

William Lane Craig's Nominalism, Essences, and Implications for Our Knowledge of Reality

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William Lane Craig argues that Platonism undermines God's aseity.¹ Instead, he argues either for Conceptualism or a version of Nominalism, such as Fictionalism. Craig even has claimed that Platonism is incompatible theologically with Christian theism:

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.²

Moreover, he claims that "God alone exists *a se*; all else exists *ab alio* and is therefore dependent upon God for its existence. This is a core tenet of the doctrine of God, one grounded in Scripture and tradition. If Platonism is

ABSTRACT: William Lane Craig has claimed that Platonism is incompatible theologically with Christian theism in that it undermines God's aseity. He develops three main objections to Platonism, as well as his own nominalist theory of reference, for which he draws from philosophy of language. However, I rebut his arguments. I argue that, unlike on Platonism, his view will not preserve a real essence of intentionality. Without that, his view undermines our abilities to know reality. As an implication, I also will highlight the importance methodologically of approaching this issue from the primacy of the ontology of knowledge, not philosophy of language.

1. By "Platonism," Craig seems to be focusing chiefly on the affirmation of the existence of metaphysically abstract entities, such as properties, propositions, and mathematical objects. As abstract, they would not be spatially or temporally located; thus they seem to be timeless and uncreated. He thereby would be objecting to "realism" about properties in the sense that he is objecting to the existence of Platonic kinds of universals. But, of course, he is not identifying Platonism with "realism" in general, for D. M. Armstrong has argued for a form of realism, i.e., immanent universals, which are located in space and time.

2. William Lane Craig, "Creatio Ex Nihilo and Abstract Objects," in *Creation out of Nothing*, ed. Paul Copan and William Lane Craig (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2004), 173. See also William Lane Craig, "Nominalism and Divine Aseity," *Oxford Studies in the Philosophy of Religion* 4 (2011): 44–65.

true, then, there literally is no God.”³ Craig has stated also that since “God alone exists necessarily and eternally . . . everything else has been created by God and is therefore contingent and temporally finite in its being.”⁴ Other main reasons he has given against Platonism include: (1) its problems with the “Indispensability Argument” (which he takes to be *the* main argument Platonists use in their defense); (2) the epistemological/causal impotency problem with how we could ever know an abstract object; and (3) the bootstrapping objection.

I will rebut these three main objections to Platonism. In that process, I will develop what I take to be a crucial problem for his own views, which also will help defend Platonism. Indeed, there are many more reasons to be a Platonist than Craig addresses, and I will surface one that I think is not commonly realized: that the *existence* of metaphysically abstract entities, especially essences, is a necessary condition for us to know reality. Since he rejects such entities, I will argue that his nominalism necessarily ends up being unable to give us knowledge of reality. This will have implications for his other important work in philosophy and apologetics. It also will allow me to highlight the importance of considering the ontology of knowledge in our methodology in approaching this overall topic.

Craig and the “Indispensability Argument” for Platonism

Craig appeals to Mark Balaguer, a philosopher of mathematics and language, for this argument:

(I) If a simple sentence (that is, a sentence of the form “*a* is *F*,” or “*a* is *R*-related to *b*,” or . . .) is literally true, then the objects that its singular terms denote exist. (Likewise, if an existential sentence is literally true, then there exist objects of the relevant kinds; for example, if “There is an *F*” is true, then there exist some *F*s.)

(II) There are literally true simple sentences containing singular terms that refer to things that could only be abstract objects. (Likewise, there are literally true existential statements whose existential quantifiers range over things that could only be abstract objects.)

(III) Therefore, abstract objects exist.⁵

Craig correctly raises considerable criticisms of this argument. As he puts it, (I) fails “as a reliable guide to ontology” because we can speak or

3. William Lane Craig, “A Nominalist Perspective on God and Abstract Objects,” *Philosophia Christi* 13 (2011): 305.

4. William Lane Craig, “Propositional Truth—Who Needs It?,” *Philosophia Christi* 15 (2013): 355–364, p. 1.

5. Craig, “A Nominalist Perspective on God and Abstract Objects,” 310.

write about all manner of things that do not obtain in reality, such as Pegasus. He is right; “expressions like ‘there is/are’ or even ‘there exists’ in the vernacular do not force ontological commitments.”⁶ Following Jody Az-zouni, Craig also is right that “ontological commitment is person-relative and context-dependent”; so, contextual factors “will tip us off to whether the locutions are being used in ontologically committing ways.”⁷ Thus he dismisses Quine’s criterion of ontological commitment in that we need not be concerned about being able to quantify over putatively abstract objects.

He also thinks a Neutralist theory of reference undercuts the Indispensability Argument.⁸ Such a theory “allows us to assert truths about things that do not exist” in reality.⁹ For instance, just because we can assert “that snow is white is true,” it does not follow that we thereby are committed to the reality of propositions (that is, as abstract entities).¹⁰

Craig seems to think he has surfaced a deathblow against Platonism. But, even a “Platonist” like Edmund Husserl or Dallas Willard would agree that just because we can think, or make assertions in language, about things like Pegasus, it does not follow that Pegasus must obtain in reality. Nor must Pegasus exist if we say in English, “Pegasus is a winged horse.” To think that “Pegasus” must succeed in referring to a real winged horse would be true on a constructivist view, such as a view that treats intentionality as a relation, not a property. If it were a relation, then anytime I think about some possible object or state of affairs that did not obtain, it would have to be created somehow, lest there not be a relation.

