

# Absolute creationism and divine conceptualism: A call for conceptual clarity

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## SUMMARY

The contemporary debate over God and abstract objects is hampered by a lack of conceptual clarity concerning two distinct metaphysical views: absolute creationism and divine conceptualism. This confusion goes back to the fount of the current debate, the article “Absolute Creation” by Thomas Morris and Christopher Menzel, who were not of one mind concerning God’s relation to abstract objects. Confusion has followed in their wake. Going forward, theistic philosophers need to distinguish more clearly between a sort of modified Platonism, according to which abstract objects depend ontologically on God, and a sort of divine psychologism, according to which objects typically thought to be abstract are, in fact, concrete mental entities of some sort.

## ABSOLUTE CREATIONISM AND DIVINE CONCEPTUALISM: A CALL FOR CONCEPTUAL CLARITY

I have elsewhere drawn attention to a terminological ambiguity with respect to absolute creationism and theistic activism which threatens to obscure the distinction between these two positions in contemporary discussions of Platonism and God’s relation to abstract objects.<sup>[1]</sup> To make matters worse, a similar ambiguity exists with respect to absolute creationism and divine conceptualism, though in this case the confusion is not terminological but conceptual. The difference between absolute creationism and divine conceptualism with respect to putative abstract objects like mathematical objects, propositions, properties, possible worlds, and so forth, is often not clearly conceived, with the result that the theist’s alternatives are obscured in contemporary discussion.

The font of contemporary absolute creationism is Thomas Morris and Christopher Menzel’s seminal article “Absolute Creation.” The aim of Morris and Menzel’s article is to defend God’s absolute creation of all things, including abstract objects. Thus, they describe the problematic they wish to address as follows:

The apparent conflict is between what is arguably the central idea of the theistic tradition, the idea of a God as absolute creator of everything which exists distinct from him, and the characteristic, metaphysically powerful claim of present-day Platonism that there are strong theoretical reasons for recognizing in our ontology . . . a realm of necessarily existent

abstract objects, objects so firmly rooted in reality that they could not possibly have failed to exist—such things as properties and propositions.<sup>[2]</sup>

To this paragraph is appended the endnote:

Henceforth, we shall use the term 'Platonism' to refer to the view that abstract objects such as properties and propositions have objective ontological status. Many Platonists understand their position to entail that these objects are metaphysically and causally independent entities. We hope to show that such independence need not be thought to follow from even the strong form of abstract object realism which holds these entities to have the modal status of necessity.<sup>[3]</sup>

It is evident that Morris and Menzel take contemporary Platonism to be a strong form of abstract object realism and that they want to modify Platonism only to the extent that abstract objects lose their independence of God. So they say, "It will be our claim 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."<sup>[4]</sup> So on the view of absolute creation "necessarily existent abstract objects. . . are not self-existent entities," since they are caused by God to exist.<sup>[5]</sup>

Morris and Menzel's commitment to the reality of abstract objects thus appears to be unequivocal. Indeed, to deny that propositions, properties, and so forth are abstract objects would subvert their entire project of integrating contemporary Platonism with theism. Absolute creationism is thus a theistic version of abstract object realism.

It is ironic, then, that 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 divine conceptualism. This view 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. Although philosophers generally consider Gottlob Frege to have dealt the death blow to a conceptualist form of realism, Frege's objections to human psychologism—such as the intersubjectivity, necessity, and plenitude of mathematical objects—do not touch divine psychologism.<sup>[6]</sup> With the late twentieth century renaissance of Christian philosophy divine conceptualism is once more finding articulate defenders.<sup>[7]</sup>

Although Morris and Menzel aspire to enunciate an integrated view of Platonism and theism, when it comes to explicating their view, they seem to slide unconsciously from absolute creationism into divine conceptualism. Consider, for example, their view of properties and relations. Their claim

that “all properties and relations are God’s concepts, the products, or perhaps better, the *contents* of a divine intellectual activity, a causally efficacious or productive sort of divine conceiving” [8] can, I think, be given a Platonist interpretation, since concepts and the contents of divine thinking are plausibly construed to be abstract objects. But Morris and Menzel proceed to describe concepts in concrete terms: “Unlike human concepts, then, which are graspings of properties that exist ontologically distinct from and independent of those graspings, divine concepts are those very properties themselves; and unlike what is assumed in standard Platonism, those properties are not ontologically independent, but rather depend on certain divine activities.” [9] This passage is messy. Human concepts are said to be mental events of a certain sort, “graspings,” which suggests that concepts are thoughts, not abstract objects. We have, for example, a thought of *redness*, which is a grasping of an abstract property. So are God’s concepts divine graspings? If so, then properties and relations are divine graspings or thoughts. Properties and relations are said to be identical with divine concepts. But if concepts are divine thoughts, then Platonism has been sacrificed.

