

## 1 The Theory of Divine Ideas

### 1.1 Creation

The heart of the doctrine of creation is that the existence of the world is due to a divine, and therefore personal, action: thinking and loving stand at the back of all things. This Element is about *the theory of divine ideas*, which is a traditional way of making sense of the doctrine of creation. The theory of divine ideas holds that God has ideas of all the creatures he could create, indeed has ideas of whole worlds of creatures he could create, and his actual creation of a world is sort of like an artist who, inspired by an idea of a painting she would like to paint, paints it. However, unlike the human artist, who has to reach outside herself to gather the stock of ideas on which her creativity depends, God has his ideas just from himself. Divine ideas are exemplars of God's creatures, and God himself is the exemplar of his ideas of creatures. God is the only totally original artist.

### 1.2 Ancient Origins

The theory of divine ideas is very old. Its classical expression is an artifact of the meeting of worlds, or worldviews: on the one hand, Greek philosophy with its Platonic Forms; and, on the other, Jewish theology with its monotheistic doctrine of creation. Greek philosophical influence on Jewish thought probably began as early as the third century BC when the Hebrew Bible was translated into Greek, the translation known as the Septuagint. Hints of a theory of divine ideas are to be found scattered in the Septuagint, and especially in its apocryphal books, in which God's Word (*Logos*) or Wisdom (*Sophia*) are personified as the agents of creation (Sir. 42:15, Wis. 9:1–2). But the standard narrative credits a later source, the Jewish philosopher Philo of Alexandria (d. 50 AD), with the first explicit synthesis of Jewish creation and Platonism.<sup>1</sup> Plato (d. c.347 BC) had envisioned a nonspatiotemporal realm of Forms, which are the exemplars of sensible things here below, the true realities which the things of this world but dimly reflect.<sup>2</sup> Philo reimaged these Forms as God's Ideas or Word(s), the exemplars by which God creates the heavens and earth. It is hard to overstate the influence of this basic picture on subsequent philosophical theology in the Abrahamic traditions, and especially in Christianity.

Yet it would be a mistake to think of the divine ideas tradition merely as an artifact of this Greco–Jewish synthesis. Judaism had its own theology of the

<sup>1</sup> Philo, *Creation of the World* IV–VI; Wolfson, *Philo*, vol. 1, pp. 200–204.

<sup>2</sup> Plato, *Timaueus* 27d–31b; *Phaedo* 100b–102b [see Cooper (ed.), *Complete Works*, for all citations].

Word (*Dabar*) which predates the Septuagint.<sup>3</sup> The word of the Lord made the heavens (Ps. 33:6) and the word of the Lord healed his people (Ps. 107:20). From the fourth century BC onward this native theology of the word was magnified within the liturgical context of spoken Aramaic glosses on the Hebrew Bible, glosses which saturated the Hebrew scriptures with the creative and sustaining activity of God's Word (*Memra*).<sup>4</sup> And Greek philosophical theology, independent of Judaism, had its own trajectory toward a theory of divine ideas – or at least toward a vision of a god who is an eternal mind containing in itself the intelligible structure of all things.<sup>5</sup> When the Stoic philosopher Seneca (d. 65 AD) gave clear voice to a straightforward monotheistic theory of divine ideas, it's as though the view had already become obvious,<sup>6</sup> and it is taken for granted in the second century syncretistic esotericism of the *Chaldean Oracles*<sup>7</sup> and the *Corpus Hermeticum*.<sup>8</sup> As Christian theologians were developing their own, Christ-centered theories of the divine ideas, the great pagan Neoplatonist philosophers advanced the new tradition of identifying Plato's Forms – most of them, anyway – as divine thoughts.<sup>9</sup>

### 1.3 Really Ancient Origins

But there is nothing originally Greek or Jewish in this core idea of one god who creates everything besides himself by means of his thoughts. Probably not by their oldest, third millennium theologies,<sup>10</sup> but still long, long ago, Egyptian religious thinkers had conceived of creation as the intellectual product of a single god.<sup>11</sup> Akhenaten (d. c.1334 BC), the famous fourteenth-century monotheist, composed a great Hymn to his god, Aten, which teaches the doctrine of creation *ex nihilo* and bears more than superficial resemblance to Psalm 104.<sup>12</sup> A text from the thirteenth century features the god Ptah, who conceives other gods and the created world in his heart, and then speaks them into being with his tongue – unaided by any primordial elements.<sup>13</sup> Another text from the thirteenth century speculates that all the gods' identity is "hidden in Amun"; the Sun is his face, Ptah is his body, and everything comes from the

<sup>3</sup> Carson, *Gospel According to John*, pp. 114–116.