Moreover, the *primary* methods by which philosophers have argued for Platonism are not by appealing to this so-called Indispensability Argument, which is driven by considerations from philosophy of language. Instead, and in sharp contrast, they argue by addressing core metaphysical issues, seeking best explanations for phenomena like property agreement and the unity of natural classes, exact similarity, and that properties themselves necessarily have other properties. The Platonist argues from these that Platonic realism better explains these phenomena than nominalism. For instance, J. P. Moreland explores these kinds of approaches in depth in his treatment and assessment of universals.¹¹ Dallas Willard and Edmund Husserl investigate the intentional natures of our thoughts, experiences, and other mental states, and how they can be of their objects, whether those objects obtain in reality or not, by phenomenological and metaphysical studies.¹² Others have argued

6. *Ibid.*, 314.

7. *Ibid.*

8. Craig, “Propositional Truth—Who Needs It?,” 356. He utilizes a Neutralist theory of reference as a nominalist strategy to deny the existence of propositions.

9. *Ibid.*

10. *Ibid.*, 356–7.

11. J. P. Moreland, *Universals* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2001).

12. See Dallas Willard, *Logic and the Objectivity of Knowledge* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 1984); as well as Edmund Husserl, *Logical Investigations*, vols. 1 and 2, trans. J. N.

similarly; as one more example, Roderick Chisholm argues for Platonism from unexemplified universals and predication facts.¹³

But Craig's point that we can speak, or have thoughts about, actual or nonexistent things does raise a good question: *how, or why, is it that our thoughts, experiences, or other mental states can be about these things?* Consider these cases, of my having a belief about American football being dangerous in its long-term effects on players; a thought about tonight's desert; or an experience of the savory taste of a Starbuck's Vivano smoothie. In each case, it seems clear that *those states could not have been about anything else and still have remained the states they are*. Instead, I could have had different beliefs, thoughts, or experiences. If we pay close attention to what is before us in conscious awareness when we have such states, I think we should see that they *could not* have been about anything else. There is something stubbornly recalcitrant about their *ofness* or *aboutness* (that is, their intentionality) that defies being changed. Each *particular* state seems to have a nature or essence—to be of or about something, and not something else—and that holds even if its object does not obtain in reality. Moreover, each state seems to have its intentionality intrinsically, just due to *what* it is.

This suggests a question: what kind of thing are these essences? The Platonist, of course, has a ready answer: each one has the property of intentionality predicated of it, which *in itself* is a metaphysically abstract entity. How might a nominalist answer this question? I will consider two likely kinds of replies. The first will be what I take to be Craig's own preferred kind of reply, which is based on a type of austere nominalism and philosophy of language. Then I will explore a second alternative, trope nominalism, which is based on metaphysical argumentation. Craig has not embraced trope nominalism, but perhaps he should consider it, for it seems trope theorists might have a way to try to preserve the existence of essences, even of intentionality. But on Craig's kind of view, I will argue that it cannot, and that result is important. Then I will assess trope nominalism and find that on this issue it too has serious deficiencies.

Austere Nominalism and Essences

Craig could develop a couple possible, linguistic replies to our question, what kind of thing are these essences? For trope nominalists, properties are real, yet they are particulars. But this is not so for Craig. He has rejected the

Findlay (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul: 1970).

13. Roderick Chisholm, *A Realistic Theory of Categories* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996). For other examples of realists' ontological methodological approaches to properties, see Gustav Bergmann, *Realism: A Critique of Brentano and Meinong* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1967); and Michael Loux, *Metaphysics: A Contemporary Introduction*, 3rd ed. (London: Routledge, 2006).

existence of properties because he takes them to be abstract objects.¹⁴ Plus, he has embraced a form of nominalism that does not require an ontological grounding for essences. Consequently, essential *properties* cannot be real, for they would be metaphysically abstract.

Craig criticizes Platonists and the Indispensability Argument because too many philosophers are enthralled with a “picture theory of language according to which successfully referring terms have corresponding objects in the world.”¹⁵ But, Craig seems quite influenced by “ordinary language,” which need not commit us to the existence of such things. Indeed, in his “Propositional Truth—Who Needs It?” Craig develops explicitly a more ordinary language theory of reference, which is influenced by Rudolf Carnap’s appeals to 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,” whereas external ones concern “the existence of the system of entities posed from a vantage point outside that framework.”¹⁶ Regarding linguistic frameworks, Craig explains these are “ways of speaking,” with “rules for forming statements and for testing, accepting, or rejecting them.”¹⁷

Conceivably for Craig, then, as a type of austere nominalist, he could embrace two possible approaches.

