

CRAIG'S NOMINALISM AND THE HIGH COST OF PRESERVING DIVINE ASEITY

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Abstract. William Lane Craig rejects Platonism (the view that uncreated abstract objects (AOs) exist) in favor of nominalism because he believes Platonism fatally compromises God's aseity. For Craig, concrete particulars (including essences) exist, but properties do not. Yet, we use property-talk, following Carnap's "linguistic frameworks." There is, however, a high cost to Craig's view. I survey his views and then explore the importance of essences. But, next, I show that his nominalism undermines them. Thus, we have just interpretations of reality. Worse, nominalism undermines creation's determinacy. Last, I suggest AOs are created, but in a more fundamental sense than Craig considers.

William Lane Craig rejects Platonism, which he defines as the view that "there are uncreated abstract objects" (AOs).¹ To him, such AOs would exist necessarily and thus independently of the Christian God, thereby also being self-existent and eternal. Therefore, he believes it fatally compromises God's aseity and the doctrine of creation *ex nihilo*.

1 William Lane Craig, "Anti-Platonism," in *Beyond the Control of God? Six Views on the Problem of God and Abstract Objects*, ed. Paul M. Gould (New York: Bloomsbury, 2014), 115. See also his "A Nominalist Perspective on God and Abstract Objects," *Philosophia Christi* 13:2 (2011): 305-18.

Instead of Platonism, he embraces a form of nominalism about such things as properties, propositions, numbers, and truth.² He argues that these things are not real, yet we may speak about properties, propositions, and truth by adopting Rudolf Carnap's "linguistic frameworks." But such talk does not commit us to the existence of such things. Instead, concrete particulars are real, which can be immaterial or material, and these are located in space and time. Moreover, for him, these concrete particulars include essences.

Against Craig, I will argue that there is a heavy price his view will exact. First, I will survey Craig's basic views, with particular attention to his own views about essences given his nominalism. Second, I will explore the importance of the existence of essences. Then, third, I will apply those findings to Craig's own views. I will argue that his nominalism will undermine essences, despite his claims to the contrary. Indeed, without essences, I will argue that at best we will be left with just our interpretations of reality, including 1) his own texts, such as his exposition and defense of the *kalam* cosmological argument; 2) key aspects of Christianity, such as Scripture and the gospel; and 3) any aspect of creation whatsoever. Even worse, his nominalism (and even any form of nominalism) will lead to an utter indeterminacy of created reality. That result will undermine not only creation, but also his appeals to brute facts to block Platonists' requests for ontological explanations. Finally, I will rebut his argument against AOs by suggesting AOs are created, but in a more fundamental sense than Craig considers.

I. CRAIG'S NOMINALISM AND ESSENCES

Craig makes clear that he is not denying that all AOs whatsoever exist; rather, he denies only uncreated ones.³ To him, there are examples of contingent AOs that have been caused to come into being, such as Tolstoy's novel *Anna Karenina*, which is not physical and not identical to any of its printed copies. Other examples could include Beethoven's Fifth Symphony

2 E.g., see William Lane Craig, "Propositional Truth - Who Needs It?" *Philosophia Christi* 15:2 (2013): 355-64.

3 Craig, "Anti-Platonism," 116.

or even the equator. To Craig, these contingent, created AOs are not problematic.

Instead, he thinks that Platonism is inimical to Christianity, for God alone exists *a se* and is the ground of being for all else that exists (which exist *ab alio*). In support, he appeals to terminological distinctions used by the Church Fathers. For instance, there is *agenetos* (unoriginated, uncreated) in contrast to *genetos* (originated, created). While God alone is *agenetos*, “all things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being” (John 1:3, NRSV).⁴ According to Craig, “the ante-Nicene and Nicene Church Fathers rejected any suggestion that there might exist *ageneta* apart from God alone.”⁵

Moreover, Craig states that the ante-Nicene Fathers “explicitly rejected the view that entities such as properties and numbers are *ageneta*.”⁶ While familiar with Plato’s metaphysical views, they refused to ground all reality in an impersonal Form, instead identifying the Hebrew God as the *agenetos*.⁷ From these considerations, Craig draws the implication that “there are no eternal entities apart from God”; all creation “is the product of temporal becoming.”⁸

So, for Craig, a necessary condition for uncreated AOs would be that they are not located in space and time. Moreover, such AOs would be causally effete. While God is not located in space and time *sans* creation, God is not an AO, since God is particularized and necessarily has causal powers. But, in relation to creation, God is temporal.⁹

4 Ibid., 114, and William Lane Craig, “Response to Critics,” in *Beyond the Control of God? Six Views on the Problem of God and Abstract Objects*, ed. Paul M. Gould (New York: Bloomsbury, 2014), 137.

5 Craig, “Anti-Platonism,” 114.

6 Ibid., 115.

7 Ibid.

8 Ibid., 113.

9 William Lane Craig, “God, Time, and Eternity,” *Religious Studies* 14:4 (1978): 497-503. This seems to imply that for Craig, uncreated AOs would exist beyond God’s control, which in turn suggests that God would not be sovereign over them.

