

## *Craig, Anti-Platonism, and Objective Morality*

R. SCOTT SMITH  
*Christian Apologetics*  
*Biola University*  
*La Mirada, California*  
*scott.smith@biola.edu*

---

William Lane Craig has been advocating “anti-Platonism” as normative for orthodox Christian theists. He claims that Platonism, understood as the doctrine that uncreated, metaphysically abstract objects (AOs) exist, fatally compromises God’s uniqueness as the only being or entity that exists *a se*. Instead of Platonism, Craig has been advocating some form of nominalism (or possibly conceptualism as a fallback position) about such things as properties, propositions, numbers, and truth.<sup>1</sup>

In scholarly writings thus far, it seems Craig has not focused on the implications of his anti-Platonism for ethics and his moral argument for God’s existence, but he is aware of them. He has been discussing them on his Reasonable Faith website, as well as in his apologetics literature.<sup>2</sup> He believes his anti-Platonism is quite compatible with the existence of objective morals and fits well with a solution to the Euthyphro dilemma.

---

ABSTRACT: Though William Lane Craig believes his anti-Platonism is compatible with objective, Christian morality, I argue that it is not. First, I survey the main contours of his nominalism. Second, I discuss how he sees those points in relation to objective, Christian morality. Then, I argue that his view cannot sustain the qualitative aspects of moral virtues or principles, or even human beings. Moreover, Craig’s view loses any connection between those morals and humans, thereby doing great violence to objective, Christian morals. Finally, I sketch two advantages of a Platonic realism in regards to Christian morals.

1. William Lane Craig, “Propositional Truth—Who Needs It?,” *Philosophia Christi* 15 (2013): 355–64. For an overview of a range of options amongst Christian scholars regarding properties, see Paul Gould and Richard Davis, eds., *Beyond the Control of God? Six Views on the Problem of God and Abstract Objects* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2014). They include discussions of Platonism, conceptualism, and nominalism.

2. See his *Reasonable Faith*, 3rd ed. (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2008), 178–9; “Anti-Platonism and Moral Realism,” <http://www.reasonablefaith.org/writings/question-answer/anti-platonism-and-moral-realism> (July 20, 2014), accessed January 22, 2016; “Is the Theistic Anti-Realist in a Predicament?” (Sept. 21, 2014), <https://www.reasonablefaith.org/writings/question-answer/is-the-theistic-anti-realist-in-a-predicament>, accessed January 22, 2016; and “Nominalism and Natural Law” (Aug. 30, 2015), <https://www.reasonablefaith.org/question-answer/P110/nominalism-and-natural-law>, accessed January 22, 2016.

Now, various rebuttals have been made against his nominalism.<sup>3</sup> Here, I will focus upon implications of his nominalist proposals for objective, Christian morality. First, I will survey the main contours of his nominalism. Second, I will discuss how he sees those points in relation to objective, Christian morality. Then I will shift to explore a main problem with his kind of nominalism. I will argue that his view cannot sustain the qualitative aspects of moral virtues or principles, or even human beings. As a result, humans will not be able to grow in virtue or even be able to have moral principles before their minds. Moreover, his view will have several damaging implications for morals in relationship to humans. While arguably Craig's view can preserve the existence of objective moral values and duties, nevertheless it loses any connection between those morals and humans. Thus, there will not be a moral basis for God to hold us accountable. Finally, having argued this, I will sketch two advantages of a Platonic realism, on which there are universals that are metaphysically abstract, in regards to Christian morals.

### *Craig's Anti-Platonism Surveyed*

According to Craig, if Platonism is true, then uncreated, metaphysically abstract objects (AOs) exist. However, they would rival God as the only *a se* being, for they too would be eternal and self-existent. For Craig, God is the ground of being for all else that exists, which exist *ab alio*. Moreover, "God alone exists necessarily and eternally; everything else has been created by God and is therefore contingent and temporally finite in its being."<sup>4</sup> In support, he has appealed to terminological distinctions used by the church fathers. For instance, Craig observes a contrast between the use of two terms, *agenetos* (unoriginated, uncreated), and *genetos* (originated, created). God alone is *agenetos*, but "all things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being" (John 1:3, NRSV).<sup>5</sup> Therefore, Craig argues that

The chief theological failing of Platonism and therefore the reason for its unacceptability for orthodox theists is that Platonism is incompatible with the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* and so fundamentally compromises divine aseity. An orthodox Christian theist, then, cannot be a Platonist.<sup>6</sup>

---

3. E.g., see my "Craig's Nominalism and the High Cost of Preserving Divine Aseity," *European Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 9 (2017): 63–85.