First Approach. Craig could hold that to talk of essences (and their “kindedness”) one need not speak from an ontological linguistic framework that would affirm the existence of metaphysically abstract entities. Instead, perhaps one could adopt a nominalist way of speaking, saying that this is a way philosophers should speak as evangelical Christians, much as Craig has done. Regardless of the particular linguistic framework he might specify, the key point is that he could make assertions about essences consistently from a standpoint internal to that framework, not external to it (such as a Platonist might). To say, therefore, that essences exist and to make a claim about what kind of thing they are would be to make claims once a person has adopted a way of speaking which is governed by rules that permit such claims. But such talk of essences need not commit us to their existence as abstract objects.

Now, if Craig’s nominalism is true, then to be consistent, a whole host of things we experience and use in life (and have been used to consider-

14. 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 concern us exist: they do not and cannot exist” (361).

15. Craig, “A Nominalist Perspective on God and Abstract Objects,” 315. See also his “Propositional Truth—Who Needs It?,” 357.

16. Craig, “Propositional Truth—Who Needs It?,” 360.

17. 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.

ing as properties of things) would need to be concrete particulars, and not properties (that is, metaphysically abstract entities). These would include not just colors, propositions, mathematical objects, or intentionality. Rather, it would include anything that would seem to be a quality or feature of reality, including things like mental states, concepts, virtues, and *even meanings and words*. Meanings would seem to be properties of thoughts.

Why words? To many, they seem to be properties. For instance, we have the word *love* itself and yet many instances thereof, in writing and speech. That is, it seems (to some) to be a property, for example, of many stories. Even if we were to destroy all the tokens of *love*, we still would not have destroyed the word itself, for we still could think of it (and arguably therefore it is not physical). It also can be translated into many languages, and yet we can preserve its meaning. So, the word *love* (itself) seems to be metaphysically abstract, even a universal, and yet its instances are located in time and space. But, of course, to be consistent, even words would have to be concrete particulars for Craig.

So, let us consider these points in light of Craig's premises and conclusion of the *kalam* cosmological argument for God's existence. To be consistent, the meanings of the whole argument, as well as the premises and conclusion of his syllogism for the *kalam*, must be particulars. And, ontologically, their meanings do not have a real essence (that is, as a property). Thus, they do not seem to have intrinsic meanings, something that is true of them simply due to what they are. While Craig could say that there is an essence to his *kalam* argument, nonetheless that does not mean there is an ontologically real essential property. Again, essence-talk would be something one does according to the grammatical rules of a particular nominalist way of speaking.

Moreover, when Craig debates or teaches about the *kalam*, it surely seems he expects that people who read or hear his view can have *his* concept of the *kalam* in their minds. Now, this observation invites a question for his view: how might his *kalam* argument can be exemplified (or present in) in many peoples' minds? It seems that the one and the same concept would need to be multiply exemplifiable, even though our respective "havings" (predications, exemplifications) of it indeed would be particular to each individual.¹⁸ How could that be the case?

A Platonic realist would answer that his concept of the *kalam* argument is a Platonic entity—that is, it is metaphysically abstract, and it is a universal (a one and many). Now, Craig seems to dismiss the feature of universality as a crucial argument for Platonic entities.¹⁹ But, is he right? I do not think so, because we should ask *how* something could be a one and many. As I

18. I think a concept is a property of specific kinds of mental states, such as beliefs and thoughts, and thus concepts have intentionality. But not all mental states have concepts (e.g., experiences).

19. Craig, "A Nominalist Perspective on God and Abstract Objects," 309–10.

have suggested, the Platonist has an answer that does preserve a nature to his concept of the *kalam*: each instance (exemplification) of his concept of the *kalam* argument literally has in common a metaphysically abstract entity—a nature to that concept.

By way of reply, perhaps Craig could say he does not intend to extend his use of linguistic frameworks to issues surrounding the *kalam*. That is, perhaps my analysis “seems to bank on, in part, Craig being committed to the use of ‘linguistic frameworks’ as an approach to claims about *kalam* But why think that? What evidence is there to suggest that Craig’s use of linguistic frameworks is that totalizing, epistemologically speaking?”²⁰

This is a good concern, and it is possible that if pressed, Craig indeed might embrace this more “eclectic” approach. But, it seems to me that if he were to do so, that move would be *ad hoc* and inconsistent. That is, he has embraced a *complete* rejection of the existence of metaphysically abstract entities, and yet the *kalam* argument itself seems to draw upon them, in the premises and the propositions they state, the concepts present in those propositions, and even the words being used.

Second Approach. But, perhaps Craig might not even see as a real need to explain what kind of thing is a nature, or essence, to intentionality, or even to things like meanings, words, and so forth. This is because to nominalists like him this might be a *pseudo* problem, one that arises merely from the standpoint of the Platonist’s own reasoning. That is, they simply do not see any need to account for natures *ontologically*. Instead, Craig conceivably could claim (in language) that things have natures, but simply deny that natures have an ontological basis. This could fit his appeal to an ontological way of talking versus a different kind. Similarly, the nominalist simply can say that as a *brute fact* intentionality has a nature, without need of further explanation.²¹

How might we reply to this? If we follow Craig, it seems we can *conceive of (or talk about) things abstractly*. So, metaphysically speaking, all things would be particulars, yet unlike what is possible on trope theory, each one would not have a particular nature *ontologically*. Still, there still could be various ways to conceive of and talk about these particulars.²²

But here we come to a threshold issue. Consider living things; no matter how we conceive of something, that conceptualization does not enter into

20. A referee suggested a possible situation. That is, “is Craig holding the use of linguistic frameworks in a provisional way OR in a more totalizing way (e.g., ‘beyond’ dealing with the abstract objects)?”