<sup>4</sup> Ronning, *Targums and John's Logos Theology*, pp. 1–69; McNamara, *Targum and Testament*, pp. 41–92.

<sup>5</sup> Dillon, *Roots of Platonism*, pp. 35–49; Dillon, *The Middle Platonists*, pp. 126–129.

<sup>6</sup> Seneca, *Epistle to Lucilius* 65. <sup>7</sup> *Chaldean Oracles* fr. 37. <sup>8</sup> *Corpus Hermeticum* I. 31.

<sup>9</sup> Plotinus, *Enneads* 5.5.2–3; Proclus, *Elements of Theology* 170.

<sup>10</sup> PT 527, 600, in Faulkner, *Pyramid Texts*, pp. 198, 246; Allen, *Genesis in Egypt*, pp. 13–14.

<sup>11</sup> Assmann, *Search for God*, pp. 189–198.

<sup>12</sup> "Hymn to Aton," in Foster, *Hymns, Prayers, and Songs*, pp. 102–107; Hoffmeier, *Akhenaten and the Origins of Monotheism*, pp. 245–266.

<sup>13</sup> "The Memphite Theology," in Lichtheim, *Ancient Egyptian Literature* I, pp. 54–55; Allen, *Genesis in Egypt*, pp. 43.

mouth of Amun<sup>14</sup> – one among many examples of the Egyptian theological penchant for unifying their many gods.<sup>15</sup>

Babylonian authors did not care very much about their original creator gods, Tiamat and Apsu. They cared far more about gods who were present and active in world affairs. But here too we find a sort of convergence of many gods upon one god, like Ptah or Amun, one god who has the power if not to create, then simply to be all the other gods. Thus, in the third millennium epic *Enuma Elish*, when Marduk establishes order in the world by his heroic deeds, the fifty great gods “take their seats” and praise Marduk with fifty names.<sup>16</sup> In a later text, probably from the fifteenth century or earlier, other gods appear to be no longer merely deferential to Marduk; instead they are identified with him, one god making shift for many.<sup>17</sup> If Egyptian metaphysical speculation converged upon a single divine origin of all, Babylonian religious devotion converged upon a single divine object of worship.

#### 1.4 The Hebrew Bible

The Hebrew Bible engages these and other ancient theologies in several ways. It combines the Babylonian theme of heroic divine agency with the Egyptian impulse to adore the first principle of all things. It tells the story of the Israelites sometimes trying and frequently failing to reject foreign gods in favor of the exclusive worship of the one God. But it is also a proclamation that God, The LORD, on his own does divinity better than any pantheon and better than any chief of a pantheon and is therefore entitled to exclusive worship. He assumes all the qualities of the gods who were his rivals for the allegiance of his chosen people, and even takes the name of El, patriarch of the Canaanite pantheon.<sup>18</sup>

One side of this sole allegiance to God is entirely negative: you shall have no other gods but The LORD (Ex. 20:3). The altars of Baal and the fertility poles of Asherah must be torn down and must never be erected (Judg. 6:25; Deut. 12:3). This negativity eventually takes the ultimate form of denial that such rivals even exist: you must carry your idols, says God, but I will carry you (Is. 46:1–4). Whatever divine beings or members of the heavenly host there really are – those who shout for joy when God establishes the heavens, for example (Job

<sup>14</sup> Papyrus Leiden I 350, ch. 300, ll. 2–5, 14–15, in Allen, *Genesis in Egypt*, p. 54.

<sup>15</sup> Hornung, *Conceptions of God in Ancient Egypt*, pp. 86–99.

<sup>16</sup> *Enuma Elish*, in Arnold and Beyer, *Ancient Near East*, pp. 31–50; Heidel, *Babylonian Genesis*, p. 12; Lambert, *Babylonian Creation Myths*, pp. 3–4.

