, or we may deny the principle and keep the other two. Quite a bit of work has been done on the first option. So we shall turn our attention to the second. Is it necessary that a property, or properties, grounds God’s character?

As stated above, the principle of character grounding does not strictly entail that properties are a necessary condition for fully explaining the character that things have. Rather, it appears to claim only that properties, when a particular exemplifies them, explain (partially or fully) the character of that thing. This weaker claim leaves open, at

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21 Ibid., 466-67.

least in principle, the possibility that some other thing could also provide some
metaphysical grounding for the character of particulars—and I suggested such a thing, an
instance of a kind-universal, in the previous chapter. However, the reductio cited above
assumes a stronger read of the principle. Step (2) cites the principle of character
grounding as justification for the claim that a property is logically prior to God. Unless
the principle of character grounding is interpreted as a principle that says that properties
are the only thing that can explain the character of particulars, then it alone would not be
a sufficient justification for premise (2). There is an implicit assumption that if God is
divine (this seems like an analytic truth if anything is), then God must exemplify the
property being divine, and if this property is to explain his character, then it must be
logically prior to him. These implicit assumptions are indicative of the general climate in
contemporary metaphysics, but are they necessary? Perhaps not.

The metaphysical assumptions of the epoch in which both the Neo-Augustinian
foundation for TCR and the doctrine of simplicity developed were much different. We
saw in the previous section that the medievals worked within a substance ontological
framework. In addition to property instances and universals, they posited the existence of
substantial forms—universals such as humanity, doghood, and so forth—and in the last
chapter I suggested that we incorporate something similar into our understanding of the
particular. Indeed, during the later middle ages, some philosophers even began referring
to the substantial form as an internal efficient cause, in order to capture the way in which
the substantial form directs the development and life of the substance itself. So, clearly,
the medievals did not think that properties are the only thing that metaphysically grounds

the character of a particular. Furthermore, they would also have been completely unfamiliar with the relational ontologies so popular in contemporary metaphysics.24 Today perhaps the most popular account of the character of particulars posits that they stand in a particular relation (called exemplification, though many deny that it is technically a relation at all) to abstract universals. The medievals, in contrast, took the particular to be constituted by its metaphysical “parts.” Its substantial form and properties were in and constitutive of it rather than outside of it and related to it. Taken together, these two differences can be quite helpful in explaining what to some of us seems like an inexplicable claim made by the medieval about the character of God—claims that include a rejection of the principle of character grounding with respect to God. 

Medievals like Thomas Aquinas claimed that God is identical to his essence and that he has no properties distinct from his essence.25 Within the context of a contemporary relational ontology that accepts a strong read of the principle of character grounding, such claims appear completely wrong-headed, as Plantinga’s arguments cited above demonstrate.26 Within a constituent substance ontology, however, they make much more sense. The doctrine of simplicity claims that God, unlike you and me, is identical to his essence. Everyday substances in the created world are always something more than their essences. Every dog has the substantial form doghood as a constituent

24 A few decades ago, relational ontologies were most favored by far. Philosopher like Bertrand Russel and Nicholas Wolterstorff are good examples of relational ontologies. However, there has been a shift back to constituent ontologies in recent years in the work of people like D. M. Armstrong and Michael Loux.

25 ST 1.3.3

(or, as I have suggested, it just *is* an instance of the kind-universal), but also has many other constituents. Each dog is composed of some bits of matter, and instantiates properties, like being brown, some of which are accidents superadded to its essence.

Aquinas’s claim, on the other hand, insists that God has no accidents, no matter, or anything else over and above his “thin substance.” So while I am not identical to my humanity, God is identical to his divinity. We need not posit an additional property or divine concept to ground the claim that “God is divine.”

