

# Absolute Creation And Theistic Activism A Plea For Terminological Uniformity

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## SUMMARY

Morris and Menzel's view that God is the Creator of abstract as well as concrete objects is variously referred to by the labels "absolute creation" and "theistic activism." To use these labels synonymously, however, exhibits a lack of discrimination. Theistic activism is the project of grounding modality in God, particularly in the divine will. Absolute creationism is a non-modal project which regards abstract objects as created by God. The synonymous use of these terms results in confusion in debates over divine aseity and sovereignty. Philosophical discussion will benefit if we adopt a uniform terminology discriminating between these different views.

## ABSOLUTE CREATION AND THEISTIC ACTIVISM A PLEA FOR TERMINOLOGICAL UNIFORMITY

The want of terminological uniformity in philosophical discussion can lead to conceptual confusion and the conflation of views which need to be kept distinct. The current discussion of the ontology of abstract objects and God's relation to them provides a case in point. One important position in the debate is a sort of modified Platonism which takes God to be the Creator of abstract objects. Thomas Morris and Christopher Menzel coined the term "absolute creation" to describe this proposed solution to the challenge of Platonism to divine aseity in their seminal article, "Absolute Creation," which sparked the contemporary metaphysical debate over God and abstract objects.<sup>[1]</sup>

I have elsewhere called Morris and Menzel's view absolute creationism because it appeals to divine creation of abstract objects to solve the challenge posed by Platonism to divine aseity.<sup>[2]</sup> But many other writers refer to Morris and Menzel's position by another label, namely, "theistic activism." This nomenclature also enjoys textual support in their original article, as we shall see. But these interpreters of Morris and Menzel seem to be guilty of conflation.

There are really two contemporary debates about God and Platonism going on, one over the challenge of Platonism to divine aseity, stemming from Morris and Menzel, and the other over the challenge of Platonism to divine sovereignty, sparked by Alvin Plantinga's 1980 Aquinas Lecture at Marquette University, "Does God Have a Nature?"<sup>[3]</sup> Because Plantinga was pre-occupied with the challenge posed by Platonism to divine sovereignty, he dismissed nominalism as irrelevant to

the discussion, since even if there are no such things as the properties of *being red* and *being colored*, for example, nevertheless it remains necessarily true that whatever is red is colored, and God can do nothing to make it otherwise. In the end he opted for a conception of divine sovereignty that does not require everything to be within God's control. He left unanswered the central question of the aseity debate whether the existence of abstract objects depends upon or can be explained by God's nature or activity. Obviously, nominalism would be highly relevant to this debate, even if irrelevant to the sovereignty debate.

Unfortunately, these two Platonistic challenges are often conflated. For example, the title of the recent symposium edited by Paul Gould, *Beyond the Control of God? Six Views on the Problem of God and Abstract Objects*,<sup>[4]</sup> is evocative of the challenge to divine sovereignty, when, in fact, the symposiasts are almost wholly occupied with the challenge to divine aseity. Absolute creationism naturally finds its home in the debate over divine aseity, while theistic activism arises in the attempt to safeguard divine sovereignty. Nevertheless, several of the symposiasts refer to absolute creationism as "theistic activism."

Morris and Menzel do use the label "theistic activism" for their view. But attend closely to their characterization of theistic activism:

Let us refer to the view that we are espousing, the view that an intellectual activity of God's is responsible for the framework of reality, as 'theistic activism.' A theistic activist will hold God creatively responsible for the entire modal economy, for what is possible as well as what is necessary and what is impossible. The whole Platonic realm is thus seen as deriving from God.<sup>[5]</sup>

This statement makes it evident that the project of theistic activism is to explain, not just the existence of abstract objects, but their modal status—especially, as is evident from the context, the modal status of propositional truths. Morris and Menzel write, "in order to be the absolute creator of the *entirety* of the framework of reality, in order to be responsible for its existence *and nature*, God must be responsible for the *necessary truth* of all propositions with this modality as well as for their *mere existence* as abstract objects."<sup>[6]</sup>

This is the same project that preoccupies Brian Leftow in his recent, massive book *God and Necessity*. Leftow explains that accounting for the existence of abstract objects is merely a subsidiary project of his study; the main project is provide a theistic account of modality.<sup>[7]</sup> The latter is the project of theistic activism and is why Morris and Menzel characterize their view as a "modally updated version" of Augustine's theory of divine ideas.<sup>[8]</sup> Their view goes beyond Augustine's in explaining the modal status of God's ideas. Thus, Morris and Menzel refer to

theistic activism as the “modal component” of absolute creationism: “The view of God as an absolute creator, with its modal component of theistic activism, has many implications of significant interest.”<sup>[9]</sup> It seems to me more accurate to say that absolute creationism is a component of theistic activism, which is the wider project. Absolute creationism can accordingly be pursued independently of the wider project. One may embrace absolute creationism without espousing any particular theory, including Morris and Menzel’s, about the grounding of truths’ modal status.

I think it is evident, then, that “absolute creation(ism)” and “theistic activism” are not synonymous. Absolute creationism holds merely that abstract objects are created by God; theistic activism is a more ambitious project which tries to ground modality in God. In interest of clarity I therefore urge that going forward theistic philosophers refer to the view that *abstracta*, along with all *concreta*, have been created by God as absolute creationism, not as theistic activism, reserving this latter term for the view that modality is somehow to be grounded in God’s will.

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[1] Thomas V. Morris and Christopher Menzel, “Absolute Creation,” *American Philosophical Quarterly* 23 (1986): 353-362.

[2] “A Nominalist Perspective on God and Abstract Objects,” *Philosophia Christi* 13 (2011): 305-18.

[3] Alvin Plantinga, *Does God Have a Nature?* (Milwaukee, Wis.: Marquette University Press, 1980). Cf. comment by Scott A. Davison, “Could Abstract Objects Depend upon God?” *Religious Studies* 27 (1991): 487, that in conversation Plantinga differentiated between explaining the existence of propositions and accounting for the necessary truth of propositions. It was this second concern that preoccupied him in his Aquinas Lecture. By contrast, Davison focuses on the first concern, the challenge posed by Platonism to divine aseity.

[4] Paul Gould, ed., *Beyond the Control of God? Six Views on the Problem of God and Abstract Objects* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014).

[5] Morris and Menzel, "Absolute Creation," p. 356.

[6] Ibid., p. 355 (my emphasis).

[7] Brian Leftow, *God and Necessity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), p. 27. He recognizes that a theist who makes putative abstract objects dependent on God need not adopt Leftow's particular theory of modality. For discussion of Leftow's two projects see my critical notices "*God and Necessity*, by Brian Leftow," *Faith and Philosophy* 30 (2013): 462-70; "*God and Necessity*, by Brian Leftow," *Philosophy* 89 (2014): 171-6.

[8] Ironically, it is not entirely clear that Morris and Menzel really are absolute creationists. For they fail to distinguish clearly absolute creationism from another realist view which we may call divine psychologism or conceptualism. Divine conceptualism is a non-Platonic realism which substitutes God's thoughts in the place of abstract objects. Objects normally thought to be abstract, such as mathematical objects, propositions, properties, and so on, are taken to be, in fact, divine thoughts of various sorts. Augustine was a conceptualist, not an absolute creationist. Just as we distinguish absolute creationism from theistic activism, so we must distinguish absolute creationism from divine conceptualism. But that is a story for another day.

[9] Morris and Menzel, "Absolute Creation," p. 360.