4. Craig, "Propositional Truth—Who Needs It?," 355.

5. William Lane Craig, "Anti-Platonism," in *Beyond the Control of God?*, 114. See also his "Response to Critics," in *Beyond the Control of God?*, 137.

6. William Lane Craig, "Creatio Ex Nihilo and Abstract Objects," in *Creation out of Nothing*, ed. Paul Copan and W. L. Craig (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2004), 173.

In place of Platonism regarding abstract objects, Craig has explored various nominalist possibilities. Broadly speaking, he thinks that, besides God, only concrete particulars that are located in space and time truly exist. He thinks this makes room for him to affirm the existence of created abstract objects, such as Tolstoy's novel *Anna Karenina*, which he thinks is not physical and not identical to any of its printed copies.<sup>7</sup>

Now, broadly speaking, there are two standard options within nominalism about properties, namely trope nominalism and austere nominalism. Philosophers typically characterize tropes as particularized properties. Tropes are objects and are fundamental. Examples could include individualized qualities, such as red<sub>1</sub>, red<sub>2</sub>, red<sub>3</sub>, or thought<sub>1</sub>, thought<sub>2</sub>, thought<sub>3</sub>, and so on. Furthermore, according to Anna-Sofia Maurin, tropes are primitively *simple*; therefore, we should not understand tropes as containing "more than one kind of entity."<sup>8</sup>

However, Craig rejects trope nominalism, for it would affirm the existence of properties, even though they are particulars. This leads him to explore austere nominalist options. Robert Garcia describes this kind of view such that "there are no characteristics [or properties *per se*] but only primitively characterized objects."<sup>9</sup> Thus, there is no redness *per se*, but only red objects (balls, apples). Similarly, there is no sphericity, but there are spherical objects.

Craig follows this pattern; for him, there is no need of further analysis of these "traits."<sup>10</sup> Consider being swift. He suggests we could use a scientific explanation why some persons are swift, such as due to a person's "musculature, consistent training, healthy diet, and so forth."<sup>11</sup> Similarly, snow is white does not require the existence of a property, whiteness. Rather, it is a matter of observation that snow is white. We could provide a causal story why snow is white, which bypasses any need for further explanation by appealing to something more fundamental, like a white property.<sup>12</sup>

While Craig does not focus upon a metaphysical analysis of these "traits," he does place much emphasis upon how we talk about them.<sup>13</sup> For him, the sentence "snow is white" does not pick out a property of snow; it

7. Craig, "Anti-Platonism," 116. On their surface, Craig's claims that (a) there are created abstract objects, and (b) all that has come into being are concrete particulars, seem to be in tension with each other. For example, on his view, Tolstoy's novel cannot be metaphysically abstract, even though it was created, for that would violate Craig's second claim. I do not intend to resolve this apparent tension here, but I suggest that perhaps Craig is using "abstract object" in the first claim in a different sense.

8. Anna-Sofia Maurin, *If Tropes* (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic, 2002), 14, 16.

9. Robert Garcia, "Tropes as Divine Acts: The Nature of Creaturely Properties in a World Sustained by God," *European Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 7 (2015): 107.

10. Craig, "Response to Critics," 140.

11. Craig, "Anti-Platonism," 124–25n8.

12. Thanks to J. P. Moreland for this insight and example.

13. Craig, "Propositional Truth—Who Needs It?," 360.

is a way of describing or talking about the primitively characterized object white-snow. Borrowing from Rudolf Carnap, Craig explores how we can use different “linguistic frameworks” to speak about it. For instance, we can say “snow is white” from a scientific framework to state that the object appears white to us. We also may exclaim “snow is white!” due to the brilliant sunlight that is reflecting off of snow. We may talk about primitively characterized objects as though they have various characteristics or qualitative facts (for instance, by focusing on snow’s whiteness, not its temperature), but these uses are just different ways of discussing and conceiving of these fully-charactered objects, and not really existent properties.

