

**E. J. LOWE'S ARGUMENT FOR THE EXISTENCE OF GOD:  
A NEO-PLATONIC DEFENSE**

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## **Abstract**

The thesis aims to show that E. J. Lowe's argument for the existence of God can be defended against van Inwagen's criticism within the Neo-Platonic or Augustinian metaphysical framework. Despite Lowe's classification of the argument as an ontological one, it is shown that it is an argument for the existence of God from the existence of necessary truths and why that is an advantage. Next, the thesis turns to the discussion of van Inwagen's arguments against the dependency of abstract entities. Van Inwagen claims that ontological dependency between God and abstracta does not hold since it cannot be understood in terms of abstraction nor causation. Another problem is that there are no truth-makers of modal propositions. Lastly, the most promising way of defending Lowe's argument is presented. The important Neo-Platonic thesis I employ is that abstract entities are ideas present in the mind of God, which makes abstract entities mind-dependent entities.

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## Introduction

E. J. Lowe's new theistic argument has received little attention since it was first published in 2012.<sup>1</sup> There are three papers published about the argument. The first paper that uses Lowe's argument is only marginally about it. Authors use Lowe's argument as an example of their project that aims to explain how machines are able to logically analyze and help with the interpretation of rational philosophical arguments, especially the ones used in metaphysics.<sup>2</sup> They aim to show how machines are to be used to make the structure of the inferences and conceptual framework more perspicuous. Although what they managed to uncover about the logical structure of Lowe's argument is very engaging, I will not use their findings in my thesis since they are primarily interested in understanding the full formalization of arguments given in natural language and simply use Lowe's new argument as a case study. Two other papers are critiques written by Graham Oppy and Peter van Inwagen.<sup>3</sup> I will not be discussing Oppy's paper either since it does not add any particular value to the discussion. Besides, it is not even a paper about the specific argument that is the topic of my thesis, although it is published as an accompanying criticism of it. It is a criticism of how Lowe presents various versions of the ontological argument in one of his earlier papers about it and ends with Oppy's conclusion that their opinions are so vastly different that they will never agree on whether arguments for the existence of God work. Such a conclusion does not seem specific enough to seem relevant for evaluating whether a substantive philosophical argument, such as Lowe's, is a promising

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<sup>1</sup> Edward Jonathan Lowe, "A New Modal Version of the Ontological Argument," in *Ontological Proofs Today*, ed. Mirosław Szatkowski (Frankfurt: Ontos Verlag, 2012), 179–93.

<sup>2</sup> David Fuenmayor and Christoph Benz Müller, "A Case Study on Computational Hermeneutics: E. J. Lowe's Modal Ontological Argument," in *Beyond Faith and Rationality: Essays on Logic, Religion and Philosophy*, ed. Ricardo Sousa Silvestre et al. (Switzerland: Springer International Publishing, 2020), 195–228, <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-43535-6>.

<sup>3</sup> Graham Oppy, "Lowe on 'The Ontological Argument,'" in *Debating Christian Theism*, ed. J. P. Moreland, Khaldoun A. Sweis, and Chad V. r Meiste (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 72–82; Peter van Inwagen, "Lowe's New Ontological Argument," in *Ontology, Modality, and Mind: Themes from the Metaphysics of E. J. Lowe*, ed. Alexander Carruth, Sophie Gibb, and John Heil, Oxford Sch (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 128–46, <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780198796299.003.0009>.

argument. Van Inwagen's criticism, on the other hand, will be discussed throughout the thesis since it very engages explicitly with the essential ideas upon which Lowe's argument depends. The significant criticism of the argument van Inwagen provided in 2018 has revealed many traditional problems that arise in the discussions about theism and abstract necessary entities.<sup>4</sup> Traditional theism, which claims that God is the source, or cause, of the existence of everything, and traditional Platonism, which holds that there are necessary abstract entities that structure reality that exist independently of anything else, are usually understood as conflicting positions. In my opinion, Lowe's argument for the existence of God is especially intriguing in this context because not only does it not suppose that Platonism and theism are incompatible, but it aims to show that we are able to infer the existence of God from the reality of abstract entities since abstracta have to be thought of as dependent on Him for their existence.

Lowe gives two reasons in favor of the idea that abstract entities are dependent entities. The first relies on the meaning of the word abstract. The second has to do with the suggestion that abstract entities are mind-dependent entities. Van Inwagen provided several arguments against such an idea, and an answer to the criticism has not been given yet. I am asking whether there is a theoretical framework that would provide us with the proper understanding of the dependence relation so that it is possible to defend Lowe's argument. The aim of the thesis is to show that it is possible to answer van Inwagen's criticism and defend Lowe's argument if we develop his second reason further and accept what can be broadly understood as a Neo-Platonic metaphysical framework. The standard way of reconciling Platonism and theism is by adopting a Neo-Platonic position. However, it is usually overlooked the fact that Neo-Platonism emerged as a rather elegant solution to numerous problems traditional Platonism faces. An important Neo-Platonic thesis in the context of the argument is that abstract entities are mind-dependent entities existing in the Divine Intellect. Neo-Platonism allows us to think

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<sup>4</sup> van Inwagen, "Lowe's New Ontological Argument."

of abstract entities as objects that we use in our explanations of the world and still think of them as dependent on God. A classic case of this conception of abstracta in the Christian tradition is present in the writings of St. Augustine.

Most directly, the topic at hand belongs to the philosophy of religion, where I find that discussion about the specific type of argument Lowe provides is often left out. However, I want to emphasize that Lowe employs the most contemporary metaphysical tools to provide a rather complex argument for the existence of God. That means that the discussion about the defensibility of the argument heavily depends but also has consequences for various essential topics in metaphysics, such as explicating ontological dependency and developing a truth-maker theory.

My thesis is composed of three themed chapters. The first chapter is concerned with presenting Lowe's argument. I will first explain what type of argument he gives and give initial definitions of main terms. Then I clarify dependency and truth-making relations by discussing the two main premises of the argument. In the second chapter, I discuss van Inwagen's criticism that I have separated into three distinct arguments against analyzing dependency in terms of abstraction, causation, and truth-making. In the third chapter, I provide a more positive contribution to the topic and describe what I find to be the most promising way of defending the argument. I first explain how we are able to understand essences as truth-makers of modal propositions. This discussion heavily depends on Lowe's other work where he endorses Kit Fine's theory of modality. I find it able to provide answers to some of van Inwagen's questions. Then I move on to explain how Neo-Platonism developed as a suitable solution to the Aristotelian criticism of Platonic theory about the nature of abstract entities and claim that it provides the best background for Lowe's argument to work. Finally, I try to separate what I am calling Neo-Platonism from other similar positions present in the contemporary literature that

all claim to be inspired by the Augustinian theory of ideas existing in the mind of God.<sup>5</sup> That in turn opens up some interesting questions to be explored in some further research.

I will approach this topic by providing an analysis and careful explication of the basic concepts and relations including the difference between *abstracta* and *concreta*, how the dependency relation helps us provide metaphysical explanations, how should we think of the ontological dependency, how it relates to truth-making relation, what is the difference between necessity and independency, what are possibilities etc. Discussing each of these has a potential to open up a completely new set of issues. Because of that, a potential problem is that the scope of my thesis may be too broad since it touches upon many central traditional topics in philosophy. In order to avoid that problem, I tried to limit the discussion to two central concepts, ontological dependency and truth-makers, and what is needed to explain how these two help us provide an argument for the existence of God. Furthermore, I will evaluate the impact and importance of criticisms and counterarguments with respect to how I have framed the issue and comment on some proposals that might help strengthen Lowe's argument.

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<sup>5</sup> Alvin Plantinga, "How to Be an Anti-Realist," *Proceedings and Addresses of the American Philosophical Association* 56, no. 1 (1982): 47–70, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3131293>; Greg Welty, "Theistic Conceptual Realism," in *Beyond the Control of God?: Six Views on the Problem of God and Abstract Objects*, ed. Paul M. Gould, First Edit (Bloomsbury Academic, 2014), 81–97; Thomas V. Morris and Christopher Menzel, "Absolute Creation," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 23, no. 4 (n.d.): 353–62, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20014160>; Paul M. Gould and Richard Brian Davis, "Modified Theistic Activism," in *Beyond the Control of God?: Six Views on the Problem of God and Abstract Objects*, ed. Paul M. Gould, First Edit (Bloomsbury Academic, 2014), 51–65.



## 1 E. J. Lowe's Argument

In the first section of this chapter, I will discuss what type of argument does Lowe present. I will claim that it belongs to the family of *a priori* arguments but that it is not an ontological argument. It starts with the idea that there are necessary truths of mathematics and logic and, using the relations of truth-making and dependence, tries to argue that God exists. The second and third sections are devoted to the discussion of the two main premises of the argument. Even though it might not be of great importance to decide on the type of argument, since Kantian classification is questionable, it is helpful to observe the potential benefits of not accepting this argument as an ontological one. We might be able to see why this approach is a more promising one.