<sup>17</sup> Smith, *Origins of Biblical Monotheism*, pp. 87–88. Lambert, *Babylonian Creation Myths*, pp. 264–265. Assmann, *Of God and Gods*, p. 62.

<sup>18</sup> Smith, *Early History of God*, pp. 32–43; Parke-Taylor, *Yahweh*, p. 37.

38:6–7) – are his creatures (Neh. 9:6), angels if you like, not to be worshipped as gods.

But there is a positive side to this sole allegiance, which is that the one God fulfills everything worth seeking in rival gods. Like Marduk, The LORD God assumes all divine qualities worth having. The benefit of being a god who can hide himself (Is. 45:15) and a god of which there must be no graven image (Deut. 4:15–19) is that he can reveal himself nearly any way he likes. God has just one true name but it is capacious as can be; God will be whatever he needs to be to accomplish his purposes (Ex. 3:14): a still small voice for Elijah (1 Kings 19:11) but a whirlwind for Job (Job 38:1).

Like Marduk and Baal, he is a warrior to whom the sea monster is but a fish which God draws forth from the waters for sport (Job 41:1–2; Ps. 104:26). Like Ptah, he is the architect and engineer of the world, establishing order (Job 38:4–6, 31–33). Like Baal, he is the god of weather (Ps. 18:6–15). Amun-Re and Aten have been eclipsed by the sun which is The LORD (Ps. 84:11), the Sun who makes the sun and everything else (Ps. 104:19). He is a husband who cares for his people (Is. 54:5), and they are bride enough for him; he needs no goddess to be his consort (Hos. 2:21–25).<sup>19</sup> But anything you might want in a goddess is already in God: he is a fierce mama bear (Hos. 13:8), a comforting mother (Is. 66:13), the one who gave birth to you (Deut. 32:18).<sup>20</sup> If zoology is your thing, God is, in addition to a bear, a lion (Is. 38:13), a leopard (Hos. 13:7), a bull (Num. 24:8), and – depending on your view about what it would take for someone to be the Messiah – a lamb (Is. 53:7).

The Hebrew Bible is not a record of the first monotheism, or the first doctrine of creation *ex nihilo*, or even the first inkling of the theory of divine ideas – that title goes to whomever wrote that bit about Ptah thinking up the whole world in his heart – but it records a monotheism the one God of which is so busy, so complicated, so rich, that it feels hardly innovative to say, in Greek terms, that this one God contains in himself the intelligible principles of everything that can be. Having read the Bible, what else would we expect of God?

### 1.5 God Before Creation

But the main point of this Element is not to consider the theory of divine ideas as an historical artifact but as a theory, a rational account of the way things are. What this theory is, first and foremost, is an account of God's rationality in creating the world. The account makes God the unique first principle of all, makes his creative activity intelligible and purposeful, and thereby makes his world the product of a mind and so able to be investigated rationally.

<sup>19</sup> Rabinowitz, *Faces of God*, pp. 83–88.    <sup>20</sup> Smith, *Early History of God*, pp. 48–52.

God, so the theory goes, is not only powerful enough to cause the existence of the world, but he is personal, with the powers distinctive of a person and a person with the best sort of character. From his personal powers we infer that God is rational and free, and from his perfect character we infer that he is good, wise, loving, just, merciful, and so on. Religious philosophers have of course attempted to reason retroactively, so as to arrive at this revealed conception of God by the tools of reason. Either by reason or revelation, or both, the theory of divine ideas only has rational traction once we are prepared to take as given that the world has in fact been made by such a creator, and not a generic First Cause.

If such a God is personal, then his actions are personal actions, and this means they are intentional and free; and if such a God is perfect in character, then his actions are rational and good. These guideposts for reflection on the doctrine of creation force us to think of God as knowing what he is doing when he creates. When he says, for example, “Let there be light (*Gen.* 1:3),”<sup>21</sup> he does not discover what light is when it comes into existence. He meant light. And if he meant it, then he knew about light *before* he spoke it into being.