When it comes to propositions, Morris and Menzel explicitly affirm the identity of propositions with God’s thoughts: “in the way in which we characterize properties as God’s concepts, we can characterize propositions as God’s thoughts.” [10] This is a typical conceptualist affirmation; but then they go on to affirm, “So the existence of propositions as well derives from an efficacious divine conceiving.” [11] One should have expected a conceptualist to say that propositions are a divine conceiving, not that they derive from it. Nevertheless, Morris and Menzel do seem to identify propositions with divine conceivings, for they explain, “The number 2, the number 4, the relation of addition, and that of equality are all divine concepts, all products of the divine conceiving activity. The existence of the proposition that  $2+2 = 4$  is thus the existence of a divine thought.” [12] Here abstract objects like propositions and mathematical objects seem to be replaced by divine thoughts.

Since we are dealing with the work of living authors, we have the luxury of asking them what they meant to affirm. So I asked Morris and Menzel respectively which view they meant to defend:

(1) a sort of modified Platonism, according to which abstract objects exist but are caused by God’s intellectual activity,

or

(2) a sort of divine conceptualism, according to which objects usually thought to be abstract are really thoughts in God’s mind.

Menzel was clear: “Tom and I definitely had (2) in mind, with the qualification that, like (1), we also

thought of their existence as caused by God's intellectual activity."[\[13\]](#) But Morris recalls that he had not clearly distinguished the two views in his thinking at the time:

As I recall, it was a tendency toward Platonism regarding the metaphysics of mathematics and a wonder as to how that squared with a really stringent and comprehensive view of creation from the point of view of Anselmian theism. . . . I hadn't at the time even pondered much the divine conceptualist tradition, the 'ideas in the mind of God' work that had come before.

But then, what we came to sort of put a new spin on that, almost a reification of the divine ideas of this sort, along with a committed creation framework underlying it, where the concept of creation would perhaps do more work than it had hitherto been asked to do.

[\[14\]](#)

Whatever Menzel's personal views may have been, the ambiguities and apparent contradictions suggest that Morris had not clearly differentiated absolute creationism from divine conceptualism. We see the conflation of the two views in Morris' "Introduction" to his *Anselmian Investigations*, where the article was reprinted: "We suggest that a thoroughly theistic ontology is possible which sees even the realm of necessarily existing abstract objects as dependent on God. The picture we adumbrate is a modally updated version of an ancient Augustinian view."[\[15\]](#) The first sentence is an expression of absolute creationism, the second of divine conceptualism.

Morris and Menzel's failure to distinguish clearly between absolute creationism and divine conceptualism has spawned confusion in the ranks of subsequent philosophers.[\[16\]](#) For example, in an important recent symposium Greg Welty, a divine conceptualist who identifies propositions and possible worlds with divine thoughts of various sorts, risks misleading his readers by affirming that "Abstract objects (AOs) exist" and that "AOs are necessarily existing, uncreated divine ideas that are distinct from God and dependent on God."[\[17\]](#) As a form of non-Platonic realism about propositions, possible worlds, and so forth, divine conceptualism denies that abstract objects exist. Only in a footnote do we learn that Welty is speaking merely "functionally" when he affirms that abstract objects are divine ideas.[\[18\]](#) What he really wants to say, then, is that there are no abstract objects and that propositions and possible worlds are thoughts which God has. Properly speaking, there are, despite his asseverations, only concrete objects according to Welty's view, some of which are mental, rather than physical, in nature. Divine conceptualism, though a form of realism, is also a form of anti-Platonism.