### 1.1 The Argument

Before I comment on the argument itself, the main concepts used need to be explained. Entities we are encountering in this argument can be characterized with reference to three categories. The first is a modal category. According to their modal status, entities can either be contingent or necessary. The second characterization separates entities into dependent and independent entities. This division has to do with providing an explanation of their existence. And thirdly, entities could be either abstract or concrete. It is notoriously difficult to say what is the crucial difference between *abstracta* and *concreta*. The usual definitions are referencing either causal efficacy or existence in time. Lowe uses both of these definitions.

Lowe's definition of abstract and concrete entities at the beginning of his paper states that abstract entities are the ones not existing in time.<sup>6</sup> Concrete entities are the ones existing

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<sup>6</sup> Lowe, "A New Modal Version of the Ontological Argument," 180.

in time. Although these specific definitions do not play a crucial role for the argument to go through, we might have some independent reasons not to accept this characterization of concrete entities. One reason might be that we do not wish to think of God as existing in time, and He is a concrete being. With that in mind, perhaps his second definition might be more satisfactory. His second definition has to do with causality.<sup>7</sup> Concrete entities are ones that are capable of being in causal relations. Abstract entities are entities that are not capable of entering causal relations.<sup>8</sup> Lowe believes that God has to be a concrete being because abstract beings have no causal powers.<sup>9</sup> On the other hand, God has to have the power to create other concrete beings even if we think that he does not create, or cause, *abstracta*. One important thing to note here is that there is a difference between claiming that abstract entities cannot enter causal relations and claiming that they cannot be causes. Lowe does not make this difference. I will come back to some discussion about these issues later in the paper. At the current stage, the question of whether God creates anything goes well beyond Lowe's argument since the argument needs to show that God exists in the first place.

Whatever is the case when it comes to the definite characterization of the concrete/abstract distinction, what is enough for an argument to work is that the distinction is exhaustive and exclusive. First, whatever exists is either concrete or abstract. This is an exhaustive distinction. Second, Lowe emphasizes that the only necessary consequence of definitions needed for an argument is that whatever is concrete is not abstract.<sup>10</sup> In other words, the distinction has to be exclusive as well. In other words, any definition of *concreta* and *abstracta* that conserves exclusivity will work in this context. Setting aside the definition of abstract entities, we do have well-established examples of them. Examples of necessary

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<sup>7</sup> Lowe, 181.

<sup>8</sup> Lowe, 189.

<sup>9</sup> Lowe, 181.

<sup>10</sup> Lowe, 180.

abstract entities are objects that operate in logic and mathematics, such as propositions, sets, numbers, properties, or relations. God, on the other hand, is an example of a concrete necessary being.

Next, Lowe defines a necessary entity as an entity that exists in every possible world.<sup>11</sup> Contingent entities exist in some but not all possible worlds. I will use this definition of necessary and contingent beings as well. However, in his paper on truth-makers, Lowe presents a different definition of a necessary being.<sup>12</sup> A necessary being is the one whose essence involves existence. I will treat the concept of a being whose essence involves existence as an independent being, not a necessary being. If a particular entity's essence involves existence, then the entity's existence is explicable independently of other entities. It is important to separate these different concepts, mainly because it seems that this difference is crucial in the context of the argument. Whether entities are dependent has to do with whether their existence is explicable only in reference to other entities. If that is the case, then Lowe does not think that whatever exists in every possible world also has an essence that involves its existence because he believes that dependent necessary entities need an explanation of their existence. Abstract beings exist in every possible world, yet they are dependent for their existence.

Having explained, at least provisionally, what is meant by abstract/concrete, necessary, and independent entities, I will now move on to discuss the argument itself. Lowe finds his argument to be a modal ontological argument. It is modal because it involves modal reasoning, and it is ontological because it is *a priori* argument for the existence of a perfect being.<sup>13</sup> However, it shares some central ideas with what Leftow calls Leibnizian cosmological

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<sup>11</sup> Lowe, 180.

<sup>12</sup> Edward Jonathan Lowe, "An Essentialist Approach to Truth-Making," in *Truth and Truth-Making*, ed. Edward Jonathan Lowe and Adolf Rami (Stocksfield, UK: Acumen, 2009), 201–16.

<sup>13</sup> Lowe, "A New Modal Version of the Ontological Argument," 187 ff.

argument.<sup>14</sup> Lowe is fully aware of the fact that some philosophers would understand his argument as a cosmological argument. Because of that, he tries to explain why it is not cosmological. It is not cosmological because Lowe does not argue that the whole universe, a totality of concrete beings, as he says, has to have an ultimate cause.

Furthermore, I wish to add that the cosmological argument is a type of *a posteriori* argument. It rests on some experiential facts. Certainly, Lowe's argument does not begin with some empirical observation. The argument concerns the explanation of the existence of necessary *abstracta*. Hence it is *a priori* argument. However, the argument does not fit the usual form of the ontological argument either. Not only because it does not contain the possibility premise, as Lowe and van Inwagen put it, but it is simply not an argument that shows that the existence of God follows from the conception or nature of God. If we take Anselm's argument to be the archetypal ontological argument, Lowe's argument does not resemble it. I believe it is characteristically Leibnizian argument: it is the argument that God exists 'by the reality of eternal truths.'<sup>15</sup> Lowe's argument is an *a priori* argument for God's existence from the existence of necessary truths. This type of argument for the existence of God argues that God has to exist if we want to provide a metaphysical explanation of other things. By metaphysical explanation, I mean an explanation of the existence of other things. To sum up, Lowe argues for God's existence based on the premise that the existence of necessary abstract entities is explicable only in reference to God.

Furthermore, if Lowe's argument is not ontological, his strategy presents a far more promising endeavor. In his paper on ontological arguments, Robinson discusses what kind of

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<sup>14</sup> Brian Leftow, "A Leibnizian Cosmological Argument," *Philosophical Studies: An International Journal for Philosophy in the Analytic Tradition* 57, no. 2 (1989): 135–55.

<sup>15</sup> Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, "Monadology," in *Leibniz's Monadology: A New Translation and Guide*, ed. Lloyd Strickland (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014), 22 sec. 45.

necessity we aim to show God has when it comes to the arguments for the existence of God.<sup>16</sup> To put it differently, arguing for the existence of God through different types of arguments answers why God has to exist. The different answers to the why He has to exist provide different senses in which one might say that something necessarily exists. Any usual argument labeled as ontological fails to show that God is a logically necessary being. Entities that exist logically necessary are taken to necessarily exist because, without them, the world would not be intelligible.<sup>17</sup> Abstract entities, such as numbers or properties, are such entities. But is God needed to make the world an intelligible place? That cannot be shown through any version of the ontological argument. However, Robinson suggests that God possesses such necessity might be shown if it can be argued that abstract entities depend for their existence on God.<sup>18</sup> If I have characterized the argument correctly, Lowe's argument does precisely that.

The main premises of the argument are the following:

1. *Some abstract entities are necessary entities.*
2. *All abstract entities are dependent entities.*<sup>19</sup>

Other supporting presuppositions are that all beings need an explanation of their existence and that dependent beings cannot explain their own existence. Independent necessary beings explain their own existence in virtue of themselves. However, dependent necessary beings need their existence explained by something else. Lowe concludes that abstract necessary beings depend for their existence on concrete necessary beings because only a concrete necessary being is able to explain the existence of abstract necessary beings. Hence, at least one concrete necessary being exists. Lowe believes that the concrete necessary being in question has to be an intellect and has to be capable of comprehending all necessary truths

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<sup>16</sup> Howard Robinson, "Varieties of Ontological Argument," *European Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 2, no. Summer 2012 (2012): 41–64.

<sup>17</sup> Robinson, 63.

<sup>18</sup> Robinson, 64.

<sup>19</sup> These are what van Inwagen calls Principles of Abstract Necessity and of Abstract Dependency.

of mathematics and logic.<sup>20</sup> I will come back to discuss the argument's conclusion and whether it really shows that God exists at the end of the third chapter.

## 1.2 The Relation of Ontological Dependency

In this section, I discuss Lowe's premise that all abstract entities are dependent entities. I explain what dependence is and what role it plays in providing metaphysical explanations. Then, I provide some initial ideas about why abstracta are dependent, what reason Lowe gives in favor of such a thesis.

Dependence has to do with the metaphysical explanation of entities. When I speak of metaphysical explanations, I have in mind not only stating what there is but why there is what there is. This *why* part is significant in the context of the argument since the main notion we are dealing with is the dependence relation. Providing a metaphysical explanation of an entity has to do with establishing its dependence relation(s). In other words, to explain why something exists, we have to explain on what does the existence of that specific entity, or category of entities, depend. Similarly to the relation of grounding, dependence makes use of the idea of priority. The prior, more basic entity is supposed to explain the existence of the dependent entity. Where does our chain of explanation end? Arguably it ends with an entity (or entities) that occupies the most basic level of reality. It ends with an entity capable of explaining its own existence. Moreover, as I have said in the previous section, this is the definition of an independent being, a being whose existence is self-explanatory. Since there is nothing prior to it, we have come to an end of explanation.