The precise sense of ‘before’ is difficult to pin down; minimally, it is an explanatory or logical ‘before’. If the world is a product of God’s rational action then when God makes light he makes it, in part, *because* he knows about light, as when we say that the child aced the test *because* she knew her multiplication table. Knowing about light is part of the explanation of making light, and I mean ‘before’ just in that minimal sense of being a part of an explanation. And while I will not argue the claim here, I think this sort of ‘before’ is compatible with God being timeless.

### 1.6 Having in Mind

So God knows about creatures he creates before he creates them. What might it mean for God to know about creatures that do not yet exist? *We* know about creatures because they are already there among us for us to experience them. Once we’ve experienced them, we can take them around with us, in mind, thinking about them even when we are not experiencing them, as I take around my family in my mind when I travel. Knowing creatures by experiencing them obviously presupposes that there are already creatures to be studied. But this cannot be what we mean when we say that God knows about creatures before he makes any, because before he makes any, there aren’t any: no land or seas, sun

<sup>21</sup> Biblical quotations throughout are taken from the Revised Standard Version of *The New Oxford Annotated Bible*.

and moon, fishes and birds, unless God makes them. So God must know about such things before he makes them.

It is very tricky to talk sense when we're trying to say what it is God is thinking about when we imagine him thinking about something which does not exist, and this is just the situation we're in when we are trying to think about what was in God's mind when he said "Let there be light." My own view is the scriptural view that God *is* light (1 Jn. 1:5), so that what God is thinking about when he thinks about light before created light is himself. But for now, don't focus on the object of God's thinking when he has something in mind; just focus on having in mind.

There are a few ordinary ways we talk about having something in mind. First, there is the quasi-sensory experience of seeing (hearing, etc.) in your head or mind, like when you have a song in your head or you are picturing a painting in your mind.

Second, we can have something in mind through a definition, as when we think about the triangle in terms of its definition or necessary properties, e.g., a figure with exactly three interior angles which equal 180 degrees. We might picture the words of a definition, or even picture something representing the thing defined, but these picturings are incidental to the experience of having the defined thing in mind.

Third, we also talk about having things in mind when expressing an intention or a preference. I say, "Let's do lunch"; you reply, "Sure, what did you have in mind?" I go on, "In-n-Out. That's a really good burger." Maybe I am picturing a cheeseburger when I say this. But this picturing is incidental to, or at best one component of, having In-n-Out in mind when it is in mind as a preference or intention. When it is in mind in this way I have some serious interest in making my idea a reality.

Fourth, another sort of action-oriented having in mind concerns things we know how to do. Your teacher gives you a calculus lesson. She asks, "Did you get all that?" You say, "Why yes, I think I do." She has helped you get something in mind, something in the calculus-shaped hole in your mind, and whatever this something is, it is what you have in mind when you do calculus or when you are aware of yourself as knowing calculus.

I see no reason to deny of God any of these ways of having in mind. If we've got as far as ascribing personhood and character to God, it's no stretch to ascribe to him these various abilities to picture, understand, prefer, intend, or do things he has in mind. Arguably, they're wrapped up in what it is to be personal, such that if it is viciously naive or anthropomorphic to think of God as having things in mind, then thinking of God as personal is, too.

If we're imagining God, so to speak, in the brainstorming phase of creation – something like considering his options – then naturally we will be thinking of

him as having things in mind in the first two of the four ways; in the selection phase, the third way; and in the execution phase, the fourth way. I do not plan to rely on this division of ways of having in mind or to carefully distinguish different ways at different phases of God's creative action. The broader point is that there are obvious (if not fully understood) ways in which we have things in mind, and if we are to think of God as personal, then we must think of him as having things in mind in some ways which are intelligible to us given our own experience of having things in mind.

### 1.7 Divine Idea

A divine idea is a thing God has in mind. God thinks about himself and does so perfectly; so he has himself in mind – that is to say, has an idea of himself. If there are such things as parts or aspects of God, God knows these too, and perfectly; so he has ideas of his aspects or parts. God thinks about all the things he could make, the individuals, the types, the combinations of individuals and types, the histories, the worlds; so he has ideas of all these. This is the foundation of the theory of divine ideas: God is a personal creator perfect in character. He knows what he's doing when he does anything; his knowledge comes before his doing; and his knowledge is a matter of having in mind, and so having divine ideas, of all the things.