Instead of Platonism, Craig sees much promise for a nominalist view of properties.¹⁰ He disavows the nominalist options (such as trope theory) that would affirm their existence, yet cash them out as particulars. Instead, he takes the route of denying the existence of properties. Besides God and created, contingent AOs, on his view, only concrete particulars that are located in space and time really exist.

So, there are qualitative facts that exist. For instance, snow really is white, and I really am thinking of my hot chocolate beverage. There can be immaterial essences, too, as qualitative facts of things (such as of a thought, his *kalam* argument, or humans). So, while many today who are nominalists also embrace a form of physicalism, that is not the case with Craig. But, even though for him these essences are immaterial, they still are spatially and temporally located.

Now, contemporary Platonists, such as Paul Gould and Richard Davis, like to appeal to the resemblance facts between various entities and then argue that these facts are best explained by a single, common property *X* (i.e., a universal, which would be a type of AO) exemplified by such entities.¹¹ This, of course, is the familiar “one-over-many” argument. But, if pressed by a Platonist to give a positive explanation of why resemblance facts obtain between various particulars, Craig simply does not see a need to pursue this. For he thinks “no explanation is required besides an account of why a thing is as described.”¹² Perhaps we could employ a scientific explanation why some persons are swift; e.g., we can explain that in terms of one’s “musculature, consistent training, healthy diet, and so forth.”¹³ So,

10 While he remains open to conceptualism, Craig seems intent on pursuing nominalism: “While conceptualism remains a fallback position should all forms of nominalism fail, I think that the alternatives afforded by nominalism are far from exhausted and merit exploration” (Craig, “Anti-Platonism,” 115).

11 Paul M. Gould and Richard Brian Davis, “Response to William Lane Craig,” in *Beyond the Control of God? Six Views on the Problem of God and Abstract Objects*, ed. Paul M. Gould (New York: Bloomsbury, 2014), 129-30. And, as we will see shortly, there is a connection between universals and AOs in relation to nominalism.

12 Craig, “Response to Critics,” 140.

13 Craig, “Anti-Platonism,” 124-25, note 8. Moreover, that snow is white does not require the existence of an AO, whiteness; it simply is a matter of observation (and scientific explanation) that snow is white.

Craig could say there is no need of a further (metaphysical) explanation; that two things resemble is just a brute fact. Similarly, that snow is white is just a way of talking about white-snow. All we can do is offer a causal story why snow is white, and it is not due to something else (such as a property) more basic.¹⁴ The same could be said of something having an essence – that too is just a brute fact.

Furthermore, following Mark Balaguer, the Platonist's appeal to a universal and essential nature of a supposed property *X* actually does not supply a genuine, informative explanation.¹⁵ Consider a sentence in which *X* is asserted. A nominalist like Craig could understand that sentence as not being ontologically committing to the existence of *X*ness. Instead of being committed to the existence of properties, we can be committed by singular terms (like, "balls," "computers," "persons," etc.), within certain qualifications, and balls simply stand in a resemblance to each other as a brute fact.¹⁶

Moreover, the Platonist's explanation (by way of appeal to AOs that are exemplified by properties or substances) faces its own challenge. Craig understands AOs to be static and causally effete, since they would not be located in space or time. This belief leads him to ask, for instance, "How does being partly composed of or standing in relation to ... [an AO] make an otherwise motionless person fleet?"¹⁷ In sum, these kinds of replies demonstrate Craig's agreement with Balaguer, that today the one-over-many argument for Platonism actually is a "bad argument."¹⁸

Indeed, Craig simply does not see the question of universals as being important to his considerations for nominalism. For, as he explains, in drawing upon the work of Gonzalo Rodriguez-Pereyra, there have been two debates over nominalism in the history of philosophy.¹⁹ The first is an age-old question of universals, in which nominalists deny that there are such things, insisting instead that things like properties are particulars. The

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

15 Mark Balaguer, "Platonism in Metaphysics," *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Spr 2014 edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), §3. In turn, he draws from Michael Devitt.

16 Ibid.

17 Craig, "A Nominalist Perspective on God and Abstract Objects," 310 (bracketed insert mine).

18 Ibid.

19 Craig, "Anti-Platonism," 116. Also see Gonzalo Rodriguez-Pereyra, "Nominalism in Metaphysics," *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, revised June 18, 2014, accessed Oct. 21, 2014.

second, however, is more recent, centering in the philosophy of mathematics. In it, nominalism is the denial that abstract objects exist; instead, all that exists are concrete particulars. Accordingly, someone (such as D.M. Armstrong) may not be a nominalist in one sense, while being one in the other.²⁰

But Craig sees the issue of divine aseity as being related to the second debate, about AOs, not universals. As he claims, “in the context of the second debate, this problem is marginal.”²¹ Thus, he tends to dismiss as misguided arguments against his view that appeal to universals.