The dependence relation, as explained by Lowe in one of his other papers, is an antisymmetric relation.<sup>21</sup> Although for the purposes of the argument, as Lowe explains, the

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<sup>20</sup> Lowe, "A New Modal Version of the Ontological Argument," 189–90.

<sup>21</sup> Edward Jonathan Lowe, "Ontological Dependency," *Philosophical Papers* 23, no. 1 (1994): 31–48; Edward Jonathan Lowe and Tuomas E. Tahko, "Ontological Dependence," in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*,

asymmetry is enough, I believe we should think of it as an antisymmetric relation because we want to keep reflexivity.<sup>22</sup> Reflexivity allows us to more formally claim that a being can depend for its existence upon itself and consequently explain its own existence. However, if we have two distinct entities, and the first one depends for its existence on the second one, the second one cannot also depend for its existence on the first one.

Having all of that in mind, why are abstract entities dependent entities? Lowe hints at an answer to this question, though does not develop it. I will try to approach these questions. In this section, I only provide some preliminary ideas, while the whole thesis could be understood as an answer to this question.

Lowe hints towards three reasons why abstract entities should be understood as dependent entities. The first is exclusively related to abstract entities of mathematics.<sup>23</sup> One can understand numbers as sets by equating number zero with the empty set, number 1 as a unit set of an empty set, etc. Each number then depends on the previous numbers because sets depend for their existence on their members until we reach the number zero. Since zero is defined as an empty set, we are left with an unintelligible notion of something which “collects together nothing.”<sup>24</sup> This reason, whether good or not, is not promising. In the best-case scenario it works for numbers, and numbers alone do not exhaust *all* abstract entities, not even all necessary abstract entities. That is a problem, especially if we consider one of van Inwagen’s criticism that goes precisely against the thesis that all abstract entities are dependent by trying to show that some abstracta exist independently. We need to provide an answer to why all abstract entities are dependent.

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ed. Edward N. Zalta, Fall 2020 (Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University, 2020), <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2020/entries/dependence-ontological/>.

<sup>22</sup> Asymmetric relation is antisymmetric irreflexive relation.

<sup>23</sup> Lowe, “A New Modal Version of the Ontological Argument,” 183.

<sup>24</sup> Lowe, 183.

Near the end of his paper, Lowe provides two more reasons to think of abstract entities as dependent entities. One has to do with the meaning of the word to abstract. This reason, yet again, is not satisfying and is heavily criticized by van Inwagen. I will discuss it in the following chapter extensively. For now, we can move on to the last and most promising way of developing an answer to the question of why abstract entities are dependent. As Lowe claims, it makes no sense to think of abstract entities as mind-independent entities.<sup>25</sup> Moreover, since abstract entities we are dealing with are necessary, they have to depend on a necessary mind.

### 1.3 Truth-makers of Necessary Truths

This section of the essay is dedicated to the second crucial premise of Lowe's argument, which states that some abstract entities are necessary entities. In short, the idea is that abstract entities needed for necessary truths have to be necessary as well. Similar to how dependent necessary entities depend for their existence on other necessary entities, necessary truths are "about" necessary entities.

The other related concept to dependency significant for Lowe's argument is truth-making. The core idea behind truth-making is that truth depends on beings. Entities in virtue of which the proposition is true have to exist if the proposition is true.<sup>26</sup> Truth-makers are supposed to help us provide an explanation of why some propositions are true, and some are not.<sup>27</sup> In other words, truth-makers are things that guarantee the truth of true propositions. There is, once again an asymmetric relation between how the reality is and the truth of propositions about some aspect of reality. This asymmetry is sometimes explained through the idea of truth-

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<sup>25</sup> Lowe, 189.

<sup>26</sup> Edward Jonathan Lowe, *The Four-Category Ontology: A Metaphysical Foundation for Natural Science* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 207, <https://doi.org/10.1093/0199254397.001.0001>.

<sup>27</sup> Lowe, "An Essentialist Approach to Truth-Making," 201.



grounding: some entity  $x$  grounds the truth of some proposition  $p$  if  $p$  is true in virtue of the existence of  $x$ .<sup>28</sup>

A necessary truth is a proposition for which it is not possible that it is false. If one wishes to use the language of possible worlds, necessary truths obtain in every possible world.<sup>29</sup> Propositions are abstract entities similar to numbers and other Platonic entities and are primary truth-bearers. A truth-bearer is that what is truth-evaluable. If we even accept that there are necessary truths, then mathematical propositions such as  $1+3=4$  are the most plausible examples. Abstract entities that are necessary beings because they are truth-makers of necessary truths of mathematics and logic. Proposition  $2+2=4$  is necessarily true, true in every possible world. That means that beings that make it true have to exist in every possible world as well. If there are no truth-makers, there is no truth. And if there are no necessary truth-makers, there are no necessary truths.<sup>30</sup> Since necessary true propositions are true in every possible world, there has to be an entity in virtue of which the proposition is true in every possible world.

Lowe gives an essentialist interpretation of truth-making relation: a truth-maker of a proposition is something such that it is part of that proposition's essence that it is true if that thing exists.<sup>31</sup> A truth-maker of any proposition is determined in terms of the essence of that proposition.<sup>32</sup> The fact that numbers and relations among them exist presents an essence of the propositions in arithmetics. The essentialist interpretation is especially important, according to

<sup>28</sup> Lowe and Tahko, "Ontological Dependence."

<sup>29</sup> Edward Jonathan Lowe, "Metaphysical Nihilism and the Subtraction Argument," *Analysis* 62, no. 1 (May 10, 2002): 72, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3329070>.

<sup>30</sup> Lowe, "A New Modal Version of the Ontological Argument," 181.

<sup>31</sup> Fraser MacBride, "Truthmakers," in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta, Spring 2022 (Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University, 2020), <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2020/entries/truthmakers/>.

<sup>32</sup> Lowe, *The Four-Category Ontology: A Metaphysical Foundation for Natural Science*, 207.

Lowe, because it provides a general theory of modal truths. This will be of interest if we are to provide an answer to the third van Inwagen's criticism.

Truth-making understood with reference to essences has intuitive appeal since it seems that what makes the following propositions true are different things:

$$2+3=5$$

$$1+1=2$$

Both propositions are made true by entities belonging to the same type of entities: natural numbers. However, not the same numbers. Truth-makers of these propositions are not only numbers but specific numbers 1, 2, 3, and 5. As Lowe explains, it is part of the essence of the particular proposition  $1+1=2$  that it is true if numbers 1 and 2 exist. These specific numbers are truth-makers of the said proposition. Furthermore, part of the essence of these numbers is that they are related in a particular way between themselves. The fact that the essence of numbers is such makes them entities upon which the truth of this proposition depends.<sup>33</sup>

Why would we think that mathematical truths are necessary in the first place? Lowe does not justify the claim that mathematical truths are necessary. He simply assumes it and then tries to explain how that can be. However, I do not believe that an argument in favor of that presupposition is needed. We start the theistic argument by positing the necessity of mathematical truths. That is not a particularly outrageous assumption. It is quite a widely accepted thesis. Other than that, Van Inwagen's criticism is the main topic of my thesis, and he does not question this aspect of Lowe's argument.

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<sup>33</sup> Lowe, 203.

## 2 Van Inwagen's Criticism

In the following pages, I will present three of van Inwagen's arguments against the dependency thesis. I will agree with van Inwagen when it comes to understanding dependency as abstraction, leave the question open when it comes to causation, and argue against his criticism regarding truth-makers of modal propositions.

### 2.1 Dependency as Causal Relation

Although, as we will see, van Inwagen provides a more discrete criticism of Lowe's theistic argument, it is important to see how he frames the issue. This will also provide us with some other more general problems present in metaphysics and philosophy of religion regarding the relationship between necessary abstract objects, such as objects of mathematics, and the necessary being – God. Van Inwagen states his confusion with Lowe's overall idea as follows:

“Why would any philosopher find both the Principle of Abstract Necessity (hereinafter, ‘Necessity’) and the Principle of Abstract Dependency (hereinafter, ‘Dependency’) plausible? Platonists like myself will of course find Necessity plausible, but will have no time for Dependency, especially if, like me, they believe that abstract objects cannot enter into causal relations. Aristotelians—that is, believers in immanent universals—will find Dependency plausible, but will reject Necessity. What’s going on?”<sup>34</sup>

However, Lowe's theistic argument rests precisely on the acceptance of both of these ideas: abstract entities are both necessary and dependent. If we interpret Lowe's argument in a Neo-Platonic rather than Aristotelian context, this sharp distinction that van Inwagen emphasizes dissolves.

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<sup>34</sup> van Inwagen, “Lowe's New Ontological Argument,” 135.

There is an important overall idea van Inwagen only hints towards in the passage quoted, although it is more developed in his other paper *God and Other Uncreated Things*.<sup>35</sup> In it, he discusses whether there are dependent *abstracta*. Abstract entities are, per definition, those that do not enter causal relations. Creation is the archetypal causal relation. However, if abstract entities are incapable of entering causal relations, that means that they cannot be created. Furthermore, if they are uncreated, they are independent. It looks like Van Inwagen understands dependency relation as a causal relation. This supposedly gives us a first option that is unacceptable, according to van Inwagen, when it comes to the characterization of ontological dependence that holds between God and *abstracta*. Abstract entities are not dependent on God because God cannot create, i.e., cause them to exist.