### *Craig on Objective Morals, in Light of his Nominalism*

How then does Craig apply these views to morality? He claims that there are objective moral duties and values, including virtues like justice. We can know that because “in moral experience we do apprehend a realm of objective moral values and duties, just as in sensory experience we apprehend a realm of objectively existing physical objects.”<sup>14</sup> So, what is justice *not*, according to him? In a discussion of Atheistic Moral Platonism (which I take to be the view in which Platonic forms exist without a God in which they are grounded), Craig explains that justice cannot be an AO, without a further foundation:

It is difficult, however, even to comprehend this view. What does it mean to say, for example, that *Justice* just exists? It’s hard to know what to make of this. It is clear what is meant when it is said that a person is just; but it is bewildering when it is said that in the absence of any people, *Justice* itself exists. Moral values seem to exist as properties of persons, not as mere abstractions—or at any rate it’s hard to know what it is for a moral value to exist as a mere abstraction.<sup>15</sup>

Moreover, Craig objects along two other lines against virtues as abstract objects. First, he claims that the abstract object justice *itself* would not be just.<sup>16</sup> Moreover, “it would seem to follow that in the absence of any people justice does not exist.”<sup>17</sup> Craig sees justice as an attribute of God, which humans also can have, but it is not an AO. For him, justice is found only in concrete particulars.

Second, epistemologically, he puzzles over how we could know anything about such moral AOs. As he asserts, “It is no clearer how I could know the content of the moral realm than how I could know what is going on in

---

14. Craig, *Reasonable Faith*, 179.

15. *Ibid.*, 178.

16. *Ibid.*

17. *Ibid.*

some remote village in Nepal with which I have no contact.”<sup>18</sup> Additionally, he has written that AOs are causally inert and cannot cause belief states. Nor can they reflect photons. While we can see concrete particulars like brown dogs or just people, “we do not see its brownness [itself, or justice itself], insofar as this is a Platonic universal, since [such] properties are abstract objects and are therefore unextended and do not reflect photons.”<sup>19</sup>

Though he rejects Platonic realism, Craig still affirms a type of moral realism. He believes that “objective moral values and duties exist,” but by this statement, his “emphasis is not on metaphysics but on the objectivity, as opposed to the mere subjectivity, of moral values and duties. I mean to claim that certain things are objectively good/evil and certain actions right/wrong.”<sup>20</sup> By not emphasizing metaphysics, he is *not* a moral realist in the sense that morals exist in a mind-independent way. If he were, he seems to think they must be included in one’s ontology.<sup>21</sup> Instead, he is a moral realist in the sense that “moral statements are objectively true or false.”<sup>22</sup>

However, what makes moral statements objectively true or false? Craig answers:

God Himself, a concrete object if ever there was one! He is the paradigm of moral goodness, and His commands to us constitute our moral duties. Thus, Platonism is avoided, the objectivity of moral goodness and duties secured, and the Euthyphro Dilemma adroitly circumvented.<sup>23</sup>

Most importantly, Craig affirms that as a brute fact God is good, just, holy, loving, and so forth, due to his nature. These qualities are not independently existing AOs that he has predicated of his being; instead, these are essential, particular qualities that he has as a brute fact. In regards to deontological principles, God commands obligations and duties in light of his character. In terms of their metaphysics status, they are particulars that are grounded in God, just like moral virtues.

Craig also seems to be drawing upon what he discusses elsewhere, namely, *truth value* (or *alethic*) *realism*.<sup>24</sup> All he means by this is that “statements of a certain sort of discourse, for example, mathematical discourse or moral discourse, have objective truth values, that is to say, are objectively either true or false.”<sup>25</sup> Craig sees no contradiction between being an ontological antirealist about properties (as AOs) and an alethic realist about moral statements.