Craig’s form of nominalism simply does not require an ontological explanation for essences. Instead, he endorses Rudolf Carnap’s appeals to linguistic frameworks, and internal and external questions. Internal questions are “about the existence of certain entities asked within a given linguistic framework,” while external ones concern “the existence of the system of entities posed from a vantage point outside that framework.”²² With regards to essences, Craig could appeal to a linguistic framework and make assertions about essences consistently from a standpoint internal to that framework, not external to it (such as a Platonist might). So, on Craig’s view, to say that essences exist and make a claim about what kind of thing they are would be to do so once a person has adopted an ontological way of speaking which is governed by its own rules. But such talk of essences need not commit us to their existence as abstract objects.²³ The linguistic framework employed, and the overall context in which a speech act is made, help determine how we should understand such sentences.

II. THE IMPORTANCE OF ESSENCES

Now, if Craig’s nominalism is true, then to be consistent, a whole host of things we experience and use in life would need to be concrete particulars, and not real properties (i.e., AOs). Consider thoughts: they seem to have in-

20 Craig, “Anti-Platonism,” 116. While Armstrong is an immanent realist about universals, nonetheless these are located in space and time.

21 Craig, “Anti-Platonism,” 116.

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

23 Craig, “Anti-Platonism,” 121, where he criticizes a “picture theory of language.”

tentionality, even essentially, or else they could not be thoughts. Now think of something specific, say, a cup of hot tea. That particular thought has intentional contents – it is of that drink, and not something else. Moreover, it does not seem that thought could have been about something else and still have been the thought it is. That is, it seems to have its intentional contents as part of its very nature, and we can know this by paying close attention to the thought as it is given in conscious awareness.

We also can observe that that thought exemplifies, or owns, its particular intentional contents, and that content seems to be internally related to the thought. That is, that content is what it is in light of its relation to that thought. It is that thought's intentional contents, and, evidently, essentially so. So, it seems that things as mundane as a thought about a certain drink seem to have an essence to them.

Now, notice that this thought's essential, intentional content is not due to how we speak of it, for we can observe, if we pay close attention to what is before us in conscious awareness, that our words used about that thought do not enter into the thought itself. Rather, the thought seems to have its intentional essence intrinsically, and not due to how we speak or conceive of it. The thought's essence seems to be ontologically real, and its content seems to enter into the very being of the thought. If so, then it seems this relationship of exemplification is real, too.

Words used about that thought can, however, be bundled together with it in an external relation. For example, we can express in words our attitude about that thought, as with "I am getting weary of pondering that thought now." In such cases, the relata (the words, and the thought) remain what they are in themselves, and the words do not seem to enter into the very being of the thought, which, again, we can notice by paying close attention to them and their relationship to each other.

Essences also seem to play a key part in defining what qualities some other quality (or substance) can have in it. For instance, due to what kind of thing humans are, it is appropriate for them (at certain levels of development) to have complex thoughts, such as about *modus ponens*, in their minds. While a dog can have the color brown in its fur, it does not seem able to have more complex thoughts. Or, consider intentionality: as I have argued

elsewhere, due to what it is, it is the kind of thing that observations, concepts, beliefs, and other mental states have, but not physical states.

Other things also seem to have essences. Take Craig's *kalam* cosmological argument for God's existence:

- (1) Whatever begins to exist has a cause.
- (2) The universe began to exist.
- (3) Therefore the universe was caused.²⁴

Now, suppose that someone were to declare that premise one of Craig's argument states that whatever exists has a cause. Besides being incorrect, that misrepresentation of his argument reveals that the argument itself seems to have an essence, or nature, to it. It cannot undergo certain, apparently essential, kinds of changes to it and still be the same argument. Even if someone did not speak from a "Christian" linguistic framework, there still would seem to be certain necessary and sufficient conditions that demarcate what his *kalam* argument is.

Now, I believe Craig would affirm that these examples have essential features. Yet, so far as I have argued, these examples do not seem to require that these essences must be AOs. They still could be concrete particulars. Now, I can have the meaning of his *kalam* argument in my mind, and while my having of it would be particular to me, on his nominalism, it also seems (at least at first glance) that that meaning itself would be a concrete particular. Even so, clearly Craig would say that many can understand and have the meaning of his argument in their minds. To "explain" that phenomena, though, it seems he would have to appeal to brute facts.

These examples suggest that essences play an important role in defining the qualities of reality. Others who also are nominalists seem to realize this, too. Perhaps we may gain some more insights from them. Though he clearly denies the reality of essences, let us consider the naturalist, Daniel Dennett, and his appeals to what he calls the intentional stance. Dennett claims as his starting point "the objective, materialistic, third-person world of the physical

²⁴ William Lane Craig, *The Kalam Cosmological Argument*, Library of Philosophy and Religion (London: Macmillan, 1979).

sciences.”²⁵ In that conceptual framework, there are no real mental entities, including intentionality, or essences. Yet, it is useful to adopt the intentional stance, which is a “tactic of interpreting an entity by adopting the presupposition that is an approximation of the ideal of an optimally designed (i.e. rational) self-regarding agent.”²⁶ Humans would be intentional systems of the highest order on the planet.

