The Platonic Challenge to Divine Aseity

Platonism, the view that there are mind-independent abstract objects, is the most significant challenge to the classic doctrine of divine aseity. Platonism is theologically unacceptable because it posits infinite realms of beings which are uncreated and so exist independently of God. The principal argument for Platonism today is the so-called Indispensability Argument based on the ontological commitments thought to be required by the use of singular terms and existential quantifiers in true sentences. Different varieties of anti-realism challenge each of the argument’s two premises. Fictionalism accepts the Platonist’s assumed criterion of ontological commitment but rejects the truth of the relevant sentences. Neutralism accepts the truth of the relevant sentences but denies the assumed criterion of ontological commitment. Both of these perspectives, but especially the last, are plausible routes available for the Christian theist to meet Platonism’s challenge.

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1. Divine Aseity


   B. Biblical basis: John 1.1-3; Colossians 1.16

   C. Nicene Creed
2. Challenge of Platonism

   A. Do numbers exist? Other examples

   B. Abstract objects: essentially causally impotent.

   C. Some seem to be uncreatable.

3. Lightweight vs. Heavyweight Platonism

   I believe that the meaning of ‘exist’ and of (informal) quantifiers is
   metaphysically light in natural languages. I think we speak sincerely and literally, but
   without meaning to commit ourselves on deep metaphysical issues, when we say, as we
   do, that there are rocks as well as roosters, shapes and sizes, numbers and theorems,
   molecules composed of several atoms, amoebas and other living cells that split in two,
   cities and states, laws and agreements, properties and relations, words that are spoken and
   written, books that exist in both printed and electronic forms—and so on. I suppose that
   few if any of us would say that all of those objects are fundamental metaphysically.
   (Robert Adams, “The Metaphysical Lightness of Being,” paper presented to the
   Philosophy Department colloquium at the University of Notre Dame, April 7, 2011)

   Suppose it is said . . . that for a thing to exist is for it to [sic; supply “be”] part of the
   ultimate furniture of the universe. However this last phrase is interpreted, it seems quite
   plausible that large, composite objects like the Eiffel Tower do not exist in this sense.
   But an anti-nominalist may be perfectly willing to grant that the Euler function may not
   exist in this sense either. The most the anti-nominalist wishes to claim [sic; supply “is”]
   that the Euler function exists in the same sense that the Eiffel Tower does. (Gideon Rosen
   and John P. Burgess, “Nominalism Reconsidered,” in The Oxford Handbook of
   Mathematics and Logic, ed. Stewart Shapiro, Oxford Handbooks in Philosophy (Oxford:
   Oxford University Press, 2005), p. 525.)
One very traditional sort of way to try to make sense of the question of the ultimate metaphysical existence of numbers would be to turn the ontological question into a theological question: Did it or did it not happen, on one of the days of creation, that God said, 'Let there be numbers!' and there were numbers, and God saw the numbers, that they were good? According to Dummett, and according to Nietzsche—or my perspective on Nietzsche—this is the only way to make sense of questions of ontological metaphysics. . . . I myself believe, like Russell, that analytic atheism [the thesis that theological language is meaningless] is false, and suspect, contrary to the Australians, that the Nietzsche-Dummett thesis is true. If as I believe the theological question does make sense, and if as I suspect it is the only sensible question about the italics-added real or capital-R Real existence of numbers, then I would answer that question in the negative; but then I would equally answer in the negative the question of the Real existence of just about anything. (John P. Burgess, “Mathematics and Bleak House,” Philosophia Mathematica 12 (2004): 30-1.)

4. Indispensability Argument for Platonism

A. Argument Stated

I. If a simple sentence (e.g., a sentence of the form ‘a is F’) is literally true, then the objects that its singular terms denote exist. (Likewise, if an existential sentence is literally true, then there exist objects of the relevant kinds; e.g., if ‘There is an F’ is true, then there exist some Fs.)

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

III. Therefore, abstract objects exist.
B. Argument Defended
   1. Quantification
      ‘Are there things that don’t exist?’
      ‘There is a prime number between 2 and 4.’

   2. Reference
      ‘The number of persons in the Trinity is three.’
      ‘The fragility of the glass makes it a poor construction material.’
      ‘All copies of Thallus’ History have been lost.’
      Reference is usually said to be successful when there is an object in the world corresponding to the word.

5. Responses to the Indispensability Argument
   A. Rejection of Premiss (II)
      1. Fictionalism: such statements are false.

         2. False that Santa Claus wears a red suit or Pegasus is a winged horse. Cf. True according to a story.
         Can be regarded as true for all practical purposes.

   B. Rejection of Premiss (I)
      1. Neutralism: “There is/are” and “some” are not ontologically committing. So no contradiction in saying some things do not exist.
         ‘Ponce de Leon was searching for something.’
         Context will tell us when an ontological claim is being made.
2. New Theory of Reference  
   a. Reference is not a word-world relation. Words don’t refer; People do. Reference has to do with aboutness. Indisputable that we talk about non-existent things. Santa, Equator, the accident that was averted. If you say you were talking about nothing, then you are talking about the same thing. Why not take reference to be an intentional property?

   b. So why can’t statements be true without there being an object in the world?  
      E.g.,

      ‘The whereabouts of the Prime Minister are unknown.’
      ‘Sherrie’s disappointment with her husband was deep and unassuageable.’
      ‘The price of the tickets is ten dollars.’
      ‘Wednesday falls between Tuesday and Thursday.’
      ‘His sincerity was touching.’
      ‘James couldn’t pay his mortgage.’
      ‘The view of the Jezreel Valley from atop Mt. Carmel was breathtaking.’
      ‘Your constant complaining is futile.’
      ‘Spasky’s forfeiture ended the match.’
      ‘He did it for my sake and the children’s.’

Margaret Thatcher yesterday gave her starkest warning yet about the dangers of global warming caused by air pollution. But she did not announce any new policy to combat climate change and sea level rises, apart from a qualified commitment that Britain would stabilize its emissions of carbon dioxide—the most important ‘greenhouse’ gas altering the climate—by the year 2005. Britain would only fulfill that commitment if other, unspecified nations promised similar restraint.

Dummett observed that “Save for ‘Margaret Thatcher,’ ‘air,’ and ‘sea’, there is not a noun or noun phrase in this paragraph incontrovertibly standing for or applying to a concrete object . . . .” (Michael Dummett, Frege: Philosophy of Mathematics (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1991), p. 231)
Many philosophers are still in the grip of a picture theory of meaning. The unit of correspondence, so to speak, is the sentence as a whole, not its constituent words. This insight is in line with a deflationary theory of truth according to which

“Sherrie’s disappointment with her husband was deep and unassuageable” is true iff Sherrie’s disappointment with her husband was deep and unassuageable.

That’s all there is to it, and there is no need to search for mysterious objects like disappointments to make this sentence true.

He provides the following schema as an account of reference:

(R) \( a \) refers to \( b \) iff \( a \) says something about \( b \),

where “\( a \)” stands, not for a linguistic expression, but for a speaker.

We then need an account of aboutness that will be cashed out not in terms of linguistic expressions but in terms of the intentions of the speaker. For example,

(A) \( a \) says something \( S \) about \( b \) iff in saying \( S \) \( a \) intends \( b \),

where “\( a \) intends \( b \)” means something like “\( a \) has \( b \) in mind.” Taking (R) in conjunction with (A) provides an account of reference which is non-committal with respect to the objects of reference and also faithful to the primacy of the intentionality of agents in referring.