18. Ibid.

19. Craig, “*Creatio Ex Nihilo* and Abstract Objects,” 180 (bracketed inserts mine).

20. Craig, “Anti-Platonism and Moral Realism.”

21. Ibid.

22. Ibid.

23. Ibid.

24. Craig, “Is the Theistic Anti-Realist in a Predicament?”

25. Ibid.

With these considerations in mind, now I will shift to consider some key implications of an austere nominalist approach to objective, Christian morals. First, I will examine the resources available to austere nominalism to sustain qualitative facts. Second, I will apply that finding to moral virtues, principles, and human beings. Then I will explore how these results affect the relationship of objective morals as Craig conceives of them to us as human beings. I will argue that his views will perpetrate great violence upon objective, Christian morals.

### *A Crucial Issue for Austere Nominalism*

Austere nominalism shares with its trope cousin the ontological position that a primitively characterized object is *simple*, without any further parts or properties. This position has led some, such as Michael Loux and David Armstrong, to call austere nominalism a “blob” ontology. On it, concrete particulars are simples with no internal differentiation of properties.<sup>26</sup>

Let us apply this ontological view to red objects, such as some red apples. As concrete particulars, there is not a property of red (or, redness) that literally is present in each of these objects, for that would be like what realists hold. Instead, for the austere nominalist, properties do not even exist. There just are these particular, red objects, and it is a brute fact that they all are red.<sup>27</sup>

Now, these red apples are individuated. We can make that position clearer if we distinguish them as red-apple<sub>1</sub>, red-apple<sub>2</sub>, and so on. On austere nominalism, since these red apples are simples, there cannot be two entities in each concrete particular. Thus, ontologically, the individuator and the character (or quality) cannot be different things. Yet, Craig and other austere nominalists *treat* these and other objects as being particulars that are characterized (even primitively).

To be consistent, then, we should be able to eliminate either the individuator or the character quality without any *real* (that is, ontological) loss. On the one hand, suppose we eliminate the individuator; then we lose the objects’ particularity. However, that undermines the austere nominalist insistence that there are only particulars.

On the other hand, if we eliminate the qualitative aspect of the object, we are left with just individutors. However, that seems incoherent; an individuator particularizes *something*. It seems, then, that on austere nomi-

---

26. Michael Loux, *Metaphysics: A Contemporary Introduction* (London: Routledge, 1998), 94. See also D. M. Armstrong, *Universals: An Opinionated Introduction* (Boulder, CO: Westview, 1989), 38; and J. P. Moreland, *Universals* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2001), 74.

27. These points fit with Craig’s view that we could provide a causal story why an apple is red, and that can bypass any need for a more fundamental red property.

nalism, we can eliminate either the individuator or the qualitative aspect of the concrete particular, which should leave us without any real loss, for the object must be simple. *Nevertheless, austere nominalism seems unable to preserve the qualitative aspects of particulars.*<sup>28</sup>

Now let us turn to apply these findings to objective, Christian morals.

### *Implications for Morality*

Consider now Craig's moral argument for God's existence:

- (1) If God does not exist, objective moral values and duties do not exist.
- (2) Objective moral values and duties do exist.
- (3) Therefore, God exists.<sup>29</sup>

On his nominalism, objective moral values and duties would not be Platonic AOs (which for Plato are universals), and yet they would be real and particular. Craig tries to secure these goals by holding that objective moral values are God's moral attributes, and moral duties are what he has commanded. Furthermore, he seems right in that his view avoids the Euthyphro dilemma by affirming that these moral duties are grounded in God's morally perfect character.

So far, so good. Now, Christian ethics also involves becoming like Christ morally. As disciples, Christians are image bearers, in whom Christ lives through his Spirit. They are to have their minds renewed so that they think in unity with the mind of Christ, which can enable them to reason morally as he would (Rom. 12:1–2; 1 Cor. 2:10–16). Moreover, they are to embody the moral character qualities of Christ, which they will “bear” as they abide in (or, draw upon) his life (John 15; Gal. 5:22–23; Col. 3:12–17).