21. I thank Tim Pickavance for these suggestions of the problem in light of an earlier version of this paper.

22. This is a stance illustrated by many other nominalists, such as Nancey Murphy, Michael Tye, John Searle, and more. For instance, on such views, it is entirely appropriate to conceive of brains as thinking, desiring, and experiencing. It all depends upon how we conceive of, and talk about, them.

the being of the thing under consideration.²³ A given living thing is what it is, regardless of how we conceive of, or talk about, it. I could conceive and even speak of myself as Superman, able to leap tall buildings in a single bound, but that conceptualization does nothing to add such a quality to me. Nor would it happen if a group to which I belong decided to talk that way.

Similarly, suppose Craig were to say there is an essence to intentionality. That would be an *ontological claim* made from a given linguistic framework. It would not be grounded in the *metaphysical reality* of a nature of intentionality. So, that way of speaking would do nothing to the *reality* of the thing being discussed. Consider intentional states: a conceptualization of them, and even an ascription of an essence to them even as intrinsically intentional, would do nothing to change what those states are. It may change things in one's mind, but that hardly would change the thing itself. Moreover, Craig has given us an ontological description that such states must be particulars. So, suppose for sake of argument that he were to choose to talk about them as though they have essences. Such claims would be just that—his linguistic utterances, according to his “anti-Platonist” framework. But, that hardly would do anything to preserve the intrinsic intentionality of such states, which would be their essential quality. *That is an issue of metaphysics, not philosophy of language.* As such, Craig's view seems to not even address the issues that have surfaced in the history of discussions of the nature of properties.

Earlier, I described some everyday kinds of mental states as being intrinsically intentional. Just due to what they are, they have an essence—they are intrinsically about their object, whether or not that object obtains in reality. But, if there are no real essences, then there is no fact of the matter what a given mental state *really* is about. We seem to be left only with our taking our mental states to be about *x*, but since there is no essence to that state, it actually could have been about *y* instead. For example, my experience of the taste of the Starbuck's smoothie could have been about something entirely different, possibly even the sound of a jackhammer in use. But that possibility is absurd, and that is because of the essence to that experience.

Now, if Craig's austere nominalism cannot really do justice to our question of what kind of thing an essence to intentionality is, as well as preserve the reality of that essence, perhaps another nominalist alternative might. Here we will engage with trope nominalism, which uses a decidedly metaphysical approach to these questions.

23. But, I could change my concept of something by reconceiving that concept. Moreover, arguably, the design of an artifact is in the mind of its designer. If so, I can change how an artifact is understood by changing my conception of its design, or purpose. E.g., I can find a new use for a state-of-the-art 300 MB hard drive for a network server (from past decades) by reconceiving of it as a door stop.

Trope Theory and Essences

For Keith Campbell's early theory, a trope is an *abstract particular*, which is a member of a set whose members stand in a relation of exact similarity.²⁴ Furthermore, a trope is a simple, independent entity, without any further parts or properties, and a trope is a part of a whole in which it is found with other compresent tropes.²⁵ As a particular, a trope is completely exhausted in its one embodiment (such as the redness, red₁, in my USC hat, or its specific, numerically singular shape).²⁶ Now, a trope has a specific *nature*, such as an individual human trope that is *essential* to each human. Each human has his or her own particular humanness, and the humanness we each possess stands in a resemblance of exact similarity to each other.

For the early Campbell, wherever a trope is located, it must be in a formed volume.²⁷ But, Campbell also held that a trope is simple; how then did he account for apparently two properties of a trope, its qualitative nature and its location? Consider his view of a trope as abstract. He did not mean it is abstract ontologically, for tropes are spatially located. Instead, he interprets "abstract" epistemically, such that "an item is abstract if it is got before the mind by an act of abstraction, that is, by concentrating attention on some, but not all, of what is presented."²⁸

For the later Campbell, a trope is a simple entity and abstract.²⁹ Yet, now he has shifted from location to particularity in individuating a trope. Now a trope is a particularized nature that, as a brute fact, sustains two roles: (1) it stands in a relation of exact similarity of nature to others in its similarity set; and (2) it is particular and individuated from all others in that set.³⁰ Yet, he still seems to affirm that the distinction between the nature and particularity of a trope is a distinction of reason, and not one of ontology. There is good reason to continue to make their difference epistemic, for if he were to affirm an ontological distinction, he would in effect change a trope into a complex, metaphysically abstract entity.³¹

Can Campbell's earlier or later view of tropes provide a way to secure a nature of intrinsic intentionality, to help us know reality? There are several problems that face his two versions, but I will focus on just one. We will examine implications of the epistemic distinction between the location and nature of a trope (the early view), or particularity and nature (the later view).

24. Keith Campbell, "The Metaphysic of Abstract Particulars," in *Properties*, ed. D. H. Mellor and Alex Oliver (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 135.