However, we could treat others’ behavior from the intentional stance, too. For instance, suppose we are trying to catch frogs. The tactic enables us to organize and simplify our expectations of the frog’s moves, and they are “compelling and useful.”²⁷ The intentional stance also enables us to be efficient and have power in predicting the frog’s behavior without committing ourselves to attributing real beliefs, desires, and the like to the frog. Similarly, we could adopt that stance toward a computer that is programmed to play chess in a match with a person. We could attribute certain beliefs to the computer, with a goal of trying to checkmate its opponent, in order to predict the moves it will make, all the while not holding ontologically that these mental states and intentionality are real.

However, Dennett cautions us that while there are objective patterns in the real, materialistic world, he also draws upon W.V.O. Quine’s thesis of the indeterminacy of radical translation and extends it to the “‘translation’ of not only the patterns in subjects’ dispositions to engage in external behavior (Quine’s ‘stimulus meanings’), but also the further patterns in dispositions to ‘behave’ internally.”²⁸ There always will be gaps between various interpretations, and this phenomenon entails that it is “always possible in principle for rival intentional stance interpretations of those patterns to tie for first place, so that no further fact could settle what the intentional system in question *really* believed.”²⁹ Dennett also notes that for Donald Davidson, this principle

25 Daniel C. Dennett, *The Intentional Stance*, 3rd printing (Cambridge, MA.: MIT Press, 1990), 5.

26 Daniel C. Dennett, “Dennett, Daniel C.,” *A Companion to the Philosophy of Mind: Blackwell Companions to Philosophy*, ed. Samuel Guttenplan (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1994), 239.

27 Dennett, *The Intentional Stance*, 108.

28 *Ibid.*, 73.

29 *Ibid.*, 40 (emphasis in original).

means that even “when all the evidence is in, alternative ways of stating the facts remain open.”³⁰

Quine used his thesis of the indeterminacy of translation to conclude that, in Dennett’s words, “there was no way of strictly reducing or translating the idioms of meaning (or semantics or intentionality) into the language of the physical sciences.”³¹ Now, like Dennett, Quine flatly rejected the existence of metaphysical essences or mental entities (or content); both are naturalists. This understanding allows Dennett to use Quine to support his own denial of the reality of mental entities and content, for “Quine’s thesis of the indeterminacy of radical translation is thus of a piece with his attack on essentialism; *if things had real, intrinsic essences, they could have real, intrinsic meanings.*”³² Alternatively, if there were real, intrinsic essences to real intentional states, then they really could be of, or about, something, and not something else.

Thus, if there were such intrinsic essences, then meanings (along with other intentional states) could be determinate. There could be a single, correct answer to questions such as, “What did he really mean when he said *x*?” But, since there are no essences, there are no “deeper facts” to give a determinate answer to such questions.

Now, as a naturalist, Dennett denies the reality of essences, mental entities, and their content. But, importantly, he realizes that if essences (and not merely essence-talk) existed, they would be the “deeper facts” that would make determinate (at least) mental entities. They would circumscribe and define what something is, even words and linguistic expressions, from what it is not.

However, Dennett also realizes a further implication of a lack of essences. In the context of a discussion of real patterns and deeper facts, and Quine’s thesis of the indeterminacy of translation, Dennett says that Samuel C. Wheeler draws insightful connections between Jacques Derrida, Quine, and Davidson. Per Wheeler, Derrida provides “important, if dangerous, supplementary arguments and considerations” to the ones that Davidson and other

30 Donald Davidson, “Belief and the Basis of Meaning,” *Synthese* Vol. 27 (1974): 322, quoted in Dennett, *The Intentional Stance*, 41 (bracketed insert mine).

31 Dennett, *The Intentional Stance*, 340.

32 *Ibid.*, 319, note 8 (emphasis mine).

Quinians have put forth.³³ As Wheeler observes, “For Quinians, of course, it is obvious already that speech and thought are brain-writing, some kind of tokenings which are as much subject to interpretation as any other.”³⁴ So even real, physical particulars are subject to interpretation.

Derrida, who also is a nominalist without a place for essences, comes to a very similar conclusion. Everything is a text, in the sense that everything must be interpreted. Why? There simply is nothing that is directly given to us in conscious awareness. Moreover, he also claims that “*there is nothing outside the text*.”³⁵ This does not suggest a license to arbitrariness, for, as Merold Westphal explains, it signifies “textuality as a limit within which we have whatever freedom we have.”³⁶ Instead, he unpacks Derrida’s statement epistemologically and metaphysically. Epistemically, it means that “Being must always already be conceptualized,” in that we do not have access immediately to things as they really are.³⁷

Metaphysically, though, there is another reason why everything is interpretation. This is because things themselves are signs and not what is signified, and as such they “essentially point beyond themselves.”³⁸ Therefore, as Westphal claims, “there is no signified that ‘would place a reassuring end to the reference from sign to sign’ by failing to refer beyond itself.”³⁹ For Derrida, there is always an absence “to” things, which yet somehow is present. What is not present is somehow essential to what is present. He denies that things,

33 Samuel C. Wheeler III, “Indeterminacy of French Interpretation: Derrida and Davidson,” in E. Lepore, ed., *Truth and Interpretation: Perspectives on the Philosophy of Donald Davidson* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986), 477. See also Dennett, *The Intentional Stance*, 40, note 2. I would add that the same issue arises for Derrida precisely because he denies that there are any essences metaphysically; no two things are identical, not even the meaning of two utterances of the “same” word. He is a nominalist – two things that resemble each other have something in common *in name only* (which seems to boil down for him to a linguistic abstraction).

