Created and Uncreated Things:

A Neo-Augustinian Solution to the Bootstrapping Problem

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ABSTRACT: Theistic activism and theistic conceptual realism attempt to relieve the tension between transcendent

realism about universals and a strong aseity-sovereignty doctrine. Paradoxically, both theories seem to imply that

God is metaphysically prior and metaphysically posterior to his own nature. In this paper I critique one attempt to

respond to this worry and offer a neo-Augustinian solution in its place. I demonstrate that Augustine's argument for

forms as ideas in the mind of God strongly suggests that only created beings need universals to ground their

character. For them, divine concepts can do all of the work that universals are typically invoked to do in the

contemporary literature. An uncreated being's character needs no such grounding and can be accounted for in terms

of his own concepts. If this is correct, theists may be realists about universals while maintaining the traditional read

of God's aseity and sovereignty.

Many Theist Philosophers embrace some form of realism about universals. While nominalism

offers a more ontologically sparse theory, realists argue that nominalism fails to provide a

satisfactory account of the character of particulars, attribute agreement, abstract reference, and

subject-predicate discourse.[1] Within the past thirty years, however, a growing body of literature

has revealed an apparent tension between various forms of metaphysical realism about universals

and the strong aseity-sovereignty doctrine to which many monotheists are also committed.[2]

Some have responded by arguing that the tension is only apparent.[3] Others have thought it

sufficient motivation for accepting various forms of nominalism.[4] A third response has been to

acknowledge both that the tension is real and that the best ontologies include transcendent

universals,while relieving the tension by locating those universals in the divine mind in a neo-

Augustinian, metaphysical framework. Theistic activism and theistic conceptual realism

represent two such attempts.[5] As a traditional theist and a metaphysical realist about universals, I

find approaches such as these compelling. However, both these views face an accusation of

divine bootstrapping: God seems to pull himself into existence by his own metaphysical

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[1] Michael J. Loux, Metaphysics Third Edition: A Contemporary Introduction (New York NY: Routledge, 2006), p. 17.

[2] This doctrine maintains that God does not depend on anything distinct from himself for his existence and that everything distinct from him depends on him for its existence.

[3] Nicholas Wolterstorff, *On Universals: An Essay in Ontology* (Chicago IL: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1970), pp. 263–97; Peter van Inwagen, "God and Other Uncreated Things" in *Metaphysics and God: Essays in Honor of Eleonore Stump*, ed. Kevin Timpe (New York NY: Routledge, 2009), pp. 3–20; Keith Yandell, "God and Propositions" in *Beyond the Control of God? Six Views on the Problem of God and Abstract Objects*, ed. Paul Gould (New York NY: Bloomsbury Academic, 2014), pp. 21–35.

[4] William Lane Craig, "A Nominalist Perspective on God and Abstract Objects," *Philosophia Christi* 13 (2011): 305–16; and "Anti-Platonism" in Gould, *Beyond the Control of God?*, pp. 113–26; Brian Leftow, "God and the Problem of Universals" in *Oxford Studies in Metaphysics*, vol. 2, ed. Dean Zimmerman (Oxford UK: Clarendon Press, 2006), pp. 325–56.

[5] Thomas V. Morris and Christopher Menzel, "Absolute Creation," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 23 (1986): 353–62. Alvin Plantinga has claimed that something like it is probably true in "Augustinian Christian Philosophy" *Monist* 75 (1992): 309; Richard Davis and Paul Gould, "Modi ed Theistic Activism" in Gould, *Beyond the Control of God?*, pp. 51–64; Alexander Pruss defends a related view in *Possibility, Actuality, and Worlds* (New York NY: Continuum, 2011). See also Greg Welty, "Truth as Divine Ideas: A Theistic Theory of the Property 'Truth,'" *Southwestern Journal of Theology* 47 (2004): 55–69.

bootstraps. If these accusations stand, the problem would be devastating.[6] None of the solutions

to the problem that have been offered to date are metaphysically sound. In this paper I

demonstrate that the bootstrapping problem arises out of a misunderstanding of the relationship

between God and the universals that are his concepts according to theistic conceptual realism. In

the first section of this paper I present the bootstrapping critique. In the second I summarize and

then refute Paul Gould's response to the problem. In the last two sections I develop an alternative

solution that arises more naturally out of Augustine's account of forms as divine ideas. I also

explain why, on Augustine's theory, created things must be metaphysically posterior to

universals. This approach leads us to interpret the exemplification relation in terms of

participation (understood in a particular way). In the fourth section I demonstrate that an

uncreated being's nature does not need the sort of explanation necessary for created beings. This

allows the divine being to serve as the explanation for universals. If my argument is correct, it is

possible for the theist to accept a strong aseity-sovereignty doctrine and remain a realist about

universals.