25. *Ibid.*, 128, 132.

26. See also Moreland, *Universals*, 53.

27. Campbell, "The Metaphysic of Abstract Particulars," 135–6.

28. *Ibid.*, 126; see also Moreland, *Universals*, 53.

29. Keith Campbell, *Abstract Particulars* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990), 69.

30. *Ibid.*, 68–71; see also Moreland, *Universals*, 60.

31. Campbell, *Abstract Particulars*, 56–8, 89–90; see also Moreland, *Universals*, 60.

Against his earlier view, various puzzles present themselves, which Campbell has admitted are decisive.³² J. P. Moreland has argued:

Consider a concrete particular, say, an apple. The taste trope and the colour trope of the apple, indeed all the apple's tropes, are at the same place since the apple is merely a bundle of compresent tropes. Now the nature of the taste trope differs from its location/formed volume by a distinction of reason only. Likewise, with the colour trope and all the others. But, then, the taste of the apple is identical to its place as are all the other tropes in the bundle. Now by the transitivity of identity, all the tropes of the apple are identical to each other and, indeed, the apple is reduced to a bare location. Concrete and abstract particulars turn out to be bare simples and this is incoherent.³³

As a simple, the trope's location cannot be assigned to some other constituent than its nature, lest the trope become a complex entity, like a universal on a Platonic realist view. As Moreland argues, "the trope view must assay a basic trope as a simple in order to avoid assigning the individuating and qualitative roles to non-identical constituents in the quality-instance, for this is what realists do (e.g. red_1 has an individuator, say, a bare particular expressed by 1, the universal redness, and a tie of predication)."³⁴ Since the location and nature of a trope differ by a distinction of reason only, it seems that either the trope's location will reduce to its nature, or vice versa. Thus, either the trope nominalist must (a) remove the individuator (the 1) and, consequently, make the identity of the trope's location and nature reflect just its nature. But that move requires that the tropes really are metaphysically abstract universals. Or, (b), the trope theorist could make the identity reflect the trope's location, but then properties would be bare particulars, which is incoherent.³⁵

Can Campbell's later view escape these problems? It does not seem so, for there, too, he distinguishes between a trope's particularity and nature epistemically. So, in either view, a trope's nature can be reduced away to either location or particularity. Applying that to intentional states, their natures (their intrinsic ofness or aboutness) likewise can be reduced to location or particularity. But that result undermines the very feature we are seeking to understand and preserve.

So, I do not see how Campbell's theory will secure natures for the trope nominalist, for what the particulars are lacking is ontological. They do not share something literally in common. At best, they stand in exact similarity relationships to one another, which could be another nominalist strategy to explain natures. But that just forestalls the question, for what grounds the

32. Moreland, *Universals*, 58; see also Campbell, *Abstract Particulars*, 65–6.

33. Moreland, *Universals*, 58.

34. *Ibid.*, 59.

35. *Ibid.*, 59, 64.

class of all natures (of intentional states, or others) that stand in this exact similarity relation? It seems that to stand in *this* relation, two objects need some quality literally in common. Also, by appealing to *the* exact similarity relation, it seems another abstract entity has been introduced to try to explain how trope nominalism can be consistent and account for natures in many states.

Now, Jeff Brower has suggested a modification that might help trope nominalism preserve an essence to a trope.³⁶ On it, a nature can be individuated by a quality *extrinsic* to it. Brower suggests that there can be basic individuals (an individuator) and derivative individuals (a trope). A given trope (or, essence, *E*) is individuated by the *extrinsic* relationship it can stand in to some individuator, *I*. Unlike Campbell, there would not be two qualities of the one trope. Instead, together, they would form a complex of an individuator and a trope.

Since *I* is extrinsic to *E*, *I* is not a constituent of *E*. While we may “stick” *I* and *E* together (like sticking together two pieces of paper with glue), *nonetheless I does nothing to E in itself* because *I* is not internally related to *E*, nor is it intrinsically related to *E* as a constituent thereof. Therefore, to claim that *E* is individuated due to *I* does not seem to be justified; instead, it seems that *E itself* is not particular; thus it is better understood as a metaphysically abstract entity.³⁷

In addressing Craig’s objections against the so-called Indispensability Argument, we have been able to see the importance of the existence of ontologically real essences to intentional states in order to know reality. Yet neither austere nor trope nominalism seems able to preserve ontologically real essences. Now let us shift to his second main objection.

Craig and the Epistemological/Causal Impotency Objection

On this objection, he thinks we could not know an abstract object because it would be causally effete. Concerning mathematical abstract objects,

36. E.g., on trope theory (in relation to Aquinas), see his chapter, “Matter, Form, and Individuation,” in *The Oxford Handbook to Aquinas*, ed. Brian Davies and Eleonore Stump (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 85–103. For a development of some related concepts (such as sameness yet without strict identity), see Jeff Brower and Susan Brower-Toland, “Aquinas on Mental Representation: Concepts and Intentionality,” *Philosophical Review* 117 (2008): 193–243.