34 Wheeler, 492, quoted in Dennett, *The Intentional Stance*, 40, note 2.

35 Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore: John Hopkins Press, 1976), 158, quoted in Merold Westphal, “Hermeneutics as Epistemology,” *The Blackwell Guide to Epistemology*, ed. John Greco and Ernest Sosa (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 1999), 429.

36 Westphal, “Hermeneutics as Epistemology,” 430.

37 *Ibid.*

38 *Ibid.*

39 Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 49, as quoted by Westphal, “Hermeneutics as Epistemology,” 430.

such as thoughts, facts, or linguistic utterances are wholes that are complete in themselves. Rather, from one re-presentation to another, there always will be *differance*, for nothing has an identity that can be circumscribed, since there are no real essences.

So, both Dennett and Derrida seem to realize that without essences, there are no intrinsic, “deeper facts” in reality that serve to define the various things we find within it. The implication we may see from their rejection of essences is the ubiquity of interpretation. Yet, without real essences, there also is no intrinsic intentionality. Thus, there are no representations that are intrinsically of, about, or represent anything. Furthermore, without essences, it seems there cannot be any “natural signs,” something that intrinsically would represent something else. Therefore, as Dallas Willard has observed, Dennett (and Derrida too) seems to be left with just events of “taking as,” in which we take, or interpret, some input as something else.⁴⁰ There is no room, it seems, for anything in reality, whether physical, mental, moral, or otherwise, as it is to come before us and be known as such, apart from how that input has been conceived and processed.

Moreover, if any particular “taking” cannot intrinsically represent, or be of or about 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 these takings or interpretations. As Willard argues, “Either there is going to be at some point a ‘taking as’ which does not itself represent anything (even what is ‘taken’) – which certainly sounds like a self-contradiction and is at best unlike the instances of ‘taking’ featured in Dennett’s explanations – or there is going to be an infinite regress of takings.”⁴¹

Moreover, this conclusion applies not just for mental entities, but every bit as much for any other aspects of the real world. If everything that can be known is the result of a process with nothing but takings, since nothing is immediately given to us, then in Dennett’s case, it seems there is no room

40 Dallas Willard, “Knowledge and naturalism,” in *Naturalism: A Critical Analysis*, ed. J. P. Moreland and William Lane Craig (New York: Routledge, 1999), 40.

41 *Ibid.*, 41.

for Dennett's "brute facts" to be exempt from Derrida's point: everything is a "text" which therefore stands in need of interpretation.

Dennett's case, along with Derrida's, is instructive because it shows how the lack of essences lands us in an infinite regress of interpretations, without a way to get started in knowing reality. Of course, naturalism is one way to eliminate any place for essences, but Craig is not a naturalist. Still, can Craig's nominalism preserve ontologically real essences? Or, is there a reason why his view, like that of Dennett, also would lead to an inability to know reality, and perhaps even other problems?

III. PRESERVING ESSENCES ON CRAIG'S NOMINALISM?

So far, we have seen that a thought seems to have its intentional contents intrinsically, and they are internally related, due to their natures. Now, that description fits closely with realists' accounts of exemplification, on which a property can exemplify (have present in it) another property, or a substance can exemplify a property, due to their respective natures. Here, it is useful to draw a connection between the two debates involving nominalism which, following Rodriguez-Pereyra, Craig distinguishes. Rodriguez-Pereyra describes two kinds of universals: *in re* universals, which exist "in" their instances, and *ante rem* universals, which exist "outside" their instances.⁴² As he observes, "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 in space and time, in which case they are concrete."⁴³ An example would be Armstrong's immanent universals. Of course, such universals would pose no threat to God's aseity, as Craig sees it.

But, according to, Rodriguez-Pereyra, *ante rem* universals would "exist outside their instances," and so it would be "plausible to suppose that they exist outside space and time. If so, assuming their causal inertness, [*ante rem*] universals are abstract objects."⁴⁴ Thus, *ante rem* universals meet Craig's criteria for being AOs. Therefore, they would pose the threat that Craig perceives

42 Rodriguez-Pereyra, "Nominalism in Metaphysics," 4.

43 Ibid.

44 Ibid. (bracketed insert mine).

to God's aseity. Indeed, they seem to be prime examples of such AOs. Therefore, Craig is mistaken to claim that the debate about universals is of marginal importance to the issue of the preservation of God's aseity.⁴⁵

However, even though *ante rem* universals are conceivable, they seem implausible to Craig. For him, it seems concrete particulars cannot have AOs present in them, simply because AOs are not located in space and time, whereas concrete particulars are. But this concern seems to overlook a distinction between an *ante rem* universal itself and its instances. J. P. Moreland explains how an *ante rem* universal can be present in a particular instance P 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, dependent particulars."⁴⁶ But, as Moreland explains, this sense of a universal being present "in" P is not a spatial one; rather, this relation is that of being an essential property-constituent of P, a way of being in P. So, as an AO, *ante rem* universals themselves would not be located in space and time, but, due to their being modified in the exemplification nexus, their instances are.