I. THE BOOTSTRAPPING PROBLEM

Both theistic activism and theistic conceptual realism attempt to resolve the conflict between

traditional monotheism and some form of transcendent realism by follow- ing Augustine's

neoplatonic intuition that universals are concepts within the Divine Mind. On this family of

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[6] Surprisingly enough, Morris and Menzel accept the conclusion of the critique but deny that it is problematic. No others, to the best of my knowledge, have been willing to follow them ("Absolute Creation," pp. 358–60).

views, universals and properties are identified with God's concepts.[7] The primary difference between the two views is that theistic activism conceives of God's concepts as something eternally created by God via "a causally efficacious or productive sort of divine conceiving" while theistic conceptual realism conceives of God's concepts as uncreated but metaphysically dependent on him.[8] If the central claim of these two views correctly captures the nature of universals, then there is no tension between the claim that universals exist necessarily and eternally (as claimed by transcendent realists) and the belief that everything distinct from God depends on God for its existence (as stipulated by the aseity-sovereignty doctrine). Several philosophers, however, have pointed out that both views appear to suffer from a vicious form circularity. Paul Gould[9] articulates a representative version of the argument as follows:

.   (1) God's concept *being divine* = the property *being divine*. (assumption of the claim for the sake of a *reductio*)[10]

.   (2) The property *being divine* is logically prior to God (that is, the divine sub- stance). (from the principle of character grounding)[11]

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[7] Welty only attempts to develop a theory of universals in terms of divine ideas while Morris and Menzel's theistic activism attempts to account for all abstract objects in this way. For the purposes of our project we will restrict our evaluation of this position to its success in accounting for universals.

[8] Morris and Menzel, "Absolute Creation," p. 354.

[9] Even though this argument is directed at theistic activism, he points out elsewhere that it applies to theistic conceptual realism as well. See his "The Problem of God and Abstract Objects: A Prolegomenon," *Philosophia Christi* 13 (2011): 255–74.

[10] Gould does not stipulate that the concept is God's own concept *being divine.* He should, however, since it seems at least possible (indeed, even necessary) that some of the concepts held by various humans may differ from God's own.

[11] The principle for character grounding: properties explain the character things have. See Gould, "Theistic Activism: A New Problem and Solution," *Philosophia Christi* 13 (2011): 130.

. (3) God (that is, the divine substance) is logically prior to the thought that he is divine. (premise)

. (4) If God (that is, the divine substance) is logically prior to the thought that he is divine, then God is logically prior to any necessary constituents of the thought that he is divine. (premise)

. (5) The concept *being divine* is a necessary constituent of God's thought that he is divine. (premise)

. (6) Therefore, God (that is, the divine substance) is logically prior to the concept *being divine*. (from 3, 4 and 5)

. (7) Therefore, God (that is, the divine substance) is logically prior to the property *being divine*. (from 1 and 6 and the law of identity)

. (8) ~(2 & 7). (from the fact that logical priority is asymmetrical)

. (9) Therefore, ~(1). (from 2–7 by *reductio*)[12]

Premise (1) is the central claim of theistic activism and theistic conceptual realism. Premise (2) may be less intuitive. Most metaphysicians agree that one of the roles that universals (properties) play is of providing the metaphysical grounds of the character of the particulars that exemplify them. Therefore, the universals exemplified by the particular are logically prior to those particulars. In this argument Gould assumes that the principle of character grounding applies to God in the same way that it does to creatures. But this assumption leads to a contradiction: God is both logically prior and logically posterior to the property *being divine*. In a slightly different

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[12] Ibid., pp. 127–39. In the original text the steps of the argument are numbered (5)–(13). I have amended the wording for clarity.

version of the problem presented by Michael Bergman and Jeffrey Brower, God creates the property "being able to create a property" that he must already exemplify in order to create it.[13] To avoid that particular instance of circularity, Gould suggests that God's essential platonic properties exist *a se*. I think that the basic intuition behind this claim is correct. God's properties (if, indeed, God has a nature) are not created but simply exist of themselves. It does not make sense to think that God himself exists *a se* but that his properties are created. I find Gould's means of avoiding the contradiction in this particular *reductio* less plausible.

II. AN UNSUCCESSFUL SOLUTION

Gould suggests that if we accept an Aristotelian view of substances, we have reason to believe that there are two distinct kinds of logical priority at work in the *reductio*: one metaphysical and the other causal. Step (2) should claim that the property *being divine* is *metaphysically* prior to God, while steps (3–(7) should state that God is *causally* prior (in the sense of final causality) to his thoughts and concepts and, therefore, to the property *being divine*. Gould argues:

> God's essential properties partially explain God's character (hence they are logically prior in the *metaphysical* sense). Still, the divine substance is a fundamental unity that is the final cause of its constituents (including its concepts and essential properties) and in that sense explains them and is logically prior to them.[14]

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[13] Michael Bergmann and Jeffrey E. Brower, "A Theistic Argument against Platonism (and in Support of Truthmakers and Divine Simplicity)" in Zimmerman, *Oxford Studies in Metaphysics*, pp. 366–70.