37. Trope theory seems to suffer from an intrinsic problem, which Campbell’s view illustrates. For a trope to be particular, but not bare, it seems it must be both a particular *and* some thing. This is why the problem occurs; a trope does not seem able to be simple. We can reduce away the nature of a trope, leaving us with an incoherent bare particular and thus no way to preserve natures. That has an unfortunate effect. With regard to intentional states, they lose their essence, thereby relegating us to merely *taking* our mental states to be about something.

Craig seems to think that, were these to cease to exist, “there would be no effect on the physical world.”³⁸ As Platonic entities, propositions also would be causally inert and could not cause belief states.³⁹ Since abstract objects are causally isolated from the empirical realm, they are “irrelevant” to it.⁴⁰

For instance, while we can see the brown dog (a concrete particular, with particular properties), “we do not see its brownness, insofar as this is a Platonic universal, since properties are abstract objects and are therefore unextended and do not reflect photons.”⁴¹ The same could be said for justice; while there can be just individuals, they cannot have an abstract object present in them. This is because metaphysically abstract objects are not located in space and time.

Yet, I do not think this answer is the best analysis available for the situation. A Platonist can address this reply as follows. J. P. Moreland explains that for universals, there is a *modal* distinction between a universal *itself* and its instances: “When a universal is exemplified, the universal is modified and constitutes the essence of its instances, which, in turn, are complex, dependent particulars.”⁴² As he explains, the relation between a universal, like justice, and its instance in a just person *P* is that of a “part” of the whole *P*, that is, justice is one of the constituents in *P*. But this “in” is not a spatial sense of “in”; rather, this relation is that of being an essential property-constituent of *P*, a *way of being in P*. As a mode of justice, this instance of justice in *P* cannot exist apart from justice itself. Yet it seems justice could exist without its instantiation in *P*. Thus, they are not identical.⁴³

As another example, consider that my hair, which is located in space and time, has brown instanced in it. Yet, the color brownness *itself* is not spatially located; it is an abstract metaphysical entity, a universal. But its nature can be present in its instance in my hair as that instance’s essential nature. So, *exemplifications* of universals are located in space and time. Drawing upon Francis Suárez’s modal distinction as used above, Moreland describes this difference between abstract objects (universals) and their modes:

it is easy to see a modal distinction between a property and its property-instance taken as a complex moment [Husserl’s term for a property-instance]. Now when one attends to a moment, one attends to something precisely as a spatiotemporal particular. But when one attends to the universal in the moment, one attends to a property simpliciter. When a perceiver is inclined to describe his language with language appropriate to a particular (e.g. by noting the location of the object) then the relevant object is the moment. But when the perceiver de-

38. Craig, “*Creatio Ex Nihilo* and Abstract Objects,” 181.

39. *Ibid.*, 184.

40. *Ibid.*, 189.

41. *Ibid.*, 180.

42. Moreland, *Universals*, 99.

43. See *ibid.*, 128.

scribes the object in terms of property-talk (e.g. this object is bright red, it is darker than orange, it is a colour) then no reference is being made at all to space, time, or particularity. . . . When one is tempted to say that the universal is also located here and now, he is now attending to the universal's mode, the moment, whether or not he realizes it.⁴⁴

So, I think Craig's epistemological/causal impotency objection against Platonism is mistaken. While we cannot interact in terms of state-state causation with a metaphysically abstract object, nonetheless we still can be directly acquainted with, for example, the same propositional contents of concepts used in the *kalam*, which can be present in many minds at the same time. The best explanation of such quality agreement seems to be that the propositional contents are universals, such that these universals are present in each instance thereof. Also, in terms of colors, while we cannot see a metaphysically abstract entity like brownness *itself*, yet it can be present in its instances (which are sense perceptible) as their essential nature.

Now, let us extend this discussion. What view of substance is needed to best understand how and why we can have these properties present in us? It seems that substances need to be Aristotelian. For Aristotle, a substance *has* its essential properties, and it is more than the sum thereof. Its nature is logically prior to its exemplification of its essential properties. We would have these properties due to our essential nature, and we would own them in a deep unity. But on a nominalist view, without the ability to preserve essences, we seem left without recourse to an Aristotelian view of substances, on which there are essential properties that are universals.⁴⁵ Instead, we seem to end up being bundles of particulars.

Now the question arises for the nominalist: *How can the exemplification of any property ever occur?* No longer do we have appeal to Aristotle's answer, that it is something *appropriate for us due to our essential nature*. Whatever particulars are exemplified would happen just as accidents.⁴⁶

How might Craig address this question? He has suggested that perhaps we can understand exemplification in terms of a quality's falling under a concept.⁴⁷ That is, how is it that we can have his concept of the *kalam* in mind, or how is it that a dog is brown? It is not due to its standing in the exemplification relation, but instead due to its falling under a concept.

But in light of his more recent "Propositional Truth—Who Needs It?," it seems he might say instead that exemplification is better understood in terms of how we talk in a linguistic framework. But this move will not truly help;

44. *Ibid.*, 128–9.

45. As defended, for instance, by J. P. Moreland in numerous places.

46. Moreover, as bundles of properties, the nominalist seems to lose any metaphysical basis for a literal identity of persons through time and change, which leaves us unable even to think through a series of arguments, or survive the death of our bodies.