Craig also complains that if God exemplifies properties, even his essential ones, then that condition requires that these properties exist apart from him in order for God to exemplify them in his being. That is, if one maintains with "the overwhelming majority of realists that properties are constituents of things or in things only by way of exemplification," then "properties remain objects distinct from God."⁴⁷ If so, then God would have to create omnipotence before he could exemplify it. This scenario leads directly to the bootstrapping worry, which he sees as an insuperable problem for Platonism.⁴⁸

But Craig misunderstands exemplification, particularly in its application to God. Craig seems to think that on a realist's view, since created things exemplify properties that exist in their own right apart from their possessors, the same reasoning must apply to God. But that is not so; the theist who is a Platonist can reply that God exemplifies (i.e., has, owns) his essential

45 And it is this kind of view of universals that motivate the critiques given by Gould and Davis.

46 J. P. Moreland, *Universals*, in *Central Problems in Philosophy* series, ed. John Shand (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2001), 99.

47 Craig, "Response to Critics," 137.

48 Craig, "Anti-Platonism," 115.

properties as a brute fact. They just are his attributes, and using the terms “exemplify” or “property” here need not entail that these exist as AOs. Thus, Moreland has argued that “all the properties that God exemplifies as part of his nature – for example, *being loving*, *being powerful*, and so on – do not exist in a ‘realm’ outside of God, as do other properties. Rather, as a brute fact, God, along with his nature, simply exists *a se*.”⁴⁹ This view also seems to align with the biblical portrait of God’s nature, where one of God’s names is “I AM,” or, the eternal One, who does not change essentially.⁵⁰

So, a realist about *ante rem* universals could appeal in these kinds of ways to preserve the reality of essences.⁵¹ Now, however, what about on nominalism? Let us start by considering what nominalists mean when they treat some entity as a concrete particular. For Craig, these could include particular thoughts, snow, an athlete who is fast, a human soul, and, evidently, the *kalam* argument and Scripture, all of which would be located in space and time. Now, he and other nominalists would not mean that these are bare particulars. Rather, any given particular always is a particular *something*; e.g., a particular thought with its particular intentional contents.

Now, though Craig does not treat things such as properties, numbers, or propositions as real, this move still is like the one made by Keith Campbell in his trope theory, whether in his earlier or later versions.⁵² On his earlier model, a trope is a located quality, or nature, while on his later view, a trope is a particular nature. Moreover, he claims the members of these pairs differ only by an epistemic distinction, not an ontological one, in order to assay tropes as simples.

49 J. P. Moreland, in J. P. Moreland and William Lane Craig, *Philosophical Foundations for a Christian Worldview* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 2003), 505.

50 E.g., see Ex. 3:14, or many examples in the Gospel of John. Moreover, even if God did need to “add” to himself attributes (such as justice) existing independently of him as AOs, he would not be essentially just. But, on God’s not changing in his essential being, see, e.g., Ps. 90:2.

51 And, to borrow the terminology from the two debates, since these universals also would be AOs, such a person also would be a Platonist about them.

52 For the early view, see Keith Campbell, “The Metaphysics of Abstract Particulars,” in *Properties*, ed. by D.H. Mellor and Alex Oliver (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 126, 135-36. Reprinted from *Midwest Studies in Philosophy VI: The Foundations of Analytic Philosophy*, ed. P. French, et al. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1981), 477-88. On the later view, see Campbell’s *Abstract Particulars* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990), 68-71. Unlike Campbell, Craig’s view would not treat these “properties” as real.

However, Moreland surfaces a problem with Campbell's position: "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. red₁ has an individuator, say, a bare particular expressed by 1, the universal redness, and a tie of predication)."⁵³ Since on Campbell's earlier view, the location and nature of a trope differ by a distinction of reason only, either the trope's location can reduce to its nature, or vice versa. Therefore, 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 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.⁵⁴ Likewise, on the later view, a trope's nature can be reduced away to its particularity. Thus, on either of Campbell's trope views, the essence of a trope can be reduced away.

But, Craig's nominalism is not of a trope variety; so, what about his view's prospects? Still, he too subscribes to the view that in creation, there exist only simple, concrete particulars and created AOs. Yet, he never treats or speaks of them as just bare simples, without any qualities. Rather, they do have brute, qualitative facts. But this position seems to take the same route as Campbell, with its same attendant problem, that essences can be reduced away. Furthermore, this result seems to happen because of the general nominalist position that reality consists of particulars. Though Craig would refuse to stop talking of essences, nonetheless there does not seem to be ontological room whatsoever for any qualitative facts, including essences, to exist. Indeed, what should creation be like on his view? It seems that only bare particulars would exist. Therefore, all qualities would be metaphysically indeterminate, leaving us without any ability to exist, much less know creation at all. Clearly, that would not be much of a "creation." Furthermore, that result seems incoherent and utterly unlike our everyday experience.