### 1.8 Total Originality

So God has things in mind and has creatures – possible creatures – in mind before he creates anything. It is important to emphasize the similarity between God's having things in mind and our having things in mind, in order to preserve the coherence of thinking of God as a person. But, naturally, there are some important differences between the way God has things in mind and the way we do. God, so I assert here but as I will argue in what follows, is *totally original*, and no human being, even the most creative human artist, is totally original.

Creative as she is, there are at least two ways in which the human artist cannot be totally original. First, to make, say, a painting, she requires some medium: canvas and paint. The quality of the painting will be determined not just by the skill and care the artist puts into its making, but also partially determined by the nature of the medium itself. Good paint and canvas make for better paintings than bad paint and canvas, all else being equal.

Second, while the idea of the painting might itself be a novel assemblage of simpler ideas, never thought up by any other human artist, the mind of the artist must be shaped by her interaction with the world – observing it with her senses,

sharing it with human communities – to achieve that medium of concepts or language, habits or skills required for thinking up the idea of the painting. So we might say that the painting depends on a *material* medium, and that coming up with the idea of the painting depends on an *intelligible* medium.

Commonly, people who think God is the creator of the world have thought that God’s creativity is independent of both media. God creates the world *ex nihilo* – that is, from no material thing which exists prior to God’s creation of the world. Thus, God depends on no material medium: he makes the paint and canvas he needs to make his painting, so to speak. Moreover, God himself is sufficiently rich in intelligible content that God gets his very idea of the world he intends to create from no other source but himself. Thus, God depends on no intelligible medium: he does not look abroad, to other worlds or realms or gods, to discover what sorts of things he might make. If this is right, then God indeed is totally, doubly, original: he is the one origin of the material of the world along with the intelligible structure which a material world can exemplify.

## 2 Theory and Worship

### 2.1 God and Abstract Objects

There is a recent body of academic literature in the philosophy of religion which is in the background of some of the reflections offered in this book. This literature concerns what is now referred to as *the problem of God and abstract objects*, and questions whether and how God might be the origin of the whole intelligible medium of creation. The view that there are abstract objects, at least as abstract objects are conventionally understood nowadays,<sup>22</sup> entails that reference to God alone cannot explain why God understands what God understands when he understands how creatures can be. Instead, he gets his ideas of possible creatures by correctly apprehending a realm of intelligibility populated by what were once referred to as ‘Platonic Forms’, after Plato, and now more often are called ‘abstract objects’. These abstract objects are necessarily existent, independent of God, and function in creation as the raw intelligible material of any created thing. The view that there are abstract objects is usually called ‘Platonism’, but I don’t think this is fair to Plato; thus, I use a new term to name the view that there are abstract objects: *abstractionism*; I’ll use the term *abstractionist* to describe a person who advocates abstractionism.

The problem of God and abstract objects arises because the abstractionist claim that there are abstract objects seems to conflict with some theological doctrines, in particular divine *sovereignty* and divine *aseity*,

<sup>22</sup> Rosen, “Abstract Objects.”



the latter so-named from the Latin, *a se*, which means ‘by himself’. These doctrines can be formulated in stronger and weaker versions, so we can say that the stronger the doctrine of sovereignty, the more control God has over other things; and the stronger the doctrine of aseity, the less control other things have over God.

If there is, for example, an abstract object which is the property of being God, then God is God just in case he exemplifies this property. But then it looks like God is dependent on a property for being what he is, and this weakens aseity.<sup>23</sup> If God can be God without depending on something else, the doctrine of aseity bids us to hold that in fact he does not depend on anything else for being what he is.

Likewise, if the things which God can create are only things which exemplify properties which themselves exist independent of any thinking or making on God’s part, then God’s creation of a world is quite a bit like having to furnish a house only with things to be found at Ikea. The celestial Ikea includes all the abstract objects which together constitute the entire inventory available to God for making a world. Insofar as this celestial Ikea is held to exist coeternally with and independent of God, it would seem to compromise God’s sovereignty. So if God’s creation of a world can be understood in a way which does not make him dependent on the celestial Ikea, the doctrine of sovereignty bids us hold that in fact he depends on no such thing.

The range of views on offer in this literature on the problem of God and abstract objects is fairly represented by the contributions to a recent book,<sup>24</sup> and some of these views pop up in