47. He attributes this idea to a Fregian suggestion made by Alvin Plantinga to him in conversation.

as I have argued elsewhere, behavior (including linguistic utterances) alone, without intrinsic meanings, is inherently ambiguous.⁴⁸ But as I argued above, if there are no ontologically real essences to intentionality, then there cannot be real intrinsic meanings.

Still, this discussion does beg for an explanation from the Platonist who is an Aristotelian about substances: *how can we exemplify abstract objects*, whether that be universals like the fruit of the Spirit (including His self-control produced in each of us), colors (like the color brown), or concepts? How can these stand in *the* exemplification relation, which itself seems to be a metaphysically abstract entity? For the Platonist, this is a mystery in several respects, one which I think philosophy will not be able to explain ultimately. It seems that the Platonist who is a theist will be limited to say that how we can have these (and not other) abstract entities present in us will be due to our nature. Similarly, it is inappropriate for dogs to have concepts such as the *kalam* in their minds due to their natures.

I think this issue of how an object (or subject) can have (in any meaningful sense) something present in them (such as a concept, character quality, and so forth) will be a challenge for Craig and other nominalists. If nominalism cannot really preserve the existence of essences, even of substances, then it will be hard to understand how, for instance, Craig can have *his* concept of the *kalam* in *his* mind based solely upon external relations, which are the ways parts and properties of bundles are related to one another. Yet, it seems that his concept of the *kalam* must be *internally* related to him and his mind, lest that concept not be what it is in light of its relation to him and his mind. In other words, there is a way to make sense of his ownership of his concept of the *kalam* argument if there are essential properties to souls and substances, but evidently not if all is discrete and particular.

Moreover, Craig's appeal to Frege and how a quality can fall under a concept would not solve issues better than exemplification on a Platonist account. Nor would his "Carnapian" appeal to linguistic frameworks help either. Both just postpone more questions. For instance, *why* would our having of his concept of the *kalam* fall under another concept (say, of understanding his *kalam* argument)? Or, why must the rules for linguistic use in a framework have a connection with whether we really have in mind his *kalam* argument? If it is due to some intrinsic properties of the person or concept in question, then it seems we have come back to essences and metaphysically abstract entities to understand this phenomenon adequately.

48. See my *Virtue Ethics and Moral Knowledge* (Farnham, UK: Ashgate, 2003), chap. 5.

Craig and the “Bootstrapping” Objection

Paul Gould explains it as follows: “God has properties. If God is the creator of all things, then God is the creator of his properties. But God can’t create properties unless he already has the property of *being able to create a property*. Thus, we are off to the races, ensnared in a vicious explanatory circle.”⁴⁹

Craig uses the bootstrapping objection against Platonism, in particular, the Absolute Creationism of Thomas Morris and Christopher Menzel, which Morris describes as follows: “*All properties and relations are God’s concepts, the products, or perhaps better, the contents of a divine intellective activity.*”⁵⁰ Now, Craig rightly objects against Morris and Menzel’s Absolute Creationism, for God would have to create His own properties, a view that not only is incoherent, but also unbiblical. But, why should theists who also are Platonists embrace their view? Why couldn’t they embrace approaches such as advocated by Gould or Moreland? For example, Gould suggests the obvious solution to Morris and Menzel’s view is to maintain that “all of God’s essential properties (that is, divine concepts) exist *a se* as a brute fact within the divine mind, and it is only those properties that are not *essentially exemplified* by God (that is, necessarily satisfied in God) that are created by God.”⁵¹

Now, Craig has claimed such a reply is *ad hoc*,⁵² but I do not think this charge sticks, especially if his other main objections can be rebutted, and if there are other important, independent reasons for Platonism. But, in fact, Craig has opined as follows in “Propositional Truth—Who Needs It?” (which was presented in November 2012): “absent the formulation of a defensible form of absolute creationism, *which has not to date been forthcoming*, the orthodox theist will want to rid his ontology of such abstract objects.”⁵³ Yet, Craig participated in the *Philosophia Christi* symposium on

49. Paul Gould, “The Problem of God and Abstract Objects: A Prolegomenon,” *Philosophia Christi* 13 (2011): 259. For him, “the most rigorous argument against the compatibility of Platonism and traditional theism is Bergmann and Brower’s,” found in “A Theistic Argument against Platonism (and in Support of Truthmakers and Divine Simplicity),” in *Oxford Studies in Metaphysics*, vol. 2, ed. Dean Zimmerman (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 357–86. See also Craig’s objections in his “*Creatio Ex Nihilo* and Abstract Objects.”

50. In Thomas Morris, *Anselmian Explorations* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1987), 166 (emphases mine). See also Gould’s footnote 29 for some exploration into “some confusion in the literature about just what the Theistic Activism of Morris and Menzel is and is not” (“The Problem of God and Abstract Objects,” 265–6).

51. Gould, “The Problem of God and Abstract Objects,” 268 (emphasis mine). For Moreland’s thoughts, see *Philosophical Foundations for a Christian Worldview* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2003), 505.