It is not obviously incoherent to think of something having no constituents apart from its substantial kind; nevertheless the claim that God is such a thing does seem at odds with the ways we actually speak of God. As I mentioned before, in addition to believing that God is divine, we say that he is loving, that he is omniscient, that he is omnipotent, and so forth. Intuitively, each one of these predications makes a claim distinct from each of the others. To claim that God is loving is to claim something different from the claim that God is omnipotent. And it doesn’t seem initially promising to ground the truth of these diverse claims in God’s simple substance, for these claims are not identical to saying that “God is divine”, “God is divine,” and “God is divine.” In other words, without the principle of character grounding, the task of accounting for the truth of our discourse about God seems futile. We might say that our discourse about God is not actually true in a strong sense of the word—it is full of useful fictions that help finite humans connect with the divine—but this is unlikely to satisfy those committed to classical theism. Classical theists, while often committed to a significant aspect of

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27 Classical theists may be willing to acknowledge that such language is *analogical*, but not that it is completely false.
mystery related to the divine, usually think that God is not only loving, but the paradigm of love itself.

In an earlier work on this topic, I argued that while God’s concepts do the work of explaining the character of particulars in a way that is rightly called realism (as I suggested in the last chapter), they ground our language about God in a way that might be called nominalistic. Since God is omniscient, in addition to knowing the particulars that he creates, he also knows himself. The concepts God has when he knows himself do resemble God, not—as with finite particulars—because he was made in accordance with them, but because they represent God. Such account of our discourse about God corresponds to concept nominalism. Our terms apply to God because his character falls under his concepts. If that account is correct, and proponents of concept nominalism are not forced to think that particulars are identical to properties, then I see no reason why we would be forced to accept that God is.

However, this explanation could use more filling out. First, I have proposed that our semantic theory for discourse about everyday things differs significantly from the theory that accounts for our discourse about God. I think it would be helpful to explain how the differences between God and created particulars justify that difference. Second, I want to address how it is that God could have multiple concepts of his single, simple nature.

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29 I do not think it makes sense to call this theory nominalistic with respect to finite things because as with realism, there is something real that exists apart from the finite conceivers and the finite particulars that explain the properties they have.
Thus far, I have suggested that properties must explain the character of created things because created things depend for their existence on the intentions of another. Since God depends on nothing, there is no need for properties to explain him. I think this is correct, but I think there is an additional aspect of this distinction that needs mentioning. Let’s start by thinking about what follows from the fact that a particular exemplifies properties. We might infer that to exemplify a property is to exist in a certain way.\(^{30}\) It is to exist in this way, rather than in that way. On other words, to exemplify a property is to be delimited.\(^{31}\) Thus, to exemplify a property is to be finite. For this wine to be red, it must not be (in the same way and at the same time) any of the other colors of the rainbow. To be a dog is to fail to be a cat and all of the other animals at the zoo. Furthermore, being an instance of a particular kind-universal and exemplifying certain properties limits the range of other properties the thing can exemplify. Being an instance of the universal-kind dog means that the particular cannot exemplify the property being prime.\(^{32}\) Properties impose a specific limit or set of limits on particulars. One might even think that having such limits follows necessarily from being created.\(^{33}\) Only created particulars depend for their existence on the intentions of another, and only created particulars are finite expressions of being. Thus, it isn’t

\(^{30}\) Unlike Armstrong, I don’t want to say that this is all that it means to exemplify a property, only that it is part of what it means.

\(^{31}\) It is important to distinguish between two different things that one might mean by this. One might think that a particular exemplifies the property that it does because it is delimited in a certain way. That is, character determines properties. That is not what I mean. I mean to say here that properties explain, ground, or cause (in the sense of formal cause) the particular limit(s) that the thing expresses.

\(^{32}\) Thanks to Michael Dickson for point this out to me.

\(^{33}\) My intuition is that being created is a necessary and sufficient condition for being finite, but I have no ready argument to defend this intuition. For my present purposes, I only need the claim that being infinite is a sufficient condition for lacking properties.
surprising that Aquinas claims that the divine ideas are nothing other than God’s knowledge of his own nature as imitable in finite ways by finite beings.