Thus, on Christian ethics, there is a deep dependency relation between the moral virtues and duties as grounded in God, and their application and relationship to us. However, while Craig affirms the existence of objective moral values and duties due to their grounding in the Christian God, it may be another matter altogether to see if his view can work in regards to humans. That is, can his view preserve objective morals in terms of their connection or relationship to us? In this crucial respect, I will argue that his nominalism does not succeed.

While he believes objective moral virtues and principles would exist, still, it seems *we* would not, at least in any meaningful sense. Indeed, since we can eliminate all qualitative aspects of concrete particulars without real

---

28. See also Moreland, *Universals*, 57–9, for his parallel kind of argument against trope nominalism. Just as above, so it seems that tropes will not be able to preserve their qualitative facts, for tropes also are simples.

29. William Lane Craig, “Theistic Critiques of Atheism,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Atheism*, ed. M. Martin (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 82.



loss, it seems we would be just bare individuators. Not only would that be incoherent, it also seems that we would not be able to *be* virtuous in any meaningful sense, much less become like Christ.<sup>30</sup> For the same reason, it does not seem we could have a moral principle present before our minds in conscious awareness.<sup>31</sup> Thus, God could not communicate his moral standards to us. “We,” much less our minds, would not have any qualities, and so it would be impossible for us to have *any* concept, thought, or belief.

Relatedly, if we cannot be virtuous, or even have moral principles present in our minds, then it seems there would not be a *moral* basis for God to hold us accountable. Any such accountability would seem to be done by arbitrary fiat; moreover, it seems that God would do so all the while knowing that we could not be moral. This implication raises the prospect that God’s judgment of us would be immoral, thereby impugning God’s goodness and justice.<sup>32</sup>

How might Craig reply to this kind of objection? I will consider three likely kinds of replies, ones that Craig has raised in other contexts. Then I will explore a further, possible reply.

As the first of three likely replies, Craig could assert that nominalism has gotten a “bad rap” in terms of not being able to preserve or have essences, including that of humans as God’s image bearers.<sup>33</sup> Now, he has rejected the existence of properties because he takes them to be abstract objects.<sup>34</sup> So, for him, essential *properties* cannot be real.

Elsewhere, Craig has developed an explicitly ordinary language theory of reference, which has been influenced by Rudolf Carnap’s notion of linguistic frameworks, and internal and external questions. As Craig explains, the former questions are “about the existence of certain entities asked within a given linguistic framework,” but the latter concern “the existence of the system of entities posed from a vantage point outside that framework.”<sup>35</sup> For Craig, these frameworks are “ways of speaking,” with “rules for forming statements and for testing, accepting, or rejecting them.”<sup>36</sup>

30. For another line of argument as to why his view cannot sustain essences, see Smith, “Craig’s Nominalism and the High Cost of Preserving Divine Aseity,” which is illuminated by drawing upon the nominalism of Daniel Dennett and Jacques Derrida.

31. Of course, this would apply to having *any* thoughts whatsoever before our minds.

32. Even such uses of “we” and “our” beg the question, for metaphysically, there would not be anything specifiable as *we*.

33. Indeed, Craig has made that claim, including that there can be essences on contemporary nominalism, in “The Johannine Logos and Abstract Objects,” presentation at Biola University, August 28, 2011, during the question and answer session.

34. Consider, e.g., his strong denial in “Propositional Truth—Who Needs It?”: “Properties as well as propositions are abstract objects” (362), and “there is, indeed, a fact of the matter whether abstract objects of the sort that concerns us exist: they do not and cannot exist” (361).

35. *Ibid.*, 360.

36. Rudolf Carnap, *Meaning and Necessity: A Study in Semantics and Modal Logic* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1956), 206, cited in Craig, “Propositional Truth—Who Needs It?,” 360.



Conceivably, then, for Craig, to affirm essences, or even essential properties, one need not (indeed, should not) speak from an ontologically realist linguistic framework. Instead, plausibly one could embrace a nominalist linguistic framework, claiming that this is a way Christian philosophers should speak, much like Craig has done. Regardless of the particular framework one might identify, that person could speak about essences consistently from a standpoint internal to that framework. Thus, to claim that there are essences would involve making such a claim once a person has adopted a way of speaking which is governed by the rules of such discourse. The same kind of move could be adopted in regards to property- (or quality-) talk. That is, one could speak of qualities, yet without being committed to their real existence.