Worse, Paul Gould and Richard Davis take absolute creationism to hold that God's thoughts

literally are abstract objects, a view which they endorse.<sup>[19]</sup> On this interpretation God's thoughts are not concrete events but are abstract objects. Unfortunately, as Welty observes, this saddles the absolute creationist with a view which seems obviously wrong:

Gould/Davis's conception of 'divine-mental-events-as-abstract-objects' pits them against what is *widely* seen as traditional ontological constraints on AOs. . . . Gould/Davis hold that something most everyone else thinks are paradigmatically concrete objects (mental states) are really AOs.<sup>[20]</sup>

Our thoughts are certainly not abstract objects. It seems bizarre to think that one of God's thoughts, on the other hand, could be an abstract object.<sup>[21]</sup> Their causal efficacy alone will preclude their being thus classified. So according to absolute creationism, in contrast to divine conceptualism, things like propositions and properties are not God's thoughts but are abstract objects which are the causal products of, and not identical with, God's intellectual activity.

What, then, shall we do? It seems to me that theistic philosophers need to introduce more conceptual clarity into debates over God and putative abstract objects. In particular, they need to realize that realism comes in both Platonic and non-Platonic forms. If they are realists, they need to be clear whether they mean to affirm not just realism about propositions, properties, mathematical objects, and so forth, but whether such things are abstract objects created by God or concrete thoughts of various sorts which God has.

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<sup>[1]</sup> [Reference omitted for anonymity].

<sup>[2]</sup> Thomas V. Morris and Christopher Menzel, "Absolute Creation," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 23 (1986): 353.

<sup>[3]</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 361.

<sup>[4]</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 354. Such a metaphysics "takes contemporary Platonism seriously."

<sup>[5]</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 360.

<sup>[6]</sup> In their critiques of conceptualism, Burgess and Balaguer are typical in that neither even mentions divine conceptualism (John P. Burgess, "Numbers and ideas," in John P. Burgess, *Mathematics, Models and Modality* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008], pp. 24-8; Mark Balaguer, "Realism and Anti-Realism in Mathematics," in *Philosophy of Mathematics*, ed. Andrew D. Irvine, *Handbook of the Philosophy of Science* [Amsterdam: North Holland, 2009], pp.

37-40, 81-3).

[7] For example, Alvin Plantinga has endorsed divine conceptualism with regard to supposedly abstract objects (Alvin Plantinga, *Warrant and Proper Function* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993], p. 121; Alvin Plantinga, *Where the Conflict Really Lies: Science, Religion, and Naturalism* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011], p. 288; Alvin Plantinga, "Response to William Lane Craig's review of *Where the Conflict Really Lies*," *Philosophia Christi* 15 [2013]: 178).

[8] Morris and Menzel, "Absolute Creation," p. 355.

[9] Ibid.

[10] Ibid.

[11] Ibid.

[12] Ibid., p. 356.

[13] Personal communication, November 1, 2013. Similarly, in a recent session of the American Philosophical Association, Menzel claims, "Morris and I came down solidly on the side of the conceptualist variant" ([Reference omitted for anonymity]).

Menzel's recollection is difficult to square with his subsequent espousal of "theistic Platonism" (Christopher Menzel, "Theism, Platonism, and the Metaphysics of Mathematics," *Faith and Philosophy* 4 [1987]: 365), according to which both theism and Platonism are true. But note that Menzel says that "many theists are also Platonists, or 'metaphysical realists'" (Ibid.), which suggests that Menzel sees divine conceptualists as Platonists, since they are realists. This lack of discrimination is bound to be misleading.

Menzel's conceptualism emerges somewhat more clearly in his later piece, "God and Mathematical Objects," in *Mathematics in a Postmodern Age*, ed. Russell W. Howell and W. James Bradley (Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans, 2001), pp. 65-97. Menzel explains that theists accept the existence of things belonging to three ontological categories: (i) physical things, (ii) mental things, and (iii) spiritual things. Significantly, thoughts are said to belong to category (ii). A more problematic category is (iv) abstract objects, such as universals, relations, and mathematical objects. So is Menzel proposing to reduce category (iv) to (ii)? It would seem so, though this is not completely clear. While acknowledging powerful reasons for positing abstract objects, Menzel notes that they occasion a dilemma for the theist: God either does or does not create abstract objects. If He does, then one faces two problems: the *coherence* problem (how can eternal and necessary objects be created?) and the *freedom* problem (how can the creation of