[14] Gould, "The Problem of God and Abstract Objects: A Prolegomenon," p. 139. This same response is given in "Theistic Activism: A New Problem and Solution," and in Richard Davis and Paul Gould, "Modi- ed Theistic Activism." It is reminiscent of Morris's claim that God's nature is *causally* dependent on God while God is *logically* dependent on his nature. See Thomas V. Morris, *Anselmian Explorations: Essays in Philosophical Theology* (Notre Dame IN: Univ. of Notre Dame Press, 1987), p. 176.

Gould's response embraces a broadly Aristotelian understanding of substance and invokes the Aristotelian notion of a final cause, yet we are given little explanation of how he conceives of Aristotelian substances or understands final causality. Both of these are critical to evaluating the success of his solution. In what follows I will consider each notion in turn, beginning with final causality.

According to Aristotle, a final cause is "the end, that for the sake of which a thing is done."[15] Final causes explain regularity in nature in a way that is more satisfying than mere coincidence. One can explain why a particular kind of animal always has teeth of a particular shape by claiming that the animal's ability to eat certain food and, therefore, flourish, is the *telos* for which the teeth exist. That is, the flourishing animal is the final cause of that animal's teeth. In the *Physics* Aristotle explains that final causes and formal causes often coincide.[16] The form of the house is the end or goal in building a house.

Turning to the Aristotelian account of substance, Gould offers the following analysis: "Substances are fundamental unities, logically prior to all of their metaphysical and physical parts."[17] He goes on to explain that the nature or essence of a substance brings into being all of the parts of the substance.[18] These claims are reminiscent of the Aristotelian ontology of substances that was prominent through- out the high and later middle ages. Given how little

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[15] Aristotle, Physics II.3; Metaphysics V.2.

[16] Physics II, 7.

[17] Gould, "How can an Aristotelian Substance have its Platonic Properties? Issues and Options," *Axiomathes* 23 (2013): 345.

[18] We can assume that he means "proper parts" since it would not make sense to think that something brings itself into existence, and every entity is an improper part of itself.

explanation Gould offers of the metaphysical and causal priority at work within Aristotelian

substances, it may be helpful to sketch out how medieval thinkers understood the relationship

between a substance and its properties.[19]

On this view, a substance in the strictest sense—I will follow Robert Pasnau in calling

this the "thin substance"[20]—is the unity of matter and substantial form. Aquinas claims that the

substantial form is what makes the thing exist *simpliciter*, while accidental form makes it exist

and some way or another.[21] The substantial form includes all of the essential properties of the

substance and is the internal cause of many of the substance's accidental properties. The

substantial form/matter composite then is the bearer of the substance's accidents. The composite,

together with all of the accidental properties it bears, constitutes the whole being—the "thick

substance."[22] This thick substance is the final cause of the individual constituents. The thriving

whole is the final cause of its parts. The thick substance, however, can only be understood as the

final cause once we have established the thin substance (the *essence*) that sets that end. Here

again we meet Aristotle's claim that formal and final causes coincide. We must first have a

substance *of a certain kind* for it to make sense for the parts to be directed toward the end of the

full expression of that kind. Given this framework, we can appreciate how a property may be

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[19] Obviously, there was no single theory of the relationship between a substance and its properties that all philosophers throughout this period accepted. But there were some things that were more generally accepted. My description here draws largely on Robert Pasnau's work in *Metaphysical Themes 1274–1671* (Oxford UK: Clarendon Press, 2011), particularly chap. 24, "Substantial Forms," pp. 549–73.

[20] Ibid., p. 102

[21] ST I.76.4.

[22] We should not confuse the distinction between thin and thick substances with the absurd belief that anything actually exists solely as a thin substance. There are no thin substances running around "naked," so to speak. Particulars only exist as thick substances, but this does not prevent us from distinguishing among that particular's metaphysical structure.

simultaneously metaphysically prior and causally posterior (in the sense of final cause) to its substance.

Consider a German Shepherd. On one hand, the property *being brown* is meta- physically prior to the dog. It partially accounts for the character the dog has (according to the principle of character grounding cited above). On the other hand, the dog's thick substance is the nal cause of the dog's exemplifying the property *being brown* and thus having brown fur. If this picture is correct, the sense in which a single property may be both prior and posterior to the substance becomes clear. A property is metaphysically prior to its thick substance but is both metaphysically and causally posterior to the thin substance. For our purposes the question arises: can this picture account for the metaphysical priority and casual posteriority of the property *being divine* that Gould suggests is at work in the *reductio*?