If properties explain the limits in the being of a thing, and God is infinite, then it follows that God does not exemplify any properties. The finite-infinite distinction, then, grounds the semantic dualism that I propose. When we use subject-predicate discourse with respect to particulars, we refer to the properties that they exemplify. When we speak of God using subject-predicate discourse, we refer not to the properties that God exemplifies—since he exemplifies none—but to the absence in God of various limits that might be there. That is, when we say that God is omniscience, we claim that God is not limited with respect to knowledge. When we say that God is omnipotent, we claim that God is not limited with respect to power. This acknowledges the intuitions behind negative theology while affirming as appropriate the positive claims that we make with respect to God.

However, one might think that the “with respect to” locutions used above reveal that a subtle acknowledgement of complexity has snuck into my theory of the divine. The absence of limits, “with respect to” this, rather than that, demonstrates that one can point to various “aspects” of the divine that might be limited but are not. The divine has knowledge, which might be limited, but isn’t, and power that might be limited, and isn’t. It isn’t unreasonable to think that the unlimited knowledge is not the very same thing as the unlimited power. I want to argue, instead, that the distinction that the “with respect to” locution points to is not, in fact, a distinction between “aspects” of the divine nature. Rather, the locution points to complexity that a limit would introduce into the divine nature if it were there. That is, once we imagine a limit, we can conceptualize the
property that such a limit would constitute. The limit would be a limit with respect to something, because the limit itself introduces complexity. Being familiar with all of the ways in which finite creatures are limited, we can easily conceptualize similar limits that are absent within the divine nature. Our subject-predicate discourse then, is the denial of these limits—and the properties that entail them—in God.

As I have described it, it may sound as though I am proposing a run-of-the-mill sort of conceptualism where our concepts of the limits that might be in God ground the truth of our discourse about him, while I suggested above that God’s concepts ground our discourse about him. This is not the case. My explanation in this paragraph explains how it is that we, in fact, come to conceptualize the pseudo-properties that we ascribe to God—an epistemic question. But, what grounds that use—the semantic/metaphysical question—is, as I claim above, God’s own concepts. If God knows his own nature as unlimited and knows his nature as imitable in limited ways by finite things, then it would follow that he knows that his own nature lacks the limits of those imitations. Thus, it may be appropriate to speak of God’s concepts, in the plural, of himself. These provide the ultimate grounds for our discourse about the divine.

One might object to this proposal on the grounds that while the “omnis” fit neatly within it, other properties do not. It isn’t clear how, for example, ‘being the creator of Abraham,’ or ‘being loving’ could be explained along these lines. We cannot, after all, interpret ‘being the creator of Abraham’ as the absence of a limit on God’s creation, for there certainly are such limits, even if they are self-imposed ones. Since God chose to create Abraham, kittens, and church mice, rather than Frodo, centaurs, or house elves, his
act of creation appears delimited in just the sort of way I deny above.\textsuperscript{34} Furthermore, to be loving is to fail to be unkind, unloving, and so forth. Love puts limits on character. To respond, I need to situate my claims within my broader theory of properties. As I argued in chapter 4, there is not a one-to-one correspondence between the predicates in natural language and the properties that things exemplify. Predicates like ‘being the creator of Abraham’ refer to relational properties. It does not enter into the constitution of the ones who ‘possess’ it. I think that the property ‘being a creator’ or ‘being capable of creating’ is what enters into the metaphysical make up of a particular. In the case of God, having the capacity to create is the absence of a limit on his capacities. It is natural for us to think of ‘being loving’ as putting limits on character, because being loving limits appropriate actions for us. But viewed in the light of theory of properties like mine, we must resist the urge to see it as a limit on being. Negative predicates, predicates depicting evils (things that God could not have intended to create), and predicates depicting deficiencies all refer to the absence of properties rather than their presence. Thus, when ‘being loving’ excludes ‘being unkind,’ it is excluding an absence, not a positive presence. Clearly, there are more predicates about which one might worry, but I think this is sufficient to suggest how one might deal with them.