Now, if this is so, then the other issues we have seen above with a lack of essences flood over Craig's views too. Several examples of results contrary to

53 Moreland, *Universals*, 59.

54 *Ibid.*, 59, 64.

Craig's intentions would follow. For example, it seems that the *kalam* argument would lose its essence, thereby becoming (at best) just a matter of interpretation, and even then, there would be only particular interpretations, and as many as there are interpreters. And if someone has no other good reason to interpret it as Craig does, as an argument for God's existence, then they could interpret its force away, perhaps due to their naturalistic or postmodern commitments. The same would go for the Christian gospel; its essential meaning would be lost, making it too just a matter of interpretation. Indeed, any passage of Scripture would not have a defined meaning that God (or the human author) had in mind, leaving it too as an open question as to its interpretation. Even the biblical claim that Jesus arose from the dead, which Craig has worked hard to defend, also would be just a matter of interpretation.⁵⁵

Moreover, various issues arise in light of creation being metaphysically indeterminate. His views seem to be in serious tension with our everyday experience of creation as determinate (even stubbornly so), not to mention Scripture. This point also is important in rebutting one of his chief objections against Platonists. For Craig maintains that he does not need to give a further, metaphysical account of why things resemble each other, or why an AO exemplified in a substance can give that substance a quality, preferring instead to terminate discussion by appealing to a brute fact of the matter. Now, in various contexts, it is fine to appeal to a brute fact, when something does not have an explanation, but also is the kind of thing we could and should expect to have one.

But to do that presumes that there indeed exists a fact of the matter. However, for Craig, if creation is metaphysically indeterminate, it does not seem there would be any qualities on his view. Even that "fact" would be indeterminate, and thus the view undermines itself. It will not do, then, for him to appeal to bruteness, for doing so presumes there are real facts. The Platonist, however, has recourse to *ante rem* universals, with their essential natures, to give determinacy to created reality. In this important respect, therefore, Platonism has greater explanatory power than nominalism, in that it helps explain why created reality seems determinate. Thus, Balaguer's claim that the Platonist

55 E.g., see his *The Historical Argument for the Resurrection of Jesus during the Deist Controversy*, Texts and Studies in Religion 23 (Toronto: Edwin Mellen, 1985), or "The Historicity of the Empty Tomb of Jesus.", *New Testament Studies* 31 (1985), 39-67.

cannot give a “genuine” or “informative” explanation, or simply a better one, is mistaken.⁵⁶

But surely there are some replies available to Craig and perhaps other forms of nominalism as well. For instance, it seems clear to me that Craig would affirm that thoughts have their contents essentially; the Christian gospel essentially includes Christ’s atoning death; God is essentially just; and more. He has no intentions of denying essences exist. But notice that these are claims one can make once one has adopted a particular linguistic framework from which to speak. As such, they are not necessarily made from an ontological one, in which we would make ontologically committing claims. So, it would remain an open question here just what these essences would be. Yet, as we have seen, on his view, ontologically they would have to be concrete particulars, yet without any “deeper fact” to them ontologically as to why they have essences. But, since there does not seem to be a basis on nominalism for any qualities of a determinate, created reality to exist, the basis for Craig’s reply dissolves.

Consider a second, possible reply, directed against Moreland’s critique of Campbell’s trope theories.⁵⁷ The criticism might go as follows: Moreland’s argument is mistaken because, though a trope is ontologically simple, nevertheless it could sustain two different functions at the same time. For example, consider a red trope in an apple, which is placed upon a table. That trope would be higher than the table and, at the same time, would be exactly similar to some other red trope, perhaps in a second apple. But in this case the two functions are based on relations in which the trope stands, which itself does not seem problematic. It does seem that one entity can stand in several relations at the same time.

But that suggestion misses the point of Moreland’s critique. Rather, his argument was based upon how one ontologically simple entity (e.g., the color of a trope versus its shape) could ground metaphysically that entity’s ability to be just like red and, at the same time, just like shapes. That is, it is not a question

56 This evident loss of determinacy to created reality suggests that nominalism actually is a constructivist view. That is, if “reality” is indeterminate, then somehow it seems we “make” it determinate in some way, perhaps by how we conceive of, or talk about, it. This is an example of what Dallas Willard has called a “Midas Touch” epistemology, in which “concepts are treated in this way — as an activity of mind (language) brought to bear upon something to produce something.” See his “How Concepts Relate the Mind to Its Objects: The God’s Eye View Vindicated?” *Philosophia Christi* 1:2 (1999), 5-20.

57 Thanks to J. P. Moreland for this suggestion.

of how one, simple particular could stand in various relations at the same time, but instead how it could have two qualities. Indeed, it does not seem possible for an ontological simple (which, ontologically, is what nominalists must endorse) actually to have two qualities (here, color and shape) which would end up being identical to each other (and thereby keep the entity simple) and yet somehow able to qualify that simple itself in two such divergent ways.

Last, Jeff Brower has explored a possibility in which a nature can be individuated by a quality extrinsic to it. If so, that might preserve essences, yet be accounted for within trope theory.⁵⁸ He 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. Thus, contrary to the result of Campbell's formulation, there would not be two qualities of the one trope. Together, they would form a complex of both an individuator and a trope.