52. E.g., see Craig, “*Creatio Ex Nihilo* and Abstract Objects,” 176.

53. Craig, “Propositional Truth—Who Needs It?,” 355 (emphasis added).

abstract objects in which his and Gould's essays appeared, which was published in late 2011.⁵⁴

Still, surely Craig will object that I have avoided his most serious point from the bootstrapping objection, that Platonism posits myriads of uncreated abstract entities that exist *a se*, whereas God alone exists *a se*. As he says, "if abstract objects cannot be created by God and such things do exist . . . then theism is at its very heart logically incoherent."⁵⁵ Let us consider how some of God's attributes can be communicable (for example, love, faithfulness, justice) to human beings. Like we have seen, our havings of these qualities would be particular to us, yet they involve the sharing of something literally in common. So Gould posits a condition for a solution to Craig's objection, that these communicable attributes are metaphysically abstract, such that "God's essential Platonic properties . . . exist *a se* . . ."⁵⁶

In contrast, what about other metaphysically abstract entities? Here, the Platonist can posit that these entities are *created* in the more fundamental sense Aquinas distinguished, that is, *ontological dependence*, rather than *coming into being*. They would be timelessly sustained in existence by God and therefore depend upon Him for their being.⁵⁷

But Craig does not seem even to consider this possibility. Instead, he rejects abstract objects as being self-existent. But without acknowledging Aquinas's contribution, his attack seems to be an argument against a straw person.

Conclusion

So, what is a better, more "indispensable argument" for Platonism? I suggest that our very ability to know reality depends upon the reality of essences, that is, as universal, metaphysically abstract entities. Without them, we seem to be left only with taking our mental states (and even our words) to be about something, yet that is just our attribution, or conceptualization, for in reality there would not be any real intrinsic intentionality to our mental states. Yet, that is only the beginning of problems; if any event of "taking" something cannot intrinsically represent something, then it too must be taken to be something else. Of course, that taking also must be taken as something else, and so on to infinity, it would seem, without any way to get started with

54. Additionally, I presented a previous version of this paper at the Evangelical Philosophical Society national conference in Nov. 2011, which referred to Gould's suggested amendment. I had sent a copy to Craig before the conference.

55. Craig, "A Nominalist Perspective on God and Abstract Objects," 305.

56. Gould, "The Problem of God and Abstract Objects," 269.

57. See Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on the Book of Causes*, trans. Vincent A. Guagliardo, Charles R. Hess, and Richard Taylor (Washington, DC: Catholic University Press of America, 1996), xvii, note 28.

these takings. Thus, without intrinsic intentionality, we end up without any knowledge of reality.

As the word “nominalism” indicates, intentional states end up being what they are (“intentional”) in name (or word) only. So also would be the case for essences. They too, as Campbell hints, would be merely *abstractions we bring to bear upon some subject matter*, due to how we try to know, conceive, or talk about it, not realizing that even to reflect upon some subject before our minds requires the very feature, real essences, which nominalism cannot seem to preserve. But, unlike mental entities (concepts, thoughts, beliefs, and so forth), how we conceive or talk about living things does not enter into their being. So, despite all our epistemic abstractions (and how we conceive of things), or our linguistically favored ways of speaking, we will not change their underlying, metaphysical reality. The issue about metaphysically abstract entities and essences is one to be addressed in metaphysics, not philosophy of language.

This conclusion highlights a very significant issue, especially in this discussion. Methodologically, it is highly important, even fundamental, that we consider the *ontology of epistemology* as prolegomena to this present topic, not to mention others. Not just any ontology is compatible with our having knowledge of reality. In general, we already know that how we come to know something depends upon what kind of thing it is. For instance, I would not try to understand and know Craig’s theory of reference by eating a printed copy of his essay. Nor would I be able to come to know what a human soul is like by looking at an x-ray of a human’s body. Furthermore, I have argued at length that due to naturalism’s ontological limitations, we cannot have any knowledge whatsoever.⁵⁸ Furthermore, I have argued at length that naturalism’s ontology prohibits any knowledge whatsoever.

Thus, we should do our epistemology in light of our ontology, not vice versa. But the same point applies to how we should do philosophy of language; it too needs to be done in light of ontology. Now, Craig takes it for granted that we can (and often do) refer to reality, and our thoughts, experiences, beliefs, and so forth, can be about reality. This seems to be a wise, commonsense position. But by focusing on philosophy of language and reference issues, without probing the ontological resources within nominalism, Craig’s approach overlooks, perhaps as unimportant, the utterly crucial issue of how there can be an essence to intentionality. Without that, our thoughts, experiences, and even our words will not be together with reality (or we will be left with a hopeless series of interpretations).

In sum, without a way to preserve essences, I believe Craig sacrifices a necessary quality to know reality. I think his nominalism therefore undermines our justification of our knowledge we can have of reality, which would

58. See my *Naturalism and Our Knowledge of Reality: Testing Religious Truth-Claims* (Aldershot, UK: Ashgate, 2012).

include, by implication, even from his *kalam* cosmological argument. I also think his views undermine his very claims; after all, if there is no intrinsic meaning to the nominalist claims he has offered, then it seems that his efforts to show why a Christian should not be a Platonist about abstract objects is an exercise in self-refutation. In sum, I do not believe Craig has defended successfully his claim that a Christian theist cannot be a Platonist.