If the above arguments are successful, then there are strong reasons to deny that the PCG applies to God. We may reject premise (2) of the \textit{reductio}, and we may reject Plantinga’s claims that for every property, God must exemplify it, or its negation and that simplicity entails that God is identical to a property. This is good news, both for my

\textsuperscript{34} Not by some external constraint, but by his own choice to do this rather that. God doesn’t chose to create everything that his power allows him to create.
theory of properties and for the traditional doctrine. Unfortunately, neither is out of the woods quite yet.

III. The Simple Multiplicity of Divine Ideas

In addition to providing reasons to deny the PCG, the way that I explicate the finite/infinite distinction above gives us the resources we need to make sense of how a simple God can have multiple “concepts” that serve as exemplar causes for everything that he creates. Consider the mathematical metaphors that Cusanus provided us for understanding the relationship between God and particulars. The circle, when extended to infinity, becomes identical to the infinite line. The idea is that if properties are limitations, a removal of all limitation leads us (epistemically) to the Divine. That suggests that an exemplar of the limited thing is somehow contained in the unlimited, but in a way that is simple. Here I am in the deepest and murkiest of territories, so I feel that all I can do is gesture in the correct direction and say that things are something like this.

Unfortunately, this still does not completely solve our problem. Cusanus gave us an explanation of how God’s simple nature could be the exemplar of everything that he creates. But I have argued following Aquinas that God’s knowledge, not God’s nature, accounts for God’s concepts. Certainly, everything I that have said up to this point, and the rest of Thomas’s theology of God, forces us to say that there is no distinction between God’s knowledge and God’s nature. And I think that is right, but I think there is still more we can say to help account for what we mean when we say that God knows his own
nature as imitable by finite creatures. On the face of it, it seems that we would be forced
to say that even if there is only one simple object of knowledge, knowing the different
ways and degrees by which particulars can imitate that simple nature seems to require
knowledge of discrete things. God would have to know $P^1$—‘$a$ is like God in $x$ way’—
and $P^2$—‘$b$ is like God in $y$ way’—and so forth for every particular, every species, every
genera, every property, and every relation. But this is probably only the case because we
use our own mode of knowing as a model for how we imagine God’s knowledge. And
that, as usual, leads us astray.

Aquinas argues both in the *Summa Theologica* and the *Summa contra Gentiles*
that God does not know “by composing and dividing” the way finite knowers do. Finite
knowers understand things by joining and dividing concepts. When I know that Fido is a
dog, I join the intentional referent ‘Fido’ with my concept of ‘being a dog’ to form the
proposition ‘Fido is a dog,’ to which I assent. Thus, a significant portion of human
knowledge is propositional. But we need not assume that because we must represent
things to ourselves in this way that God must. In fact, it may appear rather naïve to
assume that the finite human mode of knowing could be so much like the divine. Surely
an infinite being would know not only *more* than finite knowers but in a *more perfect*
way. What is this perfect way? Thomas Sullivan has this to say about it:

> By one intellectual act the divine mind attains intimate epistemic
> acquaintance with every concrete occurrence. God knows that whole of it,

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35 *Summa Contra Gentiles* I. 38, *Summa Theologica* I.14.16

36 I take it that there are other kinds of knowledge: knowing how, knowing what something feels like, etc.
in all of its individuality. He displays occurrences to himself through a single intellectual act, without relying on impoverished abstraction….

If God’s knowledge did not involve the joining and dividing entailed by “impoverished abstraction,” as Sullivan calls it, then all of God’s knowledge would be non-propositional. And because he would not understand particulars bit by bit, but completely and intimately, his knowledge would be more perfect than ours. Aquinas describes the completeness of God’s simple knowledge in the following way. It is “as if we, by the very fact that we understand what man is, were to understand all that can be predicated of man.” Aquinas is suggesting that with one eternal intuition, God knows not only this human and that human, but all that there is to know about all particular humans and humanity in general.