such objects be a free act of God?). If God does not create abstract objects, one again faces two problems: the *sovereignty* problem (God is not the creator of all things apart from Himself) and the *uniqueness* problem (God is not unique in existing *a se*). Rather than “slipping though the horns of the dilemma into nominalism,” Menzel opts for “abstract object creationism” (p. 71). Menzel thinks to resolve the coherence, sovereignty, and uniqueness problems by embracing continuous creation. This is where things get ontologically interesting. Menzel observes, “As things stand, it appears that all the AO-creationist is doing is modifying the traditional, Platonic conception of abstract objects: rather than existing *a se*, abstract objects are now sustained in existence by God” (p. 73). But Menzel is dissatisfied with such a view: what is needed “is a positive model of the nature of abstract objects that explains how such an object could be both necessary and created” (Ibid.). This is where he turns to theistic activism, which views abstract objects “as the contents of a certain kind of divine intellectual activity in which God is essentially engaged” (Ibid.) This sounds Platonistic, for the contents of God’s thinking would surely be abstract objects like propositions. The theistic Platonist would agree that “This divine activity is thus causally efficacious: the abstract objects that exist at any given moment, as products of God’s mental life, exist *because* God is thinking them; which is just to say that God creates them” (Ibid.). But between these two Platonistic-sounding sentences, Menzel says this: “Roughly, they [abstract objects] are God’s thoughts, concepts, and perhaps certain other products of God’s mental life” (Ibid.). Concepts might be taken to be abstract objects, but Menzel later says that “*Thoughts* and *concepts* are ideas in someone’s head” (Ibid., p. 75). So both thoughts and concepts seem to be concrete mental events. The “other products of God’s mental life” are presumably the sets which Menzel goes on to discuss. Menzel says that thoughts “correspond naturally to propositions” and concepts “correspond naturally to properties and relations” and sets are “God’s collectings” (Ibid., pp. 75, 93). I take it, then, that Menzel moves away from theistic Platonism to a sort of divine psychologism, despite his continued misleading use of Platonistic terms like “abstract objects” and “abstract object creationism.” On his view category (iv) is really empty.

[14] It is noteworthy that in the original paper, Menzel is listed second, despite the alphabetical priority of his name. In the version of the paper reprinted in Morris’ s *Anselmian Explorations: Essays in Philosophical Theology* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1987), pp. 161-78, Morris felt free to omit Menzel’s name as co-author, alluding only in the book’s Introduction to his role in the original paper. The reprint differs from the original principally in all of the first-person plural pronouns’ being changed to first-person singular, except in cases where the reader might be included under “we.” Endnote 7 is emended to acknowledge that what is said in that note is due to Menzel.

[14] Personal communication, November 1, 2013.

[15] Morris, *Anselmian Explorations*, p. 6.

[16] Even Plantinga does not always clearly distinguish absolute creationism from divine conceptualism. For he advocates construing propositions as God's thoughts, properties as God's concepts, and sets as God's collections. But I take it that Plantinga does not think of concepts and collections as abstract objects produced by divine thinking but as divine thoughts. Plantinga made this clear during public discussion following Brian Leftow's paper at the conference "Two Dozen (or so) Theistic Arguments," Baylor University, Nov. 6-8, 2014.

[17] Greg Welty, "Theistic Conceptual Realism," in Paul Gould, ed., *Beyond the Control of God? Six Views on the Problem of God and Abstract Objects* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), p. 81. Almost all of Welty's interlocutors in *Beyond the Control of God* complain of Welty's misleading talk of abstract objects' being divine thoughts. Gould and Davis charge, "For Welty, divine thoughts are not abstract; they are concrete. Therefore, we submit, Welty is a nominalist" ("Response to Greg Welty," in *Beyond the Control of God?*, p. 100). Welty is, indeed, a nominalist in the sense that he is an anti-Platonist. He is not a nominalist in the sense of being an anti-realist. He is a non-Platonic realist.

[18] His merely functional approach is much more clearly enunciated in Greg Welty, "Theistic Conceptual Realism: The Case for Interpreting Abstract Objects as Divine Ideas" (Oxford University: doctoral thesis, 2006), chap. 1.

[19] Paul Gould and Richard Davis, "Modified Theistic Activism," in *Beyond the Control of God?*, p. 61.