As pointed out above, a substance must be a substance *of a certain kind* for the notion of final causality to make sense with respect to it. The dog must be a *dog substance* for the thriving dog to be the final cause of exemplifying the property *being brown*. This entails that the dog substance cannot serve as the final cause of a property like *being canine* because the dog substance must already be a *canine substance* if it is to be a dog substance at all. In fact, *being canine* may just be another way of describing the substantial form or essence of the dog. The same, it seems, must hold true for God. The divine substance must be a *divine* substance (i.e., God's substance) to be the final cause of any of its constituents. If this is correct, then Gould's reading of (3)–(7) in terms of final causality fails to solve the bootstrapping problem.

Gould might object to these claims on the grounds that his notion of Aristotelian substance need not invoke a substantial form at all. If one refuses to distinguish between

different kinds of properties, then perhaps all properties can be explained in terms of final

causality. Even though nothing in the article suggests that Gould does away with the Aristotelian

notion of substantial form, in a more recent work he does consider a broadly Aristotelian

approach to substances that does not invoke substantial forms, viz. J. P. Moreland's constituent

ontology. Within Moreland's framework universals are exemplified by an underlying substratum

—the bare particular—and inhere in the individual substance.[23] Moreland claims that the

substance itself is the final cause of all of the properties it has—that is, all of the properties that

inhere in it—both properties like *being white* and properties like *being human*.

Unfortunately, without the notion of substantial form, it is hard to see how to make sense

of the claim that final causality is at work in the *reductio*. If the substance is the final cause of its

metaphysical parts, then the substance must already be a substance *of a certain kind* in order to

direct the appropriate combination of properties. But on Moreland's view the substance, apart

from the individual properties, is just a bare particular. To illustrate, let us compare Moreland's

account of the brown dog to the one I have given in the previous section:

> [C]onsider the way a classic Aristotelian substance has a property, say some dog Fido's being
> brown. On this view, Fido is a substance constituted by an essence which contains a diversity
> of capacities internal to, within the being of Fido as a substance. These capacities are
> potentialities to exemplify properties or to have parts that exemplify properties. The
> capacities are grounds for the properties like brownness that Fido comes to have. When a
> substance has a property, that property is "seated within" and thus an expression of the "inner
> nature" of the substance itself.[24]

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[23] See Gould, "How Can an Aristotelian Substance Have its Platonic Properties? Issues and Options" for
his presentation of Moreland's view. For Moreland's own presentation, see his *Universals* (London UK:
McGill-Queen's Univ. Press, 2001).

[24] J. P. Moreland, "Theories of Individuation: A Reconsideration of Bare Particulars," *Paci c
Philosophical Quarterly* 79 (1998): 257. A nearly identical passage also appears in *Universals*, p. 152.

The two descriptions share much in common. Both see the substance itself as an explanation of the properties that the substance has. The essence, like the substantial form described above, has the capacity to exemplify properties like *being brown*. On this account it is hard to understand what the essence might be. Either it is some- thing like a substantial form, and we are back to grappling with the bootstrapping problem, or it is just a collection of properties. If it is a collection of properties that inhere in the substance in the same way that brownness inheres in the substance, then it is hard to see how it can account for the brownness in any special way or how the essence might itself be accounted for. The substance cannot be the final cause of its own essence in the same way that the essence may be the final cause of other properties. Indeed, as Gould diagrams Moreland's ontology, it appears that the properties that account for the substance's essence (e.g. *being a dog*) inhere in the substance in exactly the same way that properties like *being brown* do.[25] Taking this model for God, the divine essence is the final cause of the property being divine, but then there is nothing in the substance to set that end. In fact, the use of the phrase *divine essence* may be incorrect, for a divine essence cannot cause itself to be divine. Thus, on both reads of "Aristotelian substance," the more traditional view and the contemporary one, it is incoherent to claim that God is the final cause of the property *being divine*.

I believe that this difficulty points to a deeper problem with Gould's account. It goes wrong by assuming causal relations among constituents within the nature of God. While a follower of Thomas Aquinas might find it intuitive to think of God by analogy with the Aristotelian idea of substance, and perhaps even as the paradigm of an Aristotelian substance insofar as God is self-subsisting in the strongest sense possible, certainly we should not infer

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[25] Gould, "How Can an Aristotelian Substance Have its Platonic Properties? Issues and Options," p. 360.

from this that God is a substance like all of the other substances with which we are familiar. This is why Thomas summarily rejects the possibility of God falling under the genus of substance.[26] That God is self-subsisting does not entail that the whole-constituent relations that we posit with respect to familiar substances exist in God. Whichever way one tries to ac- count for those relations, one is left with a picture of God as a complex being. Any proponent of divine simplicity (among which I count myself) will find this picture objectionable. The account that I propose in the next section avoids the *reductio* and maintains divine simplicity, aseity, and sovereignty.

III. CREATION, PARTICIPATION, AND RESEMBLANCE

In place of Gould's solution, I argue that we should reject premise (2) of the *reductio* because the principle of character grounding fails to apply to an uncreated being. To demonstrate why, I draw on Augustine's theory of divine ideas and Thomas's adaption of the same theme. In the current literature on the relationship between God and abstract objects, there is quite a bit of hand waving with regard to the medieval problem of universals and the various accounts proposed by the theist philosophers of the middle ages. Yet there is little serious discussion of whether or not those thinkers offer relevant accounts of the complex metaphysical relationships involved. I think this a mistake.