This approach might seem to allow Craig to enjoy the trappings of property- or quality-talk without having to speak necessarily from an ontologically realist framework. So, the way he talks in a given context could seem to endorse the existence of properties. If he is speaking from an ontological framework, then he would be engaged in existence claims. However, if the other framework is not ontological, or perhaps not made explicit, then he could talk of qualities, all the while not making existence claims. Yet, it might seem to his readers who are not familiar with his use of linguistic frameworks that he is affirming the existence of properties/qualities. Indeed, if he were to speak from a different framework (say, a theological or moral one), he could speak of them according to that framework's rules.

Nevertheless, my arguments have focused upon the ontological issues posed by nominalism. From that standpoint, it does not seem that nominalism can preserve qualities. Without them, however, it seems created objects would be nothing more than bare individuators, which seems incoherent. Importantly, that would include not just human beings, moral virtues such as justice and love in us, and duties as well, but also words (and their meanings). So, if there are no real qualities to what Craig claims about these matters, or any other, such as about his moral argument for God's existence, then his claims will not have any qualities either. At the very least, they would end up being subject to indefinite interpretations, without there being a fact of the matter as to what Craig really meant.<sup>37</sup> More realistically, there would not be any claims whatsoever.

---

37. Jacques Derrida's nominalism drove him in a similar direction. He claimed that "there is no signified that 'would place a reassuring end to the reference from sign to sign' by failing to refer beyond itself" (*Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore: John Hopkins Press, 1976), 49, cited in Merold Westphal, "Hermeneutics as Epistemology," in *The Blackwell Guide to Epistemology*, ed. John Greco and E. Sosa (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1999), 430). For Derrida, things such as thoughts, facts, or linguistic utterances are not wholes that are complete in themselves. Instead, from one re-presentation to another, there always will be *difference* because nothing has an identity that can be circumscribed. However, his nominalism was inconsistent at this point, for there would not have been *any* qualitative facts that differed between re-presentations.

Second, Craig could try to rebut my arguments by asserting that moral virtues and principles simply are brute facts, without need of further explanation. Therefore, for me to search for explanations of how nominalism can sustain qualitative facts is to miss a key point—there simply is no need to do that. This objection follows a well-known kind of argument that David Lewis developed. He asserted that “not every *account* is an *analysis!*”<sup>38</sup> Craig could complain that I have pressed for an analysis beyond what is required.

Following Lewis, Craig can accept that concrete particulars have primitive, qualitative facts and still be giving an account of them. Lewis acknowledged that “an effort at systematic philosophy must indeed give an account of any purported fact,” and a rational way to do that is to accept it as primitive.<sup>39</sup> Lewis also lists two other ways; first, someone could analyze the fact as such and such, or, second, someone could simply deny it. In summary, Lewis contends that “a system that takes certain Moorean facts as primitive, as unanalysed, cannot be accused of failing to make a place for them. It neither shirks the compulsory question nor answers it by denial. It does give an account.”<sup>40</sup>

This is a common reply, and it seems to be in the spirit of Craig’s appeal to brute facts as well. Nevertheless, it seems to miss my point. Lewis’s argument presupposes that there are some *real* facts that are brute. Yet, if my previous arguments are correct, it seems there *are* no real brute facts on austere nominalism, at least in creation.

Third, and last of these initial replies, Craig could observe that I am suggesting properties are real and universals. Then he could counter that I seem to be conflating the older, medieval debate between realism and nominalism about universals with the contemporary one that concerns him, that is, that between abstract objects and nominalism. For him, he thinks it is a confusion to fault his arguments against AOs on the basis of the older debate over universals.<sup>41</sup>

Is Craig correct in this claim? His distinction between these two debates depends upon work done by Gonzalo Rodriguez-Pereyra, who describes two kinds of universals: *in re* universals, which exist “in” their instances, and *ante rem* universals, which exist “outside” their instances.<sup>42</sup> Rodriguez-Pereyra notes that “if *in re* universals exist in their instances, and their instances exist in space or time, then it is plausible to think that universals exist

38. David Lewis, “New Work for a Theory of Universals,” *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 61 (1983): 352.