However, there are two potential answers to be given here. First, and the one I will give is that whether abstract entities are caused to exist is an irrelevant issue. Within the limits of the argument, God's creation does not come up. Lowe does not specify what kind of relation the dependency relation is in his paper on the theistic argument. However, as I have explained earlier, he does not think it is a causal relation. Moreover, he does not think that because of the way he defines *abstracta*. Second, we have seen that for Lowe it does not matter how we define *abstracta* as long as entities that are abstract are not concrete. If so, then the option to define abstract entities as ones that can enter causal relations, although only as effects, and *concreta* as ones that are capable of being causes, remains open. Consequently, we are able to understand dependence in terms of causation and claim that God causes *abstracta* to exist. Although I am unsure whether this solution is optimal, it is not that easy to reject it in the given context. In the final section of the thesis, I will briefly present two contemporary theories that do explain the dependency between God and abstract entities in terms of causation.

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<sup>35</sup> Peter van Inwagen, "God and Other Uncreated Things," in *Metaphysics and God: Essays in Honor of Eleonore Stump*, ed. Kevin Timpe (London/New York: Routledge, 2009), 3–21.

## 2.2 Dependency as Abstraction

The abstraction criticism rests on one of the reasons Lowe gives in support of the Dependency Principle. Lowe says that since the verb ‘to abstract’ means ‘to be drawn out of,’ it makes sense to think of something abstracted as something dependent on that out of which it is abstracted from.<sup>36</sup> Van Inwagen shows that abstraction is an epistemological and not an ontological relation. Because of that, the dependency thesis of Lowe’s argument supposedly fails.

In short, van Inwagen’s argument goes as follows.<sup>37</sup> Let us assume that there is a possible world  $w$ . If circularity does not exist in  $w$ , then the proposition ‘Something is circular’ does not exist either. However, in an actual world  $\alpha$ , there is something that is circular. This means that if there is something circular in  $\alpha$  and nothing circular in  $w$ , the accessibility relation is not symmetrical. However, he continues, we have good reasons to think that accessibility relation between possible worlds is symmetrical. That is because the actual state of affairs is essentially a possible state of affairs.<sup>38</sup> Moreover, if abstract entities are necessary entities, they must exist in all possible worlds, which means that circularity has to exist even in the worlds in which there is nothing concrete that circularity is abstracted from, assuming that there are empty worlds, i.e., worlds with no concrete entities. Contrary to that, Lowe believes that there cannot be empty worlds. According to Lowe’s view, if there are no concrete objects out of which circularity could be abstracted, then there could be no circularity. However, van Inwagen is committed to the view that since circularity is a necessary abstract entity, it exists in all possible worlds, even in those where there are no concrete entities. Abstraction might provide a good epistemological theory on how we get to know abstract entities, but it does not provide

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<sup>36</sup> Lowe, “A New Modal Version of the Ontological Argument,” 189.

<sup>37</sup> van Inwagen, “Lowe’s New Ontological Argument,” 137–38.

<sup>38</sup> van Inwagen, 138.

an ontological thesis of dependency. The problem is that “it is very hard to see how, if Lowe is right, shapes (or if you like, shape-*properties* like triangularity and circularity) could exist in a world in which there was nothing that had a shape.”<sup>39</sup> Therefore, van Inwagen concludes, Lowe’s argument involves a false premise – the Dependency Principle.<sup>40</sup>

This clash between whether worlds could be empty or not opens up a whole new set of questions. I will try to be brief and only point towards the issue here. Lowe’s argument for the existence of God aims to show that at least one concrete being has to exist. In arguing for the existence of God, Lowe does not employ his argument against the existence of empty worlds, i.e., worlds without concrete entities. The argument in question is, in my opinion, a more specific theistic version of an argument that there are no empty worlds. If that is the case, then one could accept the conclusion that abstraction does not provide a good characterization of the ontological relation and still not reject Lowe’s argument. How so? By accepting a Neo-Platonic position and claiming that circularity, like other abstract entities, is a mind-dependent entity. If so, then it is not that various circular objects ground the existence of circularity. The idea is that circularity is grounded in the mind of a concrete necessary being.

### 2.3 Dependency and Truth-makers of Modal Propositions

In his last argument against the Dependency Principle, van Inwagen tries to show that there exists a class of independent abstract entities. He finds that modal entities, more precisely possibilities, are independent abstract objects. And, since Lowe claims that all abstracta are dependent if van Inwagen is able to show that there is at least one type of abstract entity that exists independently, Lowe’s argument yet again fails because the dependency premise does not hold.

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<sup>39</sup> van Inwagen, 137–38.

<sup>40</sup> van Inwagen, 138.

Van Inwagen's argument against Lowe has a conditional form. It aims to show that if there are possibilities, then the dependence thesis does not hold. In this section of the thesis, I will claim that since van Inwagen does not provide any specific reasons why we should accept that possibilities as he defines them exist, his argument against the dependency thesis is problematic. Maybe he is right, and if there are such possibilities, then the dependency thesis fails. However, I do not see why there should be such entities to begin with. In the following section, I will show how one is able to understand and explain possibilities in a way that does not threaten Lowe's argument for the existence of God. Hence, an answer to van Inwagen's argument is developed in the following chapter.

Van Inwagen's argument is developed in two steps. First, he dismisses the idea that the dependency should be understood as an in virtue of relation where possibilities would depend on facts. Although Lowe uses the phrase "in virtue of", that is not his primitive notion of understanding truth-making relation.<sup>41</sup> As was explained in the previous chapter, for Lowe, the truth-making relation is explicated in terms of essences. I do not believe it is of great importance to comment further on this part of criticism since Lowe explicitly rejects in virtue of theories of dependency and the theory according to which facts are truth-makers.<sup>42</sup> Of course, Lowe uses the phrase "in virtue of" when he tries to emphasize the asymmetry of a specific relation that holds between entities. He uses it as a generic, non-technical phrase for providing explanations.<sup>43</sup> Nevertheless, it is important to note because van Inwagen's argument takes a peculiar turn from there onwards. Van Inwagen says:

"If the possibility of there being transparent iron depends on the fact that it is possible for there to be transparent iron only in the 'in virtue of' sense, and not in the ontological sense,

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<sup>41</sup> For "in virtue of" theories of truth-makers see: MacBride, "Truthmakers."

<sup>42</sup> Lowe, "An Essentialist Approach to Truth-Making," 201; Lowe, *The Four-Category Ontology: A Metaphysical Foundation for Natural Science*, 204.

<sup>43</sup> Lowe, "An Essentialist Approach to Truth-Making," 202.

does it then perhaps depend in the ontological sense on the truth-makers of the proposition that it is possible for there to be transparent iron?”<sup>44</sup>

It seems that Van Inwagen wonders on what do possibilities depend ontologically. Since he has previously shown that possibilities do not depend on facts, he wonders if they depend on truth-makers of modal propositions. One problem with his understanding of the ontological dependency in the section I have just quoted is that he confuses it with truth-making. Truth-making is not a type of ontological dependency. These two relations are connected in the sense that both presuppose priority and asymmetry of explanations. However, they are not used to explain the same thing. Truth-making explains what does the truth of a proposition depends on, while ontological dependency explains what does the existence of an entity depend on. That is why Lowe first establishes that truth-makers of mathematical propositions are numbers and then goes on to argue that numbers ontologically depend – i.e., depend for their existence, on a necessary concrete being. In other words, if we are talking about abstract entities such as propositions, truth-making explains in virtue of what the proposition is true, not in virtue of what the proposition exists. Hence, I will split van Inwagen’s question in two. First, is there something on what possibilities depend ontologically? Second, what are truth-makers of modal propositions?

Before proceeding to examine these questions, what van Inwagen thinks possibilities are, has to be explained. Van Inwagen understands possibilities as abstract entities denoted by phrases such as “the possibility that  $2 + 7 = 9$ ”.<sup>45</sup> Additionally, if there are such entities, he believes that they have to be independent. Maybe that is so, but why should we posit the existence of such entities in the first place? Van Inwagen does not provide any reasons besides that possibilities seem like useful objects to have around because that allows us to understand

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<sup>44</sup> van Inwagen, “Lowe’s New Ontological Argument,” 142.

<sup>45</sup> van Inwagen, 140–41.



possible worlds as possibilities.<sup>46</sup> To that, I have to say two things. First, we have other ways of constructing possible worlds at our disposal. Even if possible worlds are indispensable parts of our best modal theories, we are not obliged to accept that possibilities are the primary entities. If van Inwagen's theory is to be preferred, a further argument is required. Second, if Lowe is correct, we also have reasons to think of possible worlds in general as useless when it comes to understanding modalities, no matter how we devise them.