Now, being extrinsic to E, I is not a constituent of E. While we may "stick" I and E together (like we would stick together two pieces of paper with glue), nonetheless I does nothing to E in itself. This is because I is not internally related to E, nor is it intrinsically related to E as a constituent thereof. This condition is juxtaposed to how I described above the relatedness of a given thought and its content, in which a thought is particularized due to its being internally related to its content. In short, to claim that E is individuated due to I does not seem justified. Instead, it seems that E in itself is not particular and thus is better understood as a metaphysically abstract entity.

Now, consider again how thoughts can have, or exemplify, other properties (such as their intentional contents) in internal relations due to their natures. Compare that with what we have seen nominalists are left to work with. At one level of analysis, without essences to draw upon, the nominalist seems left with just external relations for any such relatedness to take place. But then there is no intrinsic reason why these given qualities are related. But then we have a

58 E.g., on trope theory (in relation to Aquinas), see his chapter, "Matter, Form, and Individuation," in *The Oxford Handbook to Aquinas*, eds. 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* Volume 117, No. 2 (2008), 193-243.

situation that flies in the face of what we can observe by introspection. For if these particulars were related externally, then the intentional contents would not enter in the being of the thought. *But, we can observe that they do.*

However, at another level, the nominalist seems left without anything determinate whatsoever to relate together. This finding can help rebut the claims of trope theorists that though there is not numerical identity between two particulars (e.g., two instances of the gospel), they still stand in a relation of exact similarity, and that is just a brute fact. So, they might claim there still could be the “same” essence of the gospel, though they are not literally identical. But this claim does not work, for it simply presupposes what we already have seen is not feasible. That is, it presupposes that there are determinate qualities in existence, which then can be related.

In short, then, it seems that there is a general problem to have essences on nominalism in metaphysics, including Craig’s form. Without essences, though, it seems nominalism leaves us with just bare particulars and thus an indeterminate creation. But, we have seen that realists about *ante rem* universals do have resources available to preserve essences.

CONCLUSION

Craig seems to miss the importance of *ante rem* universals as AOs to this debate. This misunderstanding apparently stems primarily from his use of Balaguer, who thinks the nominalists’ job merely is to rebut the Platonist. But, for Balaguer, the Platonist must provide a *refutation* of nominalism. Indeed, he thinks the brute facts about “the basic physical nature of elementary particles” can answer satisfactorily the Platonist’s requests for further explanations.⁵⁹ But what counts as “brute” in one conceptual framework may not in another.⁶⁰ For

59 Balaguer, §3.

60 This also helps explain why one person may be ontologically committed by the use of certain terms, while another is not. As Balaguer puts it, “A criterion of ontological commitment is a principle that tells us when we are committed to believing in objects of a certain kind by virtue of having assented to certain sentences” (Ibid.). But, why should we assent to the use of certain sentences? This seems to tie back to larger-scale, conceptual, even worldview commitments.

Balaguer, his appeal to bruteness seems closely related to his apparent embrace of naturalism and, thus, a rejection of real essences and universals.

So, is Craig right that the “one over many” argument is “bad” after all? Hardly; he has relied on an evidently mistaken (and apparently naturalistically influenced) analysis. For it is due to the (assumed) success of Balaguer’s criticisms of the “one over many” argument that he (and apparently Craig too) believes Platonists now appeal instead to the so-called “Indispensability Argument.” That argument in turn trades upon the (apparent) success of Quine’s “criterion of ontological commitment,” which Balaguer has used to rebut Platonism’s “one over many” argument. Yet, if my responses are correct, then he (not to mention Craig) has failed to rebut that argument and thus the relevance of universals.⁶¹

But, there still remains Craig’s objection to AOs on the basis of the biblical witness and the Church Fathers. Here, I think we can defuse his objections by observing that his primary concern is that God alone exists *a se*, and everything else exists *ab alio*, i.e., in dependence upon him. Despite his protestations to the contrary, Craig seems to be reading into his arguments and references that these points mandate that all AOs came into existence at a point in time. But it does not seem this must be the case. Aquinas distinguished a possibility that Craig seems to dismiss or overlook, namely, that there is another sense of “create” to be distinguished. That is, more fundamental than the sense of coming into existence in time is the sense of metaphysical dependence, in which God sustains something in existence. In this latter sense, God could create an AO (i.e., sustain it metaphysically in existence), yet without having to have created it in time.

Now, Craig might object that this solution is *ad hoc*, but why should we think that? This view does not seem to undermine God’s aseity. These AOs would not exist *a se*; instead, they would exist *ab alio* (in dependence upon God as the ground of their being), as Craig insists. So, this view also does not seem to undermine the Christian doctrine of creation *ex nihilo*.

Since God’s aseity need not be threatened by AOs, and such a view avoids the serious costs I have explained associated with nominalism, then I think it would be wise as a Christian theist for Craig to abandon nominalism.

61 Many thanks to Paul Gould for helpful feedback on an earlier draft of this paper.