39. *Ibid.*

40. *Ibid.* For him, a “Moorean fact” was something that “we know better than we know the premises of any philosophical argument to the contrary” (David Lewis, “Elusive Knowledge,” *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 74 (1996): 549).

41. Craig, “Anti-Platonism,” 116.

42. Gonzalo Rodriguez-Pereyra, “Nominalism in Metaphysics,” in *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward Zalta, accessed June 29, 2016, <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/nominalism-metaphysics>.

in space and time, in which case they are concrete.<sup>43</sup> Armstrong's immanent universals would be an example. However, for Craig, such universals would not be a threat to God's aseity, for they are not AOs.

However, for Rodriguez-Pereyra, since *ante rem* universals would "exist outside their instances," it is "plausible to suppose that they exist outside space and time. If so, assuming their causal inertness, [*ante rem*] universals are abstract objects."<sup>44</sup> So, if *ante rem* universals exist, they would pose the kind of threat that Craig perceives to God's aseity. Thus, contrary to Craig, the debate about universals *is* related and important to the issue of AOs in relation to God's aseity.<sup>45</sup>

Having addressed these three likely replies by Craig, let me suggest a further one. Craig could shift away from nominalism to a conceptualist view, which, as I have noted, is a fallback position for him. On this view, moral virtues and duties, at least in their relation to us, and even human nature are concepts in God's mind. Such things would exist in dependence upon God and thus not pose a threat to God's aseity.

I think this kind of move makes more sense than nominalist alternatives, at least since it seems that God would think of these kinds of things in a logically prior moment to their creation. Nevertheless, a conceptualist can confuse concepts of these things with those things themselves. Human nature, the virtue of justice, and more are not identical to their respective concepts, for arguably the latter have intentionality, whereas the former do not. However, as I have argued above, we need those things themselves (and not just their concepts) to exist to make sense of how God's moral attributes and commands relate to us.

### *A Better Alternative*

So far, I have argued that on nominalism, Craig's view will not preserve qualitative facts, including that of humans, moral virtues, and moral duties in relation to us. Yet, these seem to be the very ways in which a Platonic realist view of properties demonstrates key strengths. Let me develop briefly two particular examples.

First, considering the virtues as universals, it becomes explanatorily powerful how each of us can grow into the very likeness of Christ's character. On that ontological basis, the very character qualities of Christ can be present in us. However, how can we explain our being able to share the very same qualities (in which case each one would seem to be one in many) when God is a concrete particular, and his attributes are not exemplified in him as

43. Ibid.

44. Ibid. (bracketed insert mine).

45. This is the kind of view of universals that motivates the critiques given by Gould and Davis.

Platonic AOs? I think we can say that God has these attributes necessarily, and his essential properties exist *a se* as a brute fact. Furthermore, following Paul Gould, “it is only those properties that are not *essentially exemplified* by God (that is, necessarily satisfied in God) that are created by God.”<sup>46</sup> The virtues would be among God’s essential properties, which I think comports well with biblical teaching, which does not portray God as somehow needing to acquire his attributes from some other source.<sup>47</sup> Rather, all else that exists does so in dependence upon him. This approach should alleviate Craig’s worries from the “bootstrapping objection.”<sup>48</sup>

Furthermore, since some of God’s attributes are communicable, they make it possible for us to grow truly into the likeness (morally and otherwise) of Christ. This helps us address Craig’s concern, noted above, that “moral values seem to exist as properties of persons, not as mere abstractions.” For example, justice exists as an attribute of God, and it can be instantiated in humans.

