Three Views on Creation, Causality, and *Abstracta*

Introduction to the Conversation

In the spring of 2015, three philosophers of religion gathered on the campus of Southern Evangelical Seminary just outside Charlotte, North Carolina, to discuss their differing views on the relationship between God and abstract objects. After the long evening of robust exchange, the three scholars, William Lane Craig, Peter van Inwagen, and J. Thomas Bridges, each had an opportunity to update their original papers and write responses to the other two. It was a fascinating discussion, and we thought you'd like to "listen in" through the pages of *Philosophia Christi*. Sometimes formal, sometimes less so, you will sense the character of the original open discussion in the papers that we present here.

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A Reply to Craig

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I present here some rather disjointed thoughts on William Lane Craig's contention that the position I defended in my essay "God and Other Uncreated Things"[1] contradicts the traditional Christian understanding of the doctrine of creation (and, in particular, contradicts the Nicene Creed and the writings of the fathers).[2]

I am afraid I must begin by saying that Craig's exposition of my views, despite copious—and, I concede, generally well-chosen—quotations, are, well, very far from reliable. But I can hardly demonstrate this, since any paragraph in that exposition I might try to convict of that charge would require five paragraphs or more of discussion for me even to make a start on the project of convincing you that he has misunderstood me. (And, anyway, nothing is more boring than a scholar's closely reasoned point-by-point defense of the proposition that some other scholar has misrepresented his views.) Fortunately, nothing in the present paper is relevant to the points on which (in my view) Craig has got me wrong. I will also note that Craig seems bent on requiring that I *prove* things, and frequently points out that I have failed to do so.[3] I can only reply that I am a philosopher and not a mathemati-

ABSTRACT: In "God and Other Uncreated Things," I defended the position that at least some properties (attributes, qualities, and so forth) are uncreated. I argued that this thesis does not contradict the creedal statement that God is the creator of all things, visible and invisible, because that statement presupposes a domain of quantification that does not include (the things that I call) properties. William Lane Craig has contended that this defense of the consistency of my position with the Nicene Creed fails, owing to the fact that there are clear patristic statements to the effect that the domain of quantification presupposed in the Nicene Creed must be understood as absolutely unrestricted. In this paper, I grant his premise but present reasons for doubting whether his conclusion—that the proposition that there are uncreated properties contradicts the Nicene Creed—follows from it.

1. In Kevin Timpe, ed., *Metaphysics and God: Essays in Honor of Eleonore Stump* (London: Routledge, 2009), 3–20.

2. See William Lane Craig, "Van Inwagen on Uncreated Beings," http://www.reasonable-faith.org/van-inwagen-on-uncreated-beings. A shorter version of the same paper was published as "Nominalism and Divine Aseity," *Oxford Studies in Philosophy of Religion* 4 (2011): 44–65.

3. The charges that I have failed to prove my conclusions are addressed to my arguments for Platonism and are at most only indirectly relevant to the charges of unorthodoxy (if not heresy) to which I attempt to reply in the present paper.

cian and that in philosophy there are no proofs of any positive, substantive philosophical thesis. I doubt whether any philosophical argument for any important philosophical position whatever has been found convincing by more than 30 percent of the philosophers who have encountered it. I am also aware that he thinks that most of my arguments not only fail to be proofs but are bad arguments. I disagree—I've read what he's said about them, and find no reason in those writings to be less satisfied with them than I was when I first formulated them. In everything he has written about my work in ontology I can find only one just criticism: that in one place I misstated the views of Richard Routley. In this he is right, and I have no defense—I simply got the guy wrong, and I apologize to his shade. In any case, there is no need to defend the cogency of my arguments in this paper, for it concerns what Craig has said about my conclusions, and not what he has said about the arguments that led me to those conclusions.