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[26] ST I.2.5.

In his short treatise "On the Ideas" Augustine explains the theological motivation for his

divine ideas thesis.[27] He does not set up the problem (as a contemporary metaphysician would) in

terms of attribute agreement or subject-predicate discourse. Instead, he suggests that we need a

doctrine of the forms as ideas in the mind of God in order to account for creation *ex nihilo*.[28]

Augustine appeals to the aseity-sovereignty doctrine to suggest that if something like the *forms*

exists, they cannot exist outside of God as uncreated entities. If they did, there would be

something distinct from God that does not depend on God for its existence. Furthermore, the

doctrine of immutability requires that, if the ideas are in God's mind, they must be eternal and

unchanging. So far, Augustine's account coincides with the contemporary literature on the

relationship between God and universals. But he also claims that God cannot create the world

irrationally, or without reason. In other words, God must know what he is creating when he

creates in the same way that artists know what they intend to sculpt when they embarks on their

projects. An *idea* in God's mind must provide his reason for acting, just as the idea of the

sculptor provides the artist's reason. Furthermore, Augustine points out that the differences

among particular things (the existence of attribute *disagreement*) imply a multiplicity of reasons

and, therefore, a multiplicity of *ideas*. Throughout the rest of the passage, he refers to God's *plan*

for the creation of the world. In other words, Augustine is saying that if God intends to create

horses and that if what comes into being at his will is in fact *horses*, then two things must be

true. First, the *idea* or *exemplar* of the thing must exist in God's mind logically prior to his

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[27] Saint Augustine, "On the Ideas" in *De diversis quaestionibus octoginta tribus*, trans. David L. Mosher (Washington DC: The Catholic Univ. Press, 1981).

[28] Following Augustine, Aquinas argues that divine ideas are the exemplar causes necessary for God's creation. But his theory of divine ideas is distinct from his realism about universals. In fact, on his account, divine ideas serve as the exemplars for immanent universals. For a full discussion of Aquinas's various treatments of this issue, see: Gregory T. Doolan, *Aquinas on the Divine Ideas as Exemplar Causes* (Washington DC: The Catholic Univ. of America Press, 2008).

creation. Second, the things he creates must stand in some particular relation to those *ideas* or *exemplars*.

What exactly is this relation? Augustine and others refer to it as participation. Unfortunately, the concept of participation is only slightly more explanatory than "some particular relation," for it is notoriously vague in the platonic and neoplatonic literature. Two aspects of participation, however, stand out. First, when one thing participates in another, it derives its *being* from the other. It seems that there is a continual sort of causing of the one by the other. In the neoplatonic literature, this dependence of being is called emanation or procession. Conceived of in a slightly different way, it may also map well onto the Christian understanding of creation *ex nihilo*. Indeed, for Aquinas, participation consists in being created by God and distinct from God. Furthermore, from the perspective of the temporal creation, creation is not only the act of a single moment but of God's continual sustaining of the created order through time.

The second aspect of participation that stands out is resemblance or imitation.[29] For Plato, just things are *like* the form of Justice. For Augustine, particular horses are *like* God's idea of a horse. We expect God's will to bring into being some- thing *like* his idea of the thing that he intends to create. When Thomas adapts Augustine's divine ideas thesis, he frames the relationship between particulars and divine ideas in terms of resemblance. According to Thomas, the divine ideas are actually nothing other than God's divine self-knowledge.[30] God can know

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[29] Carl G. Vaught, "Participation and Imitation in Plato's Metaphysics" in *Contemporary Essays on Greek Ideas: The Kilgore Festschrift*, ed. Robert M. Baird, William F. Cooper, Elmer H. Duncan, and Stuart E. Rosenbaum (Waco TX: Baylor Univ. Press, 1987), pp. 17–31.

[30] ST I.15.1.

himself in two ways: as he is in himself and as he is imitable in an nite number of ways by nite creatures.[31] The divine ideas are multiple only insofar as God knows himself as multiply imitable, while the object of knowledge is nothing other than the one unchanging divine essence. Some of these divine ideas (those in accordance with which God chooses to create) constitute the exemplar causes of the particulars that God actually creates. Gregory Doolan defines an exemplar cause as an "extrinsic formal cause."[32] Here again, the relationship of the particular to its extrinsic formal cause is one on which the particular is *like* the exemplar because it is formed by it.

I argue that divine ideas that serve (or could serve) as extrinsic formal causes can do the work that universals are invoked to do in contemporary metaphysics. On this view, universals are the ideas in the mind of God. Particulars participate in or exemplify them by deriving their being from them and being like them. Therefore, universals explain the character of particulars. Attribute agreement exists because God creates multiple particulars that participate in a single divine idea, and subject- predicate discourse is grounded by the resemblance relations in which particulars stand to God's ideas.