So, agreeing with Craig, it would not be the case that moral virtues themselves exist as AOs; rather, they are grounded in God’s very character. Suppose we now introduce Craig’s own understanding of God’s relation to time: “prior to” creation, God existed without time and space.<sup>49</sup> So, his communicable moral attributes existed without being spatially or temporally located. Thus, they seem to meet key criteria for being AOs—they are uncreated and were not located in space and time, even though they are grounded in a concrete, particular individual. This addresses the “one” aspect of these communicable attributes as universals.

Moreover, these same, shareable attributes also can be present in many individual humans. However, this issue presents a problem for Craig, for it seems to him that concrete particulars, which are located in space and time, cannot have AOs (which are not located) present in them. This concern, however, seems mistaken. It overlooks a distinction between an AO (*qua ante rem* universal) itself and its instances. J. P. Moreland offers a solution, for an *ante rem* universal can be present in a particular instance as a mode of itself: “When a universal is exemplified, the universal is modified and constitutes the essence of its instances, which, in turn, are complex, depen-

46. Paul Gould, “The Problem of God and Abstract Objects: A Prolegomenon,” *Philosophia Christi* 13 (2011): 18.

47. E.g., many passages discuss how God is eternal and does not change essentially, including in his moral attributes. E.g., see Pss. 90:2, 103:17; Jer. 31:3; Mal. 3:6.

48. Craig worries that on Thomas Morris’s and Christopher Menzel’s “absolute creationism,” on which properties are Platonic abstracta, God would have to create his own properties in order to have them. Obviously, this view is unacceptable, for it results in a vicious circle. For an example of Craig’s concern, see his “A Nominalist Perspective on God and Abstract Objects,” *Philosophia Christi* 13 (2011): 305. See also Thomas Morris, *Anselmian Explorations* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1987).

49. William Lane Craig, “God, Time, and Eternity,” *Religious Studies* 14 (1978): 497–503.

dent particulars.”<sup>50</sup> This sense of a universal being present “in” its instance is not a spatial relation; instead, it is an essential property-constituent of that instance. So, while such AOs *themselves* would not be spatially or temporally located, their instances are. Thus, for example, the fruit of God’s Spirit, such as love, joy, peace, and so on (Gal. 5:22–23) may be present in various people, though they are modified by those substances that have it.<sup>51</sup>

Moreover, if we draw upon Aristotle, becoming virtuous involves developing a capacity that is present in one’s soul. A person needs to exemplify a virtue in such a way that it is *one’s own*—that is, it is part of one’s character. To do that seems to require that the virtue in question be *internally related* to the subject that exemplifies it. In that way, the virtue is what it is in light of its relation to its owner. This makes sense in terms of Aristotle’s view of the soul as our set of essential and ultimate capacities, such that a virtue is appropriate for us due to our nature. An acquired virtue modifies my soul by *my* having it.<sup>52</sup>

Still, becoming virtuous requires that we ourselves have qualities, as would God’s virtues and moral principles as they are instanced in us. However, since it seems we would not have qualities on nominalism, we could not have a virtue present in us as a property we have acquired. Quite simply, we could not grow in virtue.

## *Conclusion*

My argument has faulted Craig’s nominalism on the basis of not being able to have any qualities in creation, with the resultant problems for objective, Christian morality. In contrast, I have argued that a kind of Platonic realism about properties allows us to make much more sense of objective morals, how we can grow in virtue, and so on.<sup>53</sup> For these reasons, Craig’s nominalism as applied to objective, Christian morality should be rejected.

50. Moreland, *Universals*, 99.

51. I think this suggests how people may experience the fruit of God’s Spirit differently, perhaps due to different privations.

52. On the other hand, if a virtue were externally related to me, then my having it would not modify my soul. Its relation to me would be like a particular computer processor and a motherboard that remain what they are, even if the CPU is plugged into the board. But that hardly describes adequately what happens when we acquire a virtue.

53. I do not endorse an unqualified Platonism about AOs. It seems that on Plato’s own views, AOs would be eternal, and that would pose the threat to God’s aseity that Craig sees. Nevertheless, it seems to me that God could create these AOs, in the sense that he sustains them in existence timelessly. Such AOs would not exist independently of God. See also my “Craig’s Nominalism and the High Cost of Preserving God’s Aseity,” 107.