For a long time, I wasn't able to see why Craig found my views about abstract objects so objectionable. (The central thesis of "God and Other Uncreated Things" was that abstract objects—numbers, propositions, attributes—cannot enter into causal relations, and thus, since creation is a causal relation, are uncreated.) My memory is unclear on this point, but it is possible that I had not read the printed version of his paper carefully; perhaps I merely skimmed it, and was reacting to his conclusions without having considered his arguments. On those occasions on which I tried to articulate my bewilderment, I said things along the following lines:

> There are very clear biblical, and in fact Dominical, statements, which, if taken absolutely literally, imply that God is able to do anything. And yet few people if any have accused St Thomas of contradicting the Gospels when he said that nothing that implies a contradiction falls under the omnipotence of God. Or for saying that God cannot lie or break his promises or change the past. And most Christians—at least if they were philosophers and had the relevant concepts—would be willing to say that both the biblical statements and Thomas's statements were true but that the domain of quantification of the biblical statements was restricted (perhaps to things of practical concern to people living in the Christian faith and hope) and Thomas's statements were not. But if the evangelists can be said to have been employing a restricted domain of quantification, why is it so obvious that the bishops who declared,

> We believe in one God, the Father almighty, creator of heaven and earth and of and all things visible and invisible . . .

> weren't employing a restricted domain of quantification? (Well, in one respect, of course they must have been: God himself was excluded from the domain of 'all things invisible'—for God is uncreated. When I speak of a restricted domain of quantification in connection with the statements about Creation contained in the document commonly

> called the Nicene Creed, I shall mean a domain of quantification *more* restricted than the domain 'everything besides God'.)

Whatever may have been the case in the past, *now*—having read the longer, online version of the paper—I see that Craig's answer to my question is that the evangelists, and Our Lord himself, in their statements about what God had the power to do, were *obviously* employing a restricted domain of quantification, and that, whatever may have been the intention of the bishops responsible for what we loosely call the Nicene Creed, this was not the case with many of the fathers of the church. Those of them who address such matters at all insist that God created everything besides himself—*and no exceptions*. Unlike the biblical writers, the fathers, when they say that God created everything besides himself make it clear, or at least very often make it clear, that they intend this universal quantification to be unrestricted.

I am not entirely sure *why* Craig thinks it obvious that texts like Matthew 19:26 ("For human beings such a thing is impossible, but for God everything is possible"—the words are spoken by Jesus) and Luke 1:37 ("Seeing that nothing whatever that God ordains shall be impossible"—words spoken by Gabriel to Our Lady during the Annunciation) *obviously* fail to imply that God is able to create round squares or to change the past or (the example is adapted from Descartes) to create two adjacent mountains that have no valley between them. I don't see how such a judgment could be justified on textual or theological grounds. True, both the Dominical *logion* and Gabriel's statement are spoken in response to a reference to a particular, well, feat. In Matthew, Jesus had just made a well-known remark about a camel and the eye of a needle, to which the disciples have reacted by saying, "Who, then, can be saved?" In Luke, the reference is to the pregnancy of the elderly and barren St. Elizabeth, and by extension to the virginal pregnancy ordained for Mary. After all, Jesus *could* have said, "For human beings such a thing is impossible, but for God it is possible," and Gabriel *could* have said, "Don't doubt the power of God; he is able to cause a virgin to conceive." And yet they both chose to say—if we take them literally—that with God *everything* is possible. If Descartes had used these as proof texts for his thesis that God was not bound by the laws of logic or arithmetic, there would have been no textual or theological grounds on which to oppose his understanding of them. I myself oppose that understanding on philosophical grounds: I believe that there is such a thing as absolute, unqualified possibility and impossibility (as opposed to various other kinds of possibility and impossibility, such as physical possibility and impossibility), and I believe that the existence of an agent who is *able* to bring about an absolutely impossible state of affairs (or who is able to turn an absolute impossibility into a possibility) is itself an absolute impossibility. And since I think the two biblical pronouncements must have expressed truths in the contexts in which they were delivered, I postulate that those contexts induced restricted quantification—that the range of

the Greek quantifiers *panta* and *pan* did not extend to such items as creating round squares. Descartes would not be moved by this argument, since he rejects its philosophical premises. But if *Craig* thinks that the texts do not imply that God is able to create a round square, his grounds, like mine, can only be philosophical—and, I would suppose, much like mine.