The question is, does it make sense to think that God has this non-propositional sort of knowledge? Little has been written on the subject and even less has been written that also attempts to maintain an account that is compatible with the doctrine of simplicity. As a result, we have little in the way of direction concerning this question, but also little in the way of objections. So rather than rehearsing what other people have said, it may be helpful to consider what we, as finite knowers, already know about the nature of non-propositional knowledge.

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38 Sullivan discusses the fact that non-propositional knowledge is often misconstrued

Human beings, in principle, would not be able to fully grasp the nature of divine, non-propositional knowledge, even if God, in fact, possesses it. As a result, as I contemplate the possibility of such knowledge, I often feel as though I am trying to envision a new color or imagine a sixth sense. Nonetheless, we do have some ready—although limited—illustrations in the kinds of knowledge of which humans are capable. For example, I know how to play the piano. What I know when I know this is nothing like knowing ‘that I know how to play the piano’ and does not involve “composing and dividing.” I also have knowledge of my own sense experiences that seem, at least initially, to come to me in a non-propositional sort of way. I know what the pain—and euphoria—of childbirth feels like, which is also very different from knowing the proposition ‘Giving birth is both painful and euphoric.’ Both of these kinds of knowledge (knowing how and knowing what something feels like) seem more immediately a part of me—more intuitive and intimate—than my knowledge of propositions. I can imagine that God’s non-propositional knowledge has something, however small, in common with these forms of knowledge.40 What I cannot do is imagine what it would be like to know in a non-proposition way what I know when I know that P. For our present purposes, however, neither my reader nor I need to know what it is like to know according to the divine mode. It is only necessary that such knowledge be neither self-referentially incoherent nor inconsistent with the assumptions of our current project. The view is certainly compatible with traditional theism. It does

40 In the human case, we have no grounds to say that one kind of knowledge is better or worse than the other. My non-propositional knowledge is not superior to my propositional knowledge or vice versa. They are just different. But I am suggesting that God’s non-propositional knowledge of things that we know propositionally would be superior to ours.
not appear to be incoherent given that we have examples of non-propositional knowledge from our own limited experience.

However, this view may not be obviously compatible with Theistic Conceptual Realism, at least as I have described it. In the first section I referred to God’s *concepts* of created particulars. The relation in which particulars stand to God’s concept was the foundation of my entire theory. Now I claim that the dividing and composing that necessitates concepts may be below God’s form of knowledge. Remember, however, that I acknowledged even then that the use of the word *concept* was anthropomorphic. At most I claimed that there must be something in God to which the particular corresponds. Since we want to say that God’s knowledge, even his non-propositional knowledge, is true or accurate, there must be some relation between God’s knowledge and the things in the world that God has knowledge of.\footnote{Thomas claims that God knows everything through his essence. My claim is more limited than that. I claim only that he knows the ideas through his essence. I think additionally that God must have a direct and intimate acquaintance with his creatures that is outward focused. Knowledge of them as other and not himself. Though it is not within the scope of this paper to argue for it, I do not think that such knowledge is at odds with the doctrine of simplicity.} And returning to Aquinas and Cusanus’s arguments, the relation between God’s knowledge and particulars is not really distinct from the relation between finite particulars and their infinite exemplar. I think this is sufficient to ground my arguments.

V. Conclusion

The doctrine of divine simplicity has a long and respectable pedigree. It is part of classical theism. But I am not one to accept doctrines solely on those grounds. I believe
that tradition has been wrong before and it might be wrong again. We must not let the desire to avoid a tyranny of the new drive us to accept a tyranny of the old. If we accept a doctrine simply because those before us accepted it, we will pass on all of our mistakes to the next generation. Christian thinkers of the past get a voice, but not veto power. If it becomes increasingly implausible to hold on to a doctrine, I believe it can be jettisoned. But I do not think that is the case with simplicity. The doctrine of simplicity has much to say for itself. Perhaps it is my Neoplatonic leanings, but as I indicated above, I cannot imagine how an infinite being could be anything other than simple.