Lowe is, in general, rather critical of using possible worlds in the metaphysics of modality, both on the realist approach of Lewis and the conceptualist approach of Adams.<sup>47</sup> He provides an argument against any theory that claims that modal truths are "truths about special kind of entities."<sup>48</sup> Without getting into detail, the argument is supposed to show that no matter how we construct possible worlds, possible worlds do not explain modal truths. Concretists, such as Lewis construct possible worlds as sums of spatiotemporally unrelated individuals. Abstractionists, such as Adams, believe that possible worlds are sets of maximally consistent propositions. Since he attacks both theories, I do not see any reason why he would allow van Inwagen's construction of possible worlds in terms of possibilities. If Lowe's criticism holds for possible worlds as sets of propositions, I do not see why it would not hold for possible worlds understood as "comprehensive possibilities."<sup>49</sup> Possible worlds provide a useful tool to formally approach some issues about the truth of modal propositions, although it is not illuminating when it comes to the metaphysics and explanation of modalities.<sup>50</sup> Ultimately, theories that make use out of the possible worlds will have to take modal truths as brutally true, which means that modal truths are left unexplained.

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<sup>46</sup> van Inwagen, 141.

<sup>47</sup> Edward Jonathan Lowe, "The Rationality of Metaphysics," *Synthese* 178, no. 1 (2011): 106–7, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41477261>.

<sup>48</sup> Lowe, 107.

<sup>49</sup> van Inwagen, "Lowe's New Ontological Argument," 141.

<sup>50</sup> Lowe, "The Rationality of Metaphysics," 108.

This issue of whether possible worlds help us understand modalities goes far beyond both the topic and limits of my thesis. However, I want to emphasize that Lowe gives us reasons to abandon the talk of possible worlds as something that explains modalities. On the other hand, van Inwagen does not provide any special reason why we should accept that there is this special type of abstract entities, possibilities, besides claiming that we are able to construct possible worlds from them. If we do not have good reasons to accept the possibilities the way van Inwagen describes them, then the question of whether they exist independently does not arise. Hence, I believe that even if the dependency premise does not hold, that would have to be shown in some other way, or van Inwagen's criticism needs to be reinforced.

In conclusion, it seems that van Inwagen's criticism gives us good reasons not to think of existential dependency in terms of abstraction. Whether causality is an appropriate type of dependency that holds between God and abstract entities was left undecided. However, even if God does not cause abstracta to exist, we are still able to defend Lowe's ideas about necessary and dependent abstract entities, needed for this type of argument to work. In the next chapter, I will continue this discussion and try to approach the issue of truth-makers of modal propositions. I will explain how we do have resources to explain modal truths if we understand essences as truth-makers of modal propositions.

### 3 Towards an Answer to the Criticism

In what follows, I suggest a possible solution to the problem of modalities from the last chapter. Then, I present how the Neo-Platonist answer to the problem of the status of abstract entities influences the discussion around Lowe's argument for the existence of God. Lastly, I open up some interesting questions for further research.

#### 3.1 Essences, Truth-makers, and Modal Propositions

Van Inwagen seemingly does not have an issue with truth-makers of propositions about actuality (if we leave aside his general rejection of a truth-maker theory) since he says that he sees how an iron ball could be the truth-maker of the proposition "Some things are iron balls." Problems arise with truth-makers of modal propositions, or to be more precise with propositions such as "It is possible that there are two iron balls."<sup>51</sup> Following what Lowe says about modal propositions, the truth-maker of that would be the essence of an entity the proposition is about. The present discussion is of marginal importance for the argument itself. However, the following observations are important for answering van Inwagen's argument against Lowe.

Before explaining the truth-making of modal propositions, it is necessary first to clarify what essences are. The essence of an entity is simply what that specific entity is. Essences or natures of entities are expressed through their real definitions.<sup>52</sup> In other words, essences are articulated through propositions, and a real definition of an entity is supposed to provide us with an entity's essence. It is supposed to tell us what that specific entity is. However, it is notoriously difficult to provide an example of a real definition. Hence, I will not diverge from

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<sup>51</sup> van Inwagen, "Lowe's New Ontological Argument," 143.

<sup>52</sup> Edward Jonathan Lowe, "Essence and Ontology," in *Metaphysics: Aristotelian, Scholastic, Analytic*, ed. Lukás Novák et al. (De Gruyter, 2013), 108, <https://doi.org/doi:10.1515/9783110322446.93>.

the tradition and will use everyone's favorite example – a definition of a circle quoted from Spinoza: *A circle is the locus of a point moving continuously in a plane at a fixed distance from a given point.*<sup>53</sup>

What constitutes the essence of an entity? Partly the essence of an entity is determined by the fact that an entity belongs to a certain ontological category, and in part, the essence has to do with that entity being exactly that one entity different from other entities belonging to the same category.<sup>54</sup> I will use numbers to illustrate the point because numbers are crucial for the argument. This will also further underline why abstract entities are dependent from a slightly different perspective. Lowe says that it makes sense to think that numbers essentially depend for their existence at least on other numbers.<sup>55</sup> Why is that so? Well, because it is plausible to claim that a specific number, number 3, for example, depends on other numbers because it stands in various arithmetical relations to other numbers. These relations that hold between number 3 and other numbers seem essential for number 3 to be what it is, i.e., they constitute the essence of a number 3. Furthermore, we can argue that this whole network of rationally related numbers makes no sense outside of the intellect that would contemplate them. Certainly, I have emphasized this line of reasoning that Lowe suggested and tried to develop it throughout the thesis.

Thus far, I have spoken about essences as something that only actually existing beings have. However, since there are essences of things that do not actually exist, what we are looking for is a definition of an entity that tells us what that entity would be, were it to exist.<sup>56</sup> Both actual and non-actual entities have essences. This follows from Lowe's assumption that essences precede existence. The assumption comes from the observation that we are able to

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<sup>53</sup> As quoted in Lowe, 105.

<sup>54</sup> Lowe, *The Four-Category Ontology: A Metaphysical Foundation for Natural Science*, 207.

<sup>55</sup> Lowe, "An Essentialist Approach to Truth-Making," 208.

<sup>56</sup> Lowe, "Essence and Ontology," 105.

talk about things that do not exist in actuality. Lowe explains that to claim whether something does or does not exist, we need to know first what we are talking about.<sup>57</sup> I will not go further into this direction because I have entirely omitted to talk about the epistemological layers of this topic in my thesis. Although there is a worthwhile discussion about those issues that probably should guide our judgments as well, it is not the main topic of my thesis. For the present purposes, I will just claim that there are essences of things that do not exist in actuality and will not further justify why we should think that is the case. For Lowe, justification comes from the discussion about the epistemology of modality. For me, it is important to explain what theoretical framework enables us to understand possibilities and truth-makers of modal propositions.

Turning now to the critical question of this section, how essences act as truth-makers of modal propositions? First, I will explain what necessary truths are and how essences play a role in being their truth-makers. And then, since Lowe says hardly anything about possibilities, I will show that possibilities are to be defined from necessities. Understanding necessities is of greater importance for Lowe's theistic argument since it is based on the assumption that there are necessary truths. In that context, possibilities only need to be explained for the purposes of neutralizing van Inwagen's criticism. Anyway, according to Lowe, a necessary truth is either a truth about the essence of an entity or a proposition that is made true in virtue of the essences of a number of different entities that said proposition is about.<sup>58</sup> Essences ground modalities in a way that we are able to explain necessity in the following way: *X is necessarily F* if it is part of the essence of X that X is F.<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> Edward Jonathan Lowe, "Two Notions of Being: Entity and Essence," *Royal Institute of Philosophy Supplement* 62 (2008): 40–41, <https://doi.org/DOI: 10.1017/S1358246108000568>.

<sup>58</sup> Lowe, "Essence and Ontology," 107.

<sup>59</sup> Lowe, "Two Notions of Being: Entity and Essence," 45.

As I have said already, Lowe does not say a lot about possibilities. He provides an example and a general claim about modalities being grounded in essences. An example goes like this:

“Likewise, it is a metaphysical possibility, again obtaining in virtue of the essences of such objects, that the same bronze statue should coincide with different lumps of bronze at different times.”<sup>60</sup>

However, this example does not illuminate how we should deal with possibilities. A little bit later, he also notes:

“Metaphysical modalities are grounded in essence. That is, all truths about what is metaphysically necessary or possible are either straightforwardly essential truths or else obtain in virtue of the essences of thing.”<sup>61</sup>

It seems to me that this means that possibilities should be understood as propositions about what is possible. Lowe and van Inwagen do not talk about the same thing when they talk about possibilities if that is the case. However, I do not see that as a problem as long as we are in a position to explain possibilities. It appears to me that the best way to deal with possibilities is to explain possibilities using the duality of possibility and necessity: *X is possibly F* if it is not the part of the essence of X that X is not F. That way, we are able to define possibilities from necessities and essences. This allows us to get rid of possibilities as primary notions and define them away. We do not need to posit the existence of possibilities as a special kind of abstract entities the way van Inwagen does in order to account for what is possible. What is possible depends on the essences of things. Coming back to van Inwagen’s puzzlement with the possibility of there being two iron balls, it looks that very roughly and schematically, we

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<sup>60</sup> Lowe, “Essence and Ontology,” 107.