Nevertheless, there is this point. If there are no textual grounds for reading *panta* and *pan* in the Gospel texts as either restricted or unrestricted quantifiers, the same is not true of *pantōn* ("creator of . . . *all* things visible and invisible") and *panta* ("through whom *all* things were made") in the creed. For the fathers insist that these universal quantifiers are unrestricted. And when they make similar statements in their own works, they intend *their* universal quantifiers to be unrestricted.

I think Craig is very likely right when he tells his readers that when the fathers made statements like "God is the creator of all things" (always excepting himself—and I leave questions about the ontology of evil out of the discussion), they meant their use of the universal quantifier to be absolutely unrestricted. Still, it's not as obvious as it might appear at first glance to be what lesson to draw from this. Let me explain what I mean by this by telling a story, a sort of parable.

> A certain liberal theologian of our time is a fervent proponent of the sacramental validity of same-sex marriages. He can point to several clear statements in the fathers to the effect that *all* marriages recognized as valid by the law of a particular jurisdiction, even if that jurisdiction is a pagan kingdom, even if the marriage ceremonies mandated by its laws incorporate prayers to pagan gods, are sacraments and true marriages in the sight of God—provided only that the law forbids coerced marriages. (These patristic statements were made in opposition to certain heretics who held that, after the day of Pentecost, only marriages presided over by a Christian priest were true, sacramentally valid marriages—a doctrine that implied that it was now impossible for pagans and even non-Christian Jews to commit adultery.) The fathers further maintain that even if the law of a certain jurisdiction incorporates a false conception of marriage, even if it permits divorce, even if it recognizes polygamy or polyandry, *certain* marriage ceremonies performed in that jurisdiction will be valid. As one of them wrote, "If a man takes a wife, in accordance with the laws of his city, and later takes a second wife, and finally divorces the first, the original marriage ceremony is valid and effective; the second ceremony and the divorce are neither valid nor effective." The liberal theologian enlists these fathers in his cause—for, after all, at least in many jurisdictions of the present day, same-sex marriages are recognized by law.

So goes the parable. Now us ask, when our imaginary fathers contended that *all* marriages valid according to the laws of any jurisdiction were sacramentally valid (provided neither party was coerced or already married), did they mean their quantifiers to be unrestricted? I will so stipulate. But then I would ask, what if they were to learn that there would one day be jurisdictions whose law recognized the possibility of the marriage of two people of the same sex—which explicitly ordained that two men or two women might be legally married in exactly the same sense of "legally married" as a man and a woman? I find it hard to imagine that they would continue to say that *all* first marriages not involving coercion that were valid according to the laws of any jurisdiction were sacramentally valid. I would expect them to say that they had never even *thought* of the possibility of a state that would legally establish the validity of marriage between two persons of the same sex.

Now you may want to quarrel with the details of this example. Maybe a person of their time to whom this possibility was mentioned would continue to endorse the unqualified "all" statement and insist that same-sex marriages are not even *legally* possible, since the very *concept* of marriage implies that only a man and a woman can be married to each other. But surely its lesson is true even if there is some feature of the particular example that unfits it for teaching this lesson. And the lesson is that a person may endorse a certain "all"-statement, mean it to hold without any possible exception, and, nevertheless, *would have* admitted that there were possible exceptions to it *if* certain possibilities he had not thought of were brought to his attention.

I am happy to concede that if any of the fathers whom Craig quotes could have slept to the present day—not in the sleep of death, but in some such way as people sleep in Arthurian legend—and had been awakened, and had learned English, and Craig had then said to him, "Van Inwagen over there thinks that properties are necessarily existent and are, moreover, uncreated," he would say something along the lines of, "This van Inwagen is a heretic." I, however, do not find this thing I'm happy to say very interesting. I do not find it interesting because I do not think that our awakened father would have any idea, not the least, what I mean by "property" or what my reasons are for thinking that there are such things as the things I call "properties." Similarly, if a present-day physicist said to him, the awakened father, that a boulder sitting on the top of a hill was capable of doing work, he would suppose that she was mad. Slaves and horses and oxen are the sorts of thing that do work, he would protest, not inanimate objects. And in the sense he would give to the English word "work" (this sense being a joint effect of his experience in the ancient world and his recent English lessons), he would be dead right. But that wasn't the sense in which the physicist was using the word. The two senses are not entirely unrelated—as are the senses of the phonetically and orthographically identical words "bank" and "bank" when

we use them to talk of financial institutions, on the one hand, and rivers, on the other—but neither are they the same sense.