In this chapter I have demonstrated that we have good reasons to reject the Principle of Character Grounding with respect to God. Doing so frees us from some of the most popular objections to the doctrine of simplicity. It also saves Theistic Conceptual Realism from incoherence. Additionally, I have attempted to show, at least in broad strokes, that that Theistic Conceptual Realism is compatible with the belief that God lacks all complexity. In short, I have argued that God thoughts are not our thoughts and that his nature is not our nature.
Conclusion:

TCR and the Limits of Human Knowledge

In this work I have argued that there are both historical and theoretical reasons why a theist can and should adopt a theory of properties according to which divine concepts do the work for which universals are typically posited. Despite being a form of conceptualism about abstract objects, I have argued that is justifiably considered a form of realism about universals, not only because it can account for all of the relevant phenomena, but also because it satisfies the Aristotelian definition of universal while answering the Porphyrian questions. Doing so allows us to remain Platonists of sorts, without this inferring, as we saw in the introduction, that there is no God. One of the things that recommends this theory to the theist is that her ontology ultimately finds its grounding the supreme creator of all. While there is often something nice about being able to give a philosophical account that is attractive to a wide range of philosophers with varying commitments, there is also something compelling, in a different sense, about a theory that requires that to fully understand what explains the character of things in our world, one must acknowledge the creator of those particulars. Nonetheless, the theory I propose also allows that persons, regardless of their theological commitments, come into contact with objects in the world that have particularized properties that explain the character those things have. It is just that something both outside of the objects and
outside of all human minds explains that character. This much is open for any philosopher to accept. It is only once the final move is made, in positing that divine ideas are that “something” that the theist’s ontology necessarily parts ways with those who do not accept a theist account. These, I take it, are all points that recommend Theistic Conceptual Realism. However, there still remains a question that arose when considering the medieval work on universals.

Philosophers who do not depend on a theory of divine illumination tend not to think that divine ideas play any significant role in answer the problem of universals just because humans cannot know the content of the divine mind. Even someone like Grosseteste who thinks such knowledge is possible in principle, does not think that the divine concepts can account for the overwhelming majority of human knowledge about the world. Further, the lack of epistemic connection between us and the divine concepts that ground the character of particulars raised potential difficulties for our semantic theory. What shall we say to these worries?

A number of answers are compatible with the theory I propose. In what follows I will mention two approaches that I believe should be avoided, and then briefly sketch two promising views, leaving the development and defense of either of them as a direction for future research.

I. Semantic Fictionalism

We could respond to this issue by adopting either fictionalism or semantic agnosticism (or both). On fictionalism, none of our discourse is literally true. Rather, most of the
things to which we refer are just useful fictions that help us get along with one another. Semantic agnosticism on the other hand, claims that we can never know if any of our discourse is true. We cannot know that our concepts correspond to God’s, so we can never know if our uses of abstract reference ever successfully refer. While neither of these views directly refutes TCR, they would demand that we take a rather odd position. If we take the first view, what grounds do we have for thinking that the divine concepts and properties that I have posited thus far are anything more than useful fictions? On the second, the theory itself might be true, but it isn’t clear that one could have any reason to prefer it, given the limits on our reason.

II. Cooperative Epistemologies

Two other views are more promising. On one hand, one might take a epistemically hopeful approach. The theist might want to argue that for our epistemology to work, and for us to get along in the world at all, there needs to be some sort of appropriately strong, positive relationship between the world and the propositional content of human beliefs. Christopher Tollefsen, for example, defends the view that only a relationship of cooperation—where we experience the world as having some intelligible content that is rightly called propositional when it is grasped by human knowers—can make sense of our relationship to the world and others in our linguistic community.¹ On such an account, one might say that particulars in the world have the ontological structure they do

because of their relationship to the divine mind, but that human investigation gives us ample access to the actually properties—tropes—that things have, such that we can be fairly confident that we are cooperating with the world in our epistemic endeavors. Thus, we can give a mostly straightforward, Aristotelian account of human knowledge. Furthermore, we can account for the problem of abstract references to divine concepts in whatever way that transcendent realist account for our ability to refer to abstract objects to which we also lack any perceptual contact. The proponent of TCR could take this approach with no inconsistency. And as a matter of contingent fact, many of the theists who are worried about the metaphysical issues addressed in this project are also interested in maintain strong version of both metaphysical and semantic realism. So, this approach may be the most popular response. However, it isn’t the only one available.