<sup>61</sup> Lowe, 110.

can explain that possibility the following way. If that is in fact possible, then there is nothing in the essence of an iron ball that makes it uniquely existing. There could be two because there is nothing in the essence of iron nor in the essence of a ball that does not allow that there are two spherically shaped lumps of iron existing in two different places at the same time. If that is the case, then the proposition “It is possible that there are two iron balls” is true in virtue of essences of entities the proposition is about. For the purposes of neutralizing van Inwagen’s criticism I believe that enough has been said. I have explained how we are able to explain possibilities and that we do not need to claim that they exist as some special kind of abstract entities. Essences would guarantee the truth of our modal propositions.

What I have left unexplained is the issue of ontological dependency. As indicated previously, van Inwagen is wondering whether possibilities depend ontologically on truth-makers of modal propositions, and by doing that, he attacks Lowe’s premise that all abstract entities are dependent entities. I have previously separated those two questions, but perhaps what we are looking for is the answer to whether there is something that would provide a mutual ground for both the existence as well as the truth of possibilities. However, Lowe, or any defender of this type of argument for the existence of God, does not need to show that. Because this line of criticism asks for a new kind of argument to be provided, a sister argument to the argument from the existence of necessary truths: an argument for the existence of God from the existence of possibilities. As was already discussed, Lowe provides an argument for the existence of God that aims to show that necessities can be explained only if God exists. He does not need to show that possibilities can be explained only if God exists in order to make his original argument work.

### 3.2 From Plato to Neo-Platonism

In this section of the thesis, my aim is to provide a framework under which Lowe's argument works. As I have previously mentioned, near the end of his paper, Lowe gives two reasons in favor of the dependency of abstract entities. The first was regarding abstraction, and I have already said that I do not think that argument has a lot of weight. The second reason seems to be far more promising. If one is to provide a fully developed defense of Lowe's argument, she should do so by making ideas dependent on the mind of God.

The theory that is able to support Lowe's argument came from considerations against the independence of *abstracta*. I will present a crucial argument that is given against robust Platonism, the kind of Platonism that van Inwagen supports in his arguments against Lowe. I will explore this topic by looking at the Aristotelian criticism of Plato's theory of Forms and the new metaphysics of Neo-Platonists that emerged from it. Since I do believe that the main problem for a Platonist is to claim that abstract entities exist independently, as van Inwagen claims, and that is what Aristotle criticizes Plato for as well, I believe that this historical looking back is worthwhile. I will not be able to present the centuries of debates from Plato, the Old Academy, Middle Platonists, up to Plotinus, not to mention the whole Christian development of it from Augustine onwards. Nor do I find that providing the genesis of these ideas is essential for present purposes. I want to highlight the importance of reasons we have to abandon the robust Platonism of self-standing abstract objects and take up the later developed Platonist position. Likewise, I will situate the theory in the contemporary discussions and classifications of ontological theories about abstract entities. This will, in turn, help me explain why van Inwagen is mistaken to think of what I refer to as Neo-Platonism is a form of nominalism.



I need to make two preliminary notes. First, I will draw parallels between historical Plato's Theory of Forms and a contemporary metaphysical position regarding the ontology of abstract entities called Platonism. I will disregard all of the differences between them and concentrate on certain features of *abstracta* that are shared among Plato and Platonists.<sup>62</sup> Second, I will talk about abstract entities and Forms interchangeably. I am aware that recently the need to separate talking about universals and abstract entities is discussed.<sup>63</sup> However, to explain what kind of theory allows us to provide the best defense of the argument for the existence of God, the difference is not of crucial importance.

With all of that in mind, what are some reasons we have to abandon traditional Platonism? The main problem is that if abstract entities exist independently, they are not able to carry out their function. In providing answers to this crucial Aristotle's criticism, the Platonists transformed the theory of abstract entities. The new Platonic solution for the problems was simple and elegant yet exceptionally effective. Enriching the Platonic theory with the ideas present in Aristotle's criticism led to the Neo-Platonic theory and locating Forms or abstract entities in the Divine Intellect. According to Rich, a Neo-Platonic conception of Forms as divine thoughts comes from trying to accommodate Aristotelian criticism of Plato's theory of Forms with Aristotle's doctrine of immanent form and the conception of Unmoved Mover eternally thinking himself.<sup>64</sup>

Problems arise from the fact that abstract entities are conceptualized in a way that makes them incapable of performing their primary function. To put it simply, they cannot do their job

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<sup>62</sup> Robinson provides an argument that the problem remains for contemporary Platonists as well in Howard Robinson, "Benacerraf's Problem, Abstract Objects and Intellect," in *Truth, Reference and Realism*, ed. Zsolt Novák and András Simonyi, New Editio (Central European University Press, 2011), 235–62, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.7829/j.ctt128283.10>.

<sup>63</sup> For example in Roy T. Cook, "Universals and Abstract Objects," in *The Bloomsbury Companion to Metaphysics*, ed. Neil A. Manson and Robert W. Barnard (London/New York: Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, 2015), 79–95.

<sup>64</sup> Audrey N M Rich, "The Platonic Ideas as the Thoughts of God," *Mnemosyne* 7, no. 2 (March 20, 1954): 123–33, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4427595>.

if they are separately existing entities. First, what is the job of abstract objects? They help us make the world intelligible.<sup>65</sup> Numbers, for example, help us individuate things. Properties, on the other hand, help us differentiate things according to their features. According to Shields, Aristotle's criticism of Plato's theory of Forms comes exactly from the considerations about Forms being entities that are supposed to be used when one wishes to explain changes in nature.<sup>66</sup> It seems that we need certain entities to use as tools for understanding the world. We use those entities in providing explanations of the world. The intended role of Forms is precisely that one. The empirical world requires the existence of abstract objects because they are an indispensable part of our best scientific theories that explain and describe the world. However, the further Aristotelian argument goes, if Forms are supposed to play the role of explanatory principles and be used in sciences in one way or another, they cannot do so.

An important thing to note here is that Aristotle does not deny that *abstracta* are either existing in some sense or unchanging, eternal paradigms that make the world intelligible. What he thinks is the problematic feature of Forms as Plato supposedly thought of them is that they exist as separate, independent, or self-standing entities. Robinson argues that Aristotle criticizes Plato's theory because Forms cannot be both separately existing and self-predicating.<sup>67</sup> Aristotle agrees with Platonists that if Forms are separate entities, existing in their own right, then they have to be self-predicating. Self-predication gives these entities their positive nature.

In order to fulfill its function, help us understand all of the different things that surround us and develop theories that help us understand the world, a Form of something, an abstract entity has to be that according to which everything else that is F is F. If we consider ethics for

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<sup>65</sup> Robinson, "Benacerraf's Problem, Abstract Objects and Intellect," 242.

<sup>66</sup> Christopher Shields, "Plato and Aristotle in the Academy," in *The Oxford Handbook of Plato*, ed. Gail Fine, First (Oxford University Press, 2008), 648, <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780195182903.003.0021>.

<sup>67</sup> Robinson, "Benacerraf's Problem, Abstract Objects and Intellect," 247.

a second, we are able to say that this or that thing, this or that act is good because we have a universal goodness which serves as a paradigm of everything that is good. We see goodness in multiple different occasions because there is something that stands as a standard. However, in order for something to be an entity (no matter if it is abstract or concrete), to be a self-standing, separate thing, that something has to have nature. An entity of any kind to have nature, it has to have some features. In other words, for anything to be something, it has to be an instance of something. However, if it is an instance, it is a particular something. Universals are taken to be specific kind of abstract entities are understood as something that can be instantiated. But, to come back to the example of the Form of good. How are we to explain what the Form of the good is? How are we to differentiate it from other things? It seems that it has to be good itself since it is not anything else. This is why abstract entities, in order to be self-standing, have to be self-predicating.<sup>68</sup> Now, it becomes clear that there is something problematic with the way we explained abstract entities. A Platonic abstract entity is both the instance of some F and a universal paradigm of everything that is F.<sup>69</sup> If abstract entities are self-standing entities, then they are not suitably conceptualized to do what they are supposed to do. These two features are conflicted. Abstract entities cannot be thought of as both the universal paradigms and independent entities if they are to serve their purpose. They can either be universals, i.e., something that can be multiply instantiated and thus help us make the world intelligible, or (and this is an exclusive or) they are independently existing entities.

That this still presents an issue when it comes to our understanding of abstract entities, is observable even in how MacBride explains what is the problem with Lowe's theory of truth-making. According to him, the problem presents the existence of propositions as the primary truth-bearers. The problem is, MacBride explains, that:

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<sup>68</sup> Robinson, 247.

<sup>69</sup> Robinson, 247.

“(Essential-*T*) requires propositions that are not only abstract but also mysterious, because they are, so to speak, self-interpreting, i.e., propositions that mean what they do irrespective of what speakers or thinkers ever do with the signs or judgements that express them.”<sup>70</sup>

Just like universals are self-predicating, propositions are understood as self-interpreting. However, to me, that sounds odd, even on a very superficial level. It seems weird to speak of interpretation if no one is there to interpret, i.e., if no one is there to explain or understand the meaning. However, if I am correct in claiming that Lowe’s argument is best defended through Neo-Platonic theory, then what sounds non-sensical stops sounding that way. We can accommodate both of our intuitions when it comes to propositions specifically. There is someone who thinks propositions, and yet that someone is not human someone. That way, they have both the objective meaning and are mind-dependent entities.