[20] Greg Welty, "Response to Critics," in *Beyond the Control of God?*, p. 108. Cf. the comments of Yandell, Oppy, and the author in response to Welty's misleading claim that on conceptualism abstract objects are God's thoughts. Since Welty thinks that no satisfactory account can be given of what an abstract object is, he speaks of abstract objects merely functionally. He himself recognizes that God's thoughts are concrete. By contrast Gould and Davis believe that God's thoughts are literally abstract objects.

[21] Gould and Davis defend their view by claiming (persuasively, I think) that being a universal is a sufficient condition of being abstract.

"What would be involved then, in a concrete object being multiply-instantiable? Assume that a necessary and sufficient condition for a concrete object to be multiply-instantiable is that one and the same object would need to be multiply located (i.e., at different places at the same time). But this possibility is (to say the least) highly counter-intuitive. Hence, it is reasonable to conclude that



concrete objects are not multiply-instantiable. But then, it follows that if an object is multiply-instantiable, it must be an abstract object" (Paul Gould and Richard Davis, "Response to William Lane Craig," in *Beyond the Control of God?*, pp. 129-30).

They therefore infer that we ought to think of divine ideas and thoughts as abstract objects (Gould and Davis, "Response to Greg Welty," p. 100). It seems to me that the correct inference to draw is that God's thoughts are therefore not universals and therefore not properties. For, as Welty points out, it makes no sense to think of God's thoughts as multiply located (Welty, "Response to Critics," in *Beyond the Control of God?*, p. 108). What we have here is a good argument, not for the abstractness of divine thoughts, but, *pace* Welty, against the conceptualist claim that divine thoughts play the role normally ascribed to properties.

Interestingly, Gould and Davis reject Morris and Menzel's claim that properties are divine concepts; but they accept their claim that propositions are divine thoughts. Replying to scepticism concerning God's thoughts' being abstract objects, they state,

"A Proposition (capital 'P') is a divine thought: an ordered arrangement of divine ideas. Propositions are abstract in the sense of being multiply instantiable in human minds; but they're not mind-independent abstracta of the platonic variety. (Thus *contra* Craig and Yandell, there is no incoherence in saying that God is a concrete being whose thoughts are abstract.)" (Gould and Davis, "Response to Critics," in *Beyond the Control of God?*, p. 77).

When they say that propositions are not *abstracta* of the Platonic variety, there is less here than meets the eye: "we deny that propositions are 'Platonic' in the sense that they exist in Plato's heaven as brutally intentional entities" (Ibid., p. 79). Fine; but their claim that propositions are multiply instantiable in human minds seems multiply confused. Propositions are not the sort of thing that can be instantiated. Natures or essences can be instantiated, not propositions. (On instantiation, see Nicholas Wolterstorff, "Divine Simplicity," in *Philosophical Perspectives 5: Philosophy of Religion* [Atascadero, Calif.: Ridgeview Publishing, 1990], p. 538.) Neither are thoughts instantiable. But in Gould and Davis' view,

"Propositions, as divine thoughts, are mental state types—abstract objects (not concrete objects) that belong to Causal Reality; divine ideas are concepts—the contents of God's thoughts—and also abstract objects that belong to Causal Reality. God's thoughts and concepts are universals; they are capable of multiple- instantiation. Our thoughts and concepts, on the other hand, are tokens of the divine types. Hence, our thoughts and concepts, as instances of the divine types, are concrete members of Causal Reality" (Paul Gould and Richard Davis, "Response to Graham Oppy," in *Beyond the Control of God?*, p. 185).

Here they declare human thoughts to be mental state tokens of divine mental state types. But, again, propositions are not the sort of thing that can be tokened. Linguistic types can be tokened; but propositions are linguistically expressed, not tokened. Moreover, what sense does it make to say that God, a concrete mind, has a mental state which is an abstract object? Such a being would be literally unconscious. Worse, as Oppy points out, "if God's thoughts and concepts are abstract, and if abstract entities can only be effects and not causes, then it turns out that God's thoughts and concepts play no causal role in God's creative endeavors" (Graham Oppy, "Response to Critics," in *Beyond the Control of God?*, p. 194). On the other hand, if Gould and Davis mean to affirm that God's thoughts are causally efficacious, then they cannot be abstract objects.