III. Semantic Dualism and Metaphysical Realism

Finally, we might occupy a middle ground between the first two views and the third. As the reader will recall from chapter 3, Cusanus believed that while there probably isn’t a one to one correspondence between our conceptual framework and the universals in particulars, or between our conceptual framework and the ultimate universal that is God, he did think that the three were related. The conceptual framework that humans have is something that they themselves creatively generate. The human mind is the imago Dei. It both “measures” what is outside of it and creatively produces a conceptual framework. Cusansus is adamant that no particular is a perfect example of the universal it exemplifies (except Jesus) and that humans never (not even in the next life) attain to perfect
knowledge of these imperfect exemplifications. Our conceptual framework is, thus, always perspectival and the result of our imperfect knowledge of particulars. Nonetheless, it is not produced willy-nilly. It is an attempt to understand and refer to things that actually exist, and have a determinate character quite apart from our intellectual activities. So, not any and every conceptual framework captures them equally well. It does, however, leave open the possibility for differences in conceptual frameworks that are equally good, though imperfect.

If something like this perspective is correct, then either a great deal of our discourse is not literally true, or something other than God’s concepts explains the truth-value of at least some of our discourse. Both Michael Murray and David Anderson provide convincing arguments for accepting the second disjunct. The theist will want it to be the case that it is at least possible to make claims that have realist truth-conditions. Otherwise, the current project has been a complete waste! However, we won’t want a perfect overlap between our perspective of the world and God’s perspective of the world to be a pre-condition for truth in everyday situations. To borrow Anderson’s example, it would be odd to think that one’s child had spoken falsely when she says that she has made her bed if it turns out that God does not have a concept that corresponds the predicate “to make a bed.” Rather, it seems that the human conceptual framework is enough to ground the child’s claim, regardless of whether or not that framework maps on to God’s intentions. This claim requires a semantic dualism that is consistent with metaphysical realism of the kind I have proposed.

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Semantic Dualism $\equiv_{\text{DEF}}$ Statements about the external world uttered in some context (e.g., in normal, everyday contexts) express antirealist claims and will be determined as true or false in virtue of how things stand with respect to the epistemic perspective of the human beings. Statements about the external world uttered in other contexts (e.g., in contexts were the central purpose of the speech act is to express a commitments to metaphysical realism) will be determined as true or false in virtue of how things stand with respect to mind-independent reality.\(^3\)

Though Anderson here responds to worries primarily about obviously true statements turning out false if something like idealism is true, I think the approach can be adopted for cases where our conceptual framework fails to map onto the actual character of particulars and God’s own “conceptual framework.” If this is correct, one can be a metaphysical realist without being a thorough-going semantic realist. This leaves room for the sort of epistemic modesty that humans should probably have with respect to their ability to comprehend God’s view of the world while avoiding the semantic agnosticism that would entail that we are fundamentally incapable of speaking truly.

I find this approach particularly compelling, and think there are semantic and metaphysical considerations beyond the scope of this project that might push us in that general direction, such as social constructs like money that are not easily accounted for by the combination of TCR and semantical realism, and worries about imbedding metaphysical commitments into the truth conditions for every day discourse. Nonetheless, I think that TCR, just as a theory of universals, is probably compatible with either cooperative or dualistic approaches. As with most things, acknowledgement of God’s creative act, his aseity, and his sovereignty does not solve all of our problems.

\(^3\) Anderson, 133
Bibliography


Appendix A:

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