Philosophical considerations about the various issues that stem from an understanding of abstract entities as independent are problems that needed to be solved in later Platonism. Since abstract entities are shown to be incapable of being used in the explanations about the material world, the move of Forms in the Divine Mind occurred in Middle Platonism. The crucial aspect of this change for my thesis is that it made abstract entities dependent entities. This change provided a theory that was able to reconcile Aristotle’s theory of immanent form with Plato’s theory of Ideas. I will come to this aspect and situate it in a more contemporary discussion in a moment.

Before that, I want to emphasize just how important the criticism of the theory of Forms was. What I find especially interesting and important is the fact that the criticism of the theory of Forms as self-standing entities was so devastating that the Middle Platonists argued for their

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<sup>70</sup> MacBride, “Truthmakers.”

existence from the existence of God. The argument given by a Platonist Alcinous goes something like this.<sup>71</sup> Since there is God, and God is either an intellect or has an intellect, he has thoughts. These thoughts are eternal and unchanging like Himself. Furthermore, these eternal, unchanging thoughts are simply what Forms are. Hence, Forms exist. This sounds like an up-side-down of Lowe's argument. While Lowe argues for the existence of God from the existence of abstract entities, both arguments make use of the idea of dependence of thoughts on a thinker.

As Dillon concludes, the tradition of divine ideas in time became the main paradigm under which the relationship between God and the world is considered, especially because this one move of the place of ideas allowed Platonists to answer many metaphysical and epistemological questions.<sup>72</sup> This theistic solution to the problem of how numbers exist offers a solution to the real problem of how abstract entities are able to interact with the concrete world. The world is subject to mathematical description and explanation exactly because *abstracta* are dependent on God for their existence.

To be fair, at one point in the *God and Other Uncreated Things*, van Inwagen entertains the idea that *ante rem abstracta* are present in the mind of God. These abstract objects would be ideas in the mind understood as "perfect exemplars, à la Plato." This sounds like something I have characterized as a broadly Neo-Platonic theory. However, he rejects this option since he finds it to be a version of nominalism, a divine-exemplar nominalism. Nominalism, in his opinion, does not provide a theory of abstract objects since it does not confirm the existence of abstract objects and does not provide a theory that explains the nature of abstract objects in some "salient and philosophically important" way.<sup>73</sup> Although van Inwagen does not give this

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<sup>71</sup> John Dillon and Daniel J Tolan, "The Ideas as Thoughts of God," in *Christian Platonism: A History*, ed. Alexander J B Hampton and John Peter Kenney (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 44, <https://doi.org/DOI: 10.1017/9781108590341.003>.

<sup>72</sup> Dillon and Tolan, "The Ideas as Thoughts of God."

<sup>73</sup> van Inwagen, "God and Other Uncreated Things," 10.

comment regarding Lowe's argument, I do think that since nominalism denies that abstract entities exist, and if Neo-Platonism is a version of nominalism, then we have reasons to deny the importance of the theory in the context of Lowe's argument, since we have to affirm the existence of abstracta in order to make the argument work. However, what I have presented as a Neo-Platonic solution to the problem of abstract entities should not be considered a nominalist solution.

The solution to the problems at hand would be to accept a theory that presents a combination of immanent realism and conceptualism. Immanent realism is a theory that affirms the existence of abstract entities, where abstract entities are understood as sums of particular things. To be precise, it denies the abstract nature of supposed abstract entities. They really are concrete.<sup>74</sup> In the case of universals, using the before considered example, goodness would be a sum of all of the particular instances of good things. Conceptualism, on the other hand, is a theory according to which abstract entities exist, but as concepts, mind-dependent entities. However, that kind of dependency is usually understood as a human-mind-dependency. The usual complaint is that human minds are finite and thus incapable of accounting for infinity in mathematics, for example, or an intuition that stuff will be a certain way even if there is no human to provide the existence of universals.<sup>75</sup> What will avoid those problems is divine mind-dependency. Universal present in the mind is not a *post-rem* concept that depends on the human mind, but something eternal, infinite, and necessary. Individualized Form in a particular object is not a straightforward particular then, but is immanently universal; and yet this universality is manifested only in the mind.<sup>76</sup> Without matter, the form is universal, and as such, it is thought.<sup>77</sup> Abstract entities such as numbers, but also propositions, are *ante rem* concepts. They

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<sup>74</sup> Cook, "Universals and Abstract Objects."

<sup>75</sup> Cook.

<sup>76</sup> Robinson, "Benacerraf's Problem, Abstract Objects and Intellect," 252.

<sup>77</sup> Robinson, 251.

precede the existence of the concrete contingent entities, but they are still entities that depend on a mind that thinks them up. In other words, they exist as concepts in the mind of God.

It makes sense to think of numbers as something that exists independently of other objects. That is what the whole discussion about the abstraction shows. That would make abstract entities *post rem* entities dependent on other contingent concrete entities. If we allow that, numbers could not be thought of as necessary, although the dependency would be preserved. However, we need both of those theses to make Lowe's argument work. But still, as I have explained, we have good reasons to claim that they are not self-standing. They need to depend on a concrete entity that would think them. That mind needs to be a necessary mind because only that way we are able to account for their necessity, as well as objectivity. The only reason Plato dismisses the account of abstract entities as mind-dependent entities in *Parmenides* is because he wishes to keep the objectivity of necessary truths.<sup>78</sup> This is exactly how Neo-Platonists thought of Forms. Platonist successors of Plato stopped talking about Forms as one-over-many and started talking about one-before-many when discussing abstract entities. For Neo-Platonists, a Form is an "entity that comprehends in a unitary way a plurality that will become manifest only on a lower level of reality," i.e., once materialized.<sup>79</sup> That means that abstract entities are ontologically independent of contingent concrete entities. They are prior to them as universals. As concepts, universals dependent on the concrete objective mind of a necessary being that would contemplate and thus be a source of this universality. At the same time, the universal is particularized in concrete contingent entities. Thus, coming back to van Inwagen's note, Neo-Platonic theory affirms the existence of abstract entities, but as dependent entities. As a realist theory, it affirms the existence of abstracta. But as a conceptualist theory, it affirms the dependence of *abstracta* as well. The nature of abstract

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<sup>78</sup> Dillon and Tolan, "The Ideas as Thoughts of God," 37 footnote 9.

<sup>79</sup> Pieter d'Hoine, "Aristotle's Criticism of Non-Substance Forms and Its Interpretation by the Neoplatonic Commentators," *Phronesis* 56, no. 3 (May 30, 2011): 281, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23056295>.

entities is hence explained. They are mental entities, thoughts, concepts or ideas present in the Divine Mind.<sup>80</sup>

To reiterate, according to the Aristotelian criticism, independently existing abstract objects could not make the world intelligible. Aristotle's criticism of the Platonic theory of Forms shows us that the main problem is that the theory cannot provide an explanation of empirical reality if Forms exist separately, which is the main aim of the theory in the first place. I was interested in pointing out that the issue of the independent existence of abstract entities was recognized early on, and the solution I am claiming provides the best line of argument for Lowe (or any serious defender of Lowe's argument) to take was also taken rather early on as well. Numerous issues that arise from theories that postulate the existence of self-standing abstracta are avoidable if we think of them as dependent on the mind and intellectual activity of a necessary being.

### **3.3 Mind-dependence *Abstracta*: Concluding Remarks and Further Questions**

In what follows, I will discuss how the Neo-Platonic framework relates to other contemporary theories that make necessary mathematical entities dependent on the mind of God and what are some other questions that one should explore. It might seem that I am straying away from the main question of the thesis. However, I believe that all of these considerations are important for evaluating the strength of the argument. If this is supposed to be a theistic argument, an argument for the existence of God, then the subsequent questions naturally arise in the context of the argument.

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<sup>80</sup> I am using thoughts, ideas and concepts synonymously here. That would have to be clearly defined in order to develop this theory further, but for the present purposes I believe that such ambiguity does not present a major issue.



Some questions about the dependency of abstract entities are first, on what do abstract entities depend? If we are able to show that they depend on God, then Lowe's argument works. This is the point where the argument for God's existence itself stops. However, if we argue to show why abstract entities have to depend on God, we will ultimately specify this dependency. Then the whole new set of questions arise. For example, on what in God do abstract entities depend, or on which aspect of His nature? This is where Leibniz and Descartes, for example disagree. Cartesians claim that necessary truths depend on the will of God, while Leibniz believes they depend on His intellect.<sup>81</sup> It seems that the Leibnizian solution is currently still accepted, and I have gone that route in defending Lowe's argument as well.<sup>82</sup> This brings us to the discussion about some of the more recent theories that deal with the issue of a relationship between God and abstract entities. There are several similar positions to what I have characterized as a Neo-Platonic position taken in the recent literature that discusses the relationship between God and abstract entities. The three that are most notable are *theistic activism*, *divine creative antirealism*, and *theistic conceptual realism*. The authors of all three positions find the inspiration in Augustinian theory, which is of Neo-Platonic origin. It is interesting to note how authors of these theories understand dependency relation. So, what kind of a relation is the dependency relation? Theistic activists and conceptual realists, for example, give different answers. The difference is that theistic activists and divine anti-realists understand the dependency relation as a causal relation, while the conceptualists define it in terms of constituents.