I obviously cannot produce a proper argument for the conclusion that the concept I express by the word "property" (or any concept even remotely resembling it) was wholly unknown to the fathers. I cannot even present a proper argument for the conclusion that they never explicitly mentioned that concept. (For all I know, none of the fathers ever explicitly mentioned the concept "tacking against the wind" or the concept "dactylic hexameter," but I'm fairly confident that they all *had* those two concepts.) I could not do the latter even if I were far more learned than I am, for my space is limited. But I will give one example in aid of this contention. Consider this passage:

> . . . without [body, color] has no existence (not as being part of it, but
> as an attendant property co-existing with it, united and blended, just as
> it is natural for fire to be yellow and the ether dark blue) . . .

Craig has quoted these words from the *Plea for the Christians* of the ante-Nicene father Athenagoras of Athens, a second-century philosopher who was converted to Christianity and thereafter wrote apologetical works.[4] (I don't know what word has been translated as "property." If someone were for some reason to undertake to translate my "A Theory of Properties"[5] into patristic Greek, I'd counsel using *hē poiotēs* for my word "property"—the word Plato invented for the "whatness" of a thing; Cicero would later coin the Latin word *qualitas* to translate it.[6]) I would certainly say that if colors could not exist apart from bodies but coexisted with them, not as parts of them but united and blended with them, then it would indeed be heretical to say that colors existed but God had not created them. But *my* colors, that is, the properties of physical things I call "colors," are nothing at like Athenagoras's colors (or, rather, nothing at all like the things Athenagoras *supposes* colors to be)—just as David Lewis's possible worlds are nothing at all like Saul Kripke's possible worlds. Within my metaphysical system, it makes no more sense to say that the color green is united and blended with a shamrock than it does to say that the number three (or, as it may be, the number four) is united and blended with the shamrock. God has indeed created shamrocks and has ordained that the number of their leaves shall be three or four; it does not follow that he created the numbers three and four.

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4. Craig, "Van Inwagen on Uncreated Beings."

5. Van Inwagen, *Oxford Studies in Metaphysics*, vol. 1, ed. Dean Zimmerman (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 107–38.

6. And I would counsel against using Aristotle's coinage *to katholou*—usually translated "universal." (A noun he formed by contracting the adverbial phrase *kata holou*. I once heard C. D. C. Reeve say in a lecture that the following was the *very first* appearance of "universal" in its philosophical sense: "But come now, try to keep your promise to *me*, and tell me what virtue *as a whole* (*kata holou*) is; and stop making many things out of one, as the wags say every time someone breaks something; rather leave virtue whole and sound, and tell me what it *is*" (*Meno* 77a)).

I will also contend that, whatever metaphysical concepts may have been available to the fathers, my concept of "property" was quite unknown to Plato or Aristotle or to the Hellenistic philosophers. If I am wrong about this, it would suffice to show it if one could point to a passage in which one of those philosophers mentions or expresses this concept.

But let us return to our father who has slept and been awakened in the present day. What I *would* find an interesting question is this: Suppose he were willing to enter into a couple of months of dialectical exchange with me about the contents of the various metaphysical categories. Would he finally say, "Ah, now I see what you mean by 'property.' It's quite different from anything I or my contemporaries had ever thought of. But you're still a heretic if you say they're uncreated"? Or would he say, "Ah, now I see what you mean by 'property.' It's quite different from anything I or my contemporaries had ever thought of. It's perfectly all right for a Christian who believes in such things to say that they are uncreated. Go in peace to love and serve the Lord"? I don't think I know which of these things the awakened father would say in those circumstances—although I am, as I have said, confident that the metaphysicians and theologians of his day had no concept that resembled the concept that I express by the word "property." I can say only this. I see reason to think that my metaphysical views are true. I see no reason to think that they contradict the faith of the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church of which I am a committed member. If I did see or thought I saw a reason to believe this (and a proof that they contradict the writings of venerable Christian texts like the writings of the fathers would certainly be a reason to believe this) I would immediately cease to hold those metaphysical views.