The phenomenon of abstract reference, also typically explained via universals, is a bit more challenging. One might be inclined to say that on my view, abstract references are cases of referring to divine ideas. On the other hand, one might think it unlikely that human beings have the epistemic access to the divine mind necessary to successfully refer to those ideas. While I sympathize with this worry, I am not entirely sure that it is any more pressing than worries about

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[31] ST I.15.2.

[32] Doolan, *Aquinas on the Divine Ideas as Exemplar Causes*, pp 33–41.

our epistemic access to the abstract objects to which abstract references refer on the standard realist ac- count. If abstract objects are causally effete, as most realists claim, we cannot come to know them directly the way we come to know particulars in the world. Rather, we infer their existence from the judgments we make about the particulars with which we enter into causal relations. I see no reason why a similar account cannot be given with respect to God's concepts.[33]

It is also worth noting that the account that I have proposed can successfully evade the objections that Richard Davis raises to standard theistic activism and theistic conceptual realism. Davis (like Gould himself in his most recent book) advocates for a more restricted form of theistic activism, which Davis and Gould label modi- ed theistic activism.[34] While they argue that propositions and possible worlds are the products of divine conceivings, they deny that divine concepts can account for properties, universals, or relations.[35] Instead, they suggest that we should understand these particular abstract objects as inhabiting a realm of *abstracta* that is distinct from God, but created by him.[36] Davis's objection to extending theistic activism or theistic conceptual realism to these three categories is an incredibly important one. Up to this point, defenders of both theories have assumed that divine concepts can replace abstract objects

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[33] Alternately, one might want to argue that abstract reference need not actually refer to abstracta or ideas. One would need to develop this line of argumentation more fully if is to be plausible. In any case, I will not explore this problem in any more depth in the present essay.

[34] Richard Davis, "God and the Platonic Horde: A Defense of Limited Conceptualism," *Philosophia Christi* 13 (2011): 301; and Richard Davis and Paul Gould, "Modi ed Theistic Activism," pp. 51–64.

[35] A bootstrapping problem similar to the one presented in this paper arises for modi ed theistic activ- ism. In their co-authored chapter Davis and Gould respond to it in almost exactly the same way Gould does in his earlier work. So, modi ed theistic activism fairs no better on that front than does theistic activism.

[36] Anyone who thinks that there is something contradictory about God creating necessarily existing entities will not find this option palatable. For further discussion of this issue, see Peter van Inwagen, "God and Other Uncreated Things" and *Beyond the Control of God? Six Views on the Problem of God and Abstract Objects.*

if divine concepts can cover all of the same conceptual territory as abstract objects. What they

have not attempted to describe is the relationship that exists between these divine concepts and

the particulars that exemplify them. Davis claims that once one attempts to articulate that

relationship, serious problems arise. He claims that the metaphysician who accepts theistic

activism or theistic conceptual realism about properties is forced to accept one of two absurdi-

ties, depending on whether the metaphysician is a bundle theorist or a substratum theorist. If the

metaphysician is a bundle theorist—an account on which particulars are identical to some bundle

of properties—and properties are identical to God's concepts, then that metaphysician must

accept that material objects are nothing more than bundles of divine ideas (i.e., Berkleyan

idealism).[37] If, on the other hand, one is partial to substratum theory (according to which

particulars are constituted by a property-less bearer of properties, together with the properties

they exemplify), then there are things (e.g., bare substrata) the identity of which depends entirely

on God not possessing a concept of them. This is particularly troubling for a neo- Augustinian

account like mine since I claim that God necessarily has a concept of everything that he creates.

In Davis's words:

> [the substratum] is a thing with no properties of its own, which on [property-concept
> conflation] simply means that God does not have a concept of it; in which case Socrates is
> the consequence of God's conceiving of a thing of which he has no conception.[38]

So, either God is not omniscient or he does not create everything that exists (i.e., bare substrata).

Both subvert the project of reconciling traditional theism with realism about universals, so either

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[37] Davis does not seem to address the differences between constituent and relational ontologies in his paper. While his claim seems particularly powerful in the case of a constituent ontology, it is less clear that it succeeds as an objection to a relational ontology.

[38] Richard Davis, "God and the Platonic Horde: A Defense of Limited Conceptualism," *Philosophia Christi* 13 (2011): 301.

would devastate my solution to the bootstrapping problem. My account quite easily escapes

Berkeleyan idealism since particulars exemplify their universals by resembling them, not by

being constituted by a bundle of them. If something resembles a divine concept, however, there

must be some *thing* that bears the resemblance. Particulars cannot simply be bundles of

resemblances. This might push us in the direction of substratum theory, but we have already seen

that it leads to incoherence.

Thankfully, Davis has presented us with a false dilemma. Even though bundle and

substratum theories are perhaps the most popular, they are far from being the only two accounts

of the property-particular relation available. Two alternative solutions come to mind

immediately, though there certainly may be more. First, one could adopt what D. M. Armstrong

calls a "blob theory" of particulars.[39] On such a theory, particulars have no internal structure and

are not built up out of combinations of properties. In fact, properties do not enter into the

ontological make up of particulars at all at all. Resemblance nominalism is an example of a

theory that adopts this view. For resemblance nominalists, resemblance is a primitive, internal

relation that exists between unstructured particulars. It is a just primitive fact that this particular

resembles all of the members of a particular class and fails to resemble all of the members of

another one. That is, resemblance determines properties, not the other way around. Since we

have elucidated the exemplification relation partially in terms of resemblance, this account of

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[39] D. M Armstrong, Universals: An Opinionated Introduction (Boulder CO: Westview Press, 1989).

particulars may be attractive, especially since resemblance of divine ideas is capable of

sidestepping the typical difficulties that arise from a blobish account of particulars.[40]

A second alternative, and the one that I am inclined to accept, is to adopt an ontology of

particulars like the one proposed by E. J. Lowe.[41] This account is a two-step theory that invokes

both property instances (sometimes called tropes or modes) and transcendent universals to

account for the character of the particular. On a two-step account, property instances constitute

(or partially constitute) the nature of the particular. Rather than a blob ontology, we have

something akin to an ontological layer cake. Furthermore, the properties of the particular are

themselves particulars rather than universals. The redness of this apple is distinct from the

redness of that wine. But the particular property instances are properties of the kind they are

because they exemplify the proper kind-universal. Each property resembles exactly one divine

concept and does so because it is the realization of God's intention to create such a particular.[42]

This apple's redness is a case of redness just because it participates in God's concept of redness,

which he intends to create when he creates this apple's redness. One could combine this

approach with bundle theory, thus avoiding Berkeleyan idealism, or one might follow Lowe in

applying it to a substance ontology. Armstrong argues that after his own theory of immanent

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[40] Alexander Paseau, "Resemblance Theories of Properties," *Philosophical Studies* 157 (2012): 362. The problems are coextension, companionship, and imperfect community. A neo-Augustinian blob theory could avoid each of these three problems because properties are not identical to maximal resemblances classes. Rather, each property is identical to the resemblance relation in which the particular stands to a single exemplar cause.

[41] See E. J. Lowe, "Immanent Universals," Deocumenti e studi sulla tradizione filosofica medievale 18 (2007): 623–36; and "Form without Matter" Ratio 11 (1998): 214–34.

[42] Again, "one divine concept" is to be understood from the perspective of the creation, not from the perspective of God's nature, which is not divided or divisible. It is like God in one of the ways that God knows himself imitable by nite particulars.

realism, the combination of trope nominalism and resemblance nominalism is the strongest

theory of universals on offer in the current ontological market. What I am suggesting provides all

of the strengths of that combination, while avoiding the difficulties faced by resemblance

nominalism and adding the bene fits of transcendent realism. These external onto- logical

considerations recommend the "extravagance" of the two-step ontology well beyond the rather

ad hoc need to defend theistic activism and theistic conceptual realism against the charge of

incoherence.

One might worry that resemblance is itself a relation, and therefore must be explained by

a universal. But I see no problem in taking resemblance as a primitive notion. Every theory must

suggest something as primitive. Given the theist commitment to creation by God, it makes sense

to take God's ability to create what he intends—that is, God's power—as a primitive fact. Even if

the reader finds this suggestion unconvincing, the difficulties that theistic activism and theistic

conceptual realism face at this juncture seem no more problematic than those that afflict the

exemplification relation taken as primitive on standard transcendent realist accounts.[43] Insofar as

my argument is directed at those who already find some form of realism appealing, my proposal

should be on equal footing with the alternatives. One final consideration worth attending to

before we move on is the ontological status of the universals proposed in my theory. As

traditionally construed, universals are abstract (rather than concrete) objects. Indeed, Davis and

Gould take universals as paradigm examples of abstract objects when claiming that being a

universal is a sufficient condition for being abstract.[44] But one might question whether the

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[43] Loux, Metaphysics Third Edition: A Contemporary Introduction, pp. 30–36.

[44] Boethius, "From His Second Commentary on Porphyry's *Isagoge*," in *Five Texts on the Mediaeval Problem of Universals*, ed. Paul Vincent Spade (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1994), 22.

universals I propose are actually abstract. Most theists are uncomfortable with categorizing God

as an abstract object (and with good reason). If God himself is not an abstract object, it is at least

plausible to deny that his concepts are abstract objects (this is especially true for those of us who

want to deny a real distinction between God, the divine nature, and divine concepts). If God's

concepts are not abstract, then the universals that I propose are not abstract. The question we

must ask is whether or not this constitutes a problem. The only relevant consideration, as far as I

can see, is whether or not a divine concept can perform all of the functions that we expect from a

universal. Aristotle's definition of a universal as "what is apt to be predicated of many" is

certainly fulfilled by divine concepts since a single divine concept can be exemplified by

infinitely many particular property instances. On Boethius's characterization in the *Second*

Commentary on Porphyry, he describes a genus (one kind of a universal) as something that "is

supposed to be common [to many singulars] in such a way that the whole of it is in all its

singulars, and at one time, and also it is able to constitute and form the substance of what it is

common to."[45] On this formulation, it appears that divine concepts cannot be universals since

they do not enter into the metaphysical make-up of the particular. But the same is true of any

transcendent theory of universals, so this should hardly count more against theistic activism and

theistic conceptual realism than it does against any transcendent theory. In the contemporary

literature, universals are introduced as the best explanation of certain phenomena: property

possession, attribute agreement, and abstract reference. I have defended the claim that the

combination of divine concepts and particular property instances can fulfill each of these roles at

least as well as transcendent realism's universals without violating the aseity-sovereignty

[45] Boethius, "From His Second Commentary on Porphyry's *Isagoge*," in *Five Texts on the Mediaeval Problem of Universals*, ed. Paul Vincent Spade (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1994), 22.

doctrine to which many theists are committed. There appears to be no reason, then, to reject a theory that is realist about universals simply because it is not a realist theory of abstract objects.[46]

IV. DIVINE NATURE AND UNIVERSALS

How do Augustine's view and the theory that I have developed from it serve as a refutation of step (2) of the *reductio*? As I have presented it, Augustine's view of Divine Ideas answers the question of how created beings come to have the character that God intended them to have. Augustine assumes that only created beings need this sort of explanation because only they depend for their existence on the intentions of another. An uncreated thing, on the other hand, would need no such explanation. Something uncreated does not stand in any relation to the intentions of a creator, and its character can only be explained in relation to itself. This is exactly what one would expect with respect to God, given a strong aseity-sovereignty doctrine. Thus, if we take Augustine's approach, we must conclude that God does not stand in relation to universals as other things stand in relation to them. The principle of character grounding does not apply to God because he does not *exemplify* universals in the proper sense. Since we use subject-predicate discourse with respect to God and since such discourse is typically explained with reference to universals, this claim may appear counter-productive to the project for which theistic activism and theistic conceptual realism are proposed. If God does not exemplify universals, at least not in the same way as created things, how will we ground the truth of statements

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[46] For a fuller discussion of what is at stake in the concrete/abstract distinction as it relates to this question, see the responses to Greg Welty's article "Theistic Conceptual Realism" in Gould, *Beyond the Control of God?*, pp. 81–96 as well as the critique from others and Welty's rebuttal, pp. 97–111.

concerning God? Presumably the proponents of both these approaches are not in a position to claim that we cannot talk meaningfully about God, for such a claim would undermine the project.

I suggest that we think about universals that are applicable to God in the following way. God exists *a se*, as Gould suggests. God eternally knows himself, for he is the object of his own thoughts. God's concept of himself is the universal *being divine*. But, of course, he only resembles his own concept because the concept represents him. Unlike created things, which are what they are in virtue of a similarity they bear to God's concepts, concepts that apply to God are what they are in virtue of their resemblance of him. The relationship is precisely reversed. With this reversal the circularity problem falls away. God does not create his own nature, and he is not both metaphysically prior and metaphysically posterior to it. God simply is, and he is eternally known by himself. What he eternally knows when he knows himself is identical to the concept *being divine*. On this view, the relationship between God and the universals that apply to him is what we might loosely call "nominalistic" rather than realistic. As such, the realism that I am suggesting more closely resembles theistic conceptual realism than theistic activism. For theistic conceptual realism, realism holds on the creaturely level (for everything that is not God) but conceptualism holds for God himself. As such, my argument also serves as a reason to prefer this position over theistic activism since it seems unlikely that theistic activism, even in its modi ed form, can overcome the circularity problem as long as God both creates and is metaphysically comprised by his own concepts.

Some may object to this account on the grounds that I have suggested an arbitrary distinction between how I account for the universals that we think apply to God and how I

account for the universals that we think apply only to creatures. If theists have strong reasons to believe that a being like God exists, they presumably have strong reasons to think that this being stands in unique relation to everything else. In fact, the aseity-sovereignty doctrine, which this paper seeks to defend, lays out just what sort of distinction we are to expect: one in which God is causally and metaphysical prior to everything that is not God.

In this paper I have argued that Gould's appeal to final causality fails to avoid the conclusion of the *reductio*. In its place I have contended that, following Augustine, we should reject premise (2). The character of God is not grounded by universals; rather, God grounds the character of universals. Without this premise, the *reductio* fails, and monotheists may coherently be realists about universals without rejecting a strong aseity-sovereignty doctrine.[47]