Theistic activism states that since God's creation is absolute, that must mean that He created the abstract entities as well. Platonic entities are understood as created by God's mental

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<sup>81</sup> Section 3 Matthew Davidson, "God and Other Necessary Beings," in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta, Fall 2019 (Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University, 2019), <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2019/entries/god-necessary-being/>.

<sup>82</sup> One reason to be careful with evaluating the acceptability of Cartesian theistic voluntarism in the context of defending Lowe's argument in its' current form is the fact that the necessity of mathematical truths becomes questionable.

activity and as such are taken to be dependent necessary entities. As I have mentioned already, this would also bring changes to how we define abstract entities. If they are able to be created, and creation is a causal relation, then abstract entities cannot be defined the usual way as entities that do not enter causal relations. Anyway, according to Morris and Menzel, the original authors of theistic activism, properties, and relations are contents of the divine mental activity, similar to concepts, and as such, they do not exist ontologically independent from Him.<sup>83</sup> Propositions are understood as thoughts present in the mind of God. Other abstract entities, such as numbers, sets or possible worlds, are then further explicated in terms of properties, relations and propositions.

One major problem with theistic activism is that it introduces explanatory circularity. This is usually called a bootstrapping objection and is explained in reference to God's omnipotence or *haecceity*.<sup>84</sup> However, the problem of explanatory circularity is the most easily observed once stated in more general terms. If God creates all *abstracta*, including properties, then God creates even His own properties. However, God cannot create properties unless He already has a property of 'being able to create properties.'<sup>85</sup> That problem is supposed to be avoided in the modified version of the theory offered by Gould and Davis.<sup>86</sup> The difference between the modified and the original version of theistic activism is that all of God's essential properties are uncreated and exemplified by God. All of the other abstract entities are created by God. However, this might seem to be an *ad hoc* solution.

Following Welty's suggestion, we might state that the dependency relation that exists between God and abstract objects is a *constitutive relation*. Ideas in God's mind constitute

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<sup>83</sup> Morris and Menzel, "Absolute Creation."

<sup>84</sup> Haecceity is the property that explains individual nature or identity of something. In the case of God, the property 'being God' is God's haecceity. The overview of the bootstrapping objections given in reference to omnipotence and haecceity is given under the subtitle "Theistic Emanationism" in Davidson, "God and Other Necessary Beings."

<sup>85</sup> Gould and Davis, "Modified Theistic Activism," 62.

<sup>86</sup> Gould and Davis, "Modified Theistic Activism."

abstract entities.<sup>87</sup> Welty names his position as *theistic conceptual realism* because it combines three theses: abstract objects do exist; abstract entities are best understood as mind-dependent entities, that do not depend on human, but on the Divine Mind. On this view, *abstracta* are dependent, necessary, yet uncreated (i.e., not caused), ideas present in God's mind.<sup>88</sup> Since I have claimed against van Inwagen that a Neo-Platonic theory present a combination of realism and conceptualism, it seems that it fits closer to the theistic conceptual realism than it does to the activism or creative antirealism. However, the initial observations do not suggest the direction one should take. Although it might seem that the difference between all of these theories is simply in the terminology, I believe that differences are more subtle than that. For example, one major difference is that the dependency which holds between abstract entities and God is understood differently. Also, it seems that these three theories do not encounter the same problems. As I have said, theistic activism is rejected because of circularity. That does not seem to be an issue for a divine conceptual realist. All of the theories need to be analyzed more carefully in order to fully explain how we are to look at the dependency in this context.

However, I am in danger of wandering from the main point with these considerations, especially with writing about the issues of creation. Lowe is trying to establish that God exists since truths of mathematics exist. In that context, the issue of creation does not arise. One wonders about creation only if the existence of God is presupposed. However, I am trying to explain what kind of metaphysical framework allows us to defend Lowe's argument in the most natural and elegant way and how it relates to other contemporary similar theories. Even if the Neo-Platonic solution to the problem of how abstract entities interact with the world was adopted by theist philosophers because it allowed the right order of things when it comes to the questions of creation, I want to emphasize that we do have independent philosophical reasons

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<sup>87</sup> Welty, "Theistic Conceptual Realism," 81.

<sup>88</sup> Welty, 81.

to think of abstract entities as dependent entities. With this simple change, we are getting all of the benefits of both realist and non-realist solutions of the problem of the status of abstract entities such as numbers. I once again want to emphasize that robust Platonism was rather quickly updated because of the crucial issue that it run into. These are considerations upon which Lowe's argument depends. I wish to explain how Lowe's argument can be reinforced if one takes these considerations into account.

It is important to note that these other theories have emerged from the considerations about aseity and sovereignty and not from arguing for the existence of God. In other words, they are interested in showing how God is the only independent being and a being upon which everything else depends. Entities that are sometimes understood as independent entities, such as necessary abstract entities, present a special problem one has to deal with. These authors are trying to show that a theist is able to be a Platonist if she tweaks a Platonic theory in a way to accommodate the theistic teaching about God. So, the question for them is how to reconcile the existence of other necessary, eternal and supposedly independent entities with what is taken to be the necessary independent eternal entity. All of these are supposedly shared characteristics of both God and *abstracta* that makes Platonism and theism traditionally conflicted positions. What people like Welty argue for is that abstract entities do not have to be thought of as independent entities. According to him, arguments in favor of realism show us why it is necessary that we posit the existence of abstract entities. However, what these do not show is why they would have to represent a special ontological kind of independently existing entities. Welty suggests that if we follow the parsimony principle when it comes to our metaphysical theories, we would not want to posit the existence of a special new kind of objects.<sup>89</sup> If it is possible to explain all of the relevant features of abstract objects that we could explain with robust realism, with the theory that does not posit a new kind of entities, then it

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<sup>89</sup> Welty, 87.

has been shown that postulating independent abstract objects that are neither mental nor physical entities, belonging to Fregean third realm is unnecessary. He shows that these positions do not have to be conflicted. But if arguments against traditional Platonism work, then they show that Platonists have to be Neo-Platonists, i.e., that they have to accept the dependence of abstract entities. And if someone accepts that dependent necessary entities exist, then there would have to exist an entity upon which they depend. This seems to be a far more desirable outcome for a theist in general.

Lastly, I think that all of these different routes one is able to take also raise questions about what kind of being are we able to show that exists with this type of argument. What are we able to argue for the existence of? I have referred to this argument as an argument for the existence of God because that is the intended purpose of the argument. However, the argument obviously shows something that does not have all of the characteristics of the supreme being. To be precise, the conclusion of the argument is that *A necessary concrete being exists*.<sup>90</sup> Traditional attributes of the supreme being or God are omnipotence, omniscience, omnibenevolence, eternality, and necessary existence. God is also traditionally understood as a being that grounds reality by creating and sustaining everything else in existence. If Lowe's argument works, although it does not provide us with this conception of God, it comes close. First of all, we have established a necessarily existing being. If we are able to successfully argue in favor of Neo-Platonic defense, we would perhaps not get an all-knowing being, but we will get an eternally existing mind that knows at least all of the necessary truths. And coming back to the questions of possibilities, I would like to note that if we are able to claim that truths about possibilities are necessary truths, since the argument shows that all necessary truths are grounded in this Mind, then He will know all that is possible as well. One major issue that is left is that this argument shows that at least one necessary concrete being that grounds

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<sup>90</sup> Lowe, "A New Modal Version of the Ontological Argument," 186.

other necessary entities exist. What is missing is uniqueness. That would need to be argued for further.

## Conclusion

The aim of the present research was to examine under which presuppositions Lowe's argument for the existence of God is defensible from the criticisms given so far, i.e., what is the best way to argue for dependency thesis. I have claimed that the theory according to which abstract entities are dependent on God's mind provides the needed framework. The important conclusion of the first chapter is that Lowe's argument is an argument for the existence of God from the existence of necessary truths and not an ontological one. The investigation of van Inwagen's criticism has shown that abstraction does not provide a fitting way of characterizing the dependency relation that holds between God and abstract entities. Whether causality would provide a suitable relation, I do not know. Finally, I have suggested that if essences are thought of as sources of modalities, the final problem could be resolved as well. A limitation of this thesis is the lack of discussion of various specific arguments against the independence of *abstracta* that would shed even more light and strengthen the importance of rejecting that self-standing abstract entities exist. Despite its limitations, this thesis adds to our understanding of not only the arguments for the existence of God, for example, what are limitations and strengths of different types of arguments, but also into how a theistically inclined philosopher might deal with some contemporary metaphysical problems. Even though claiming that Lowe's argument proves that God exists is a rather ambitious overstatement, I do believe that it rests on some reasonable ideas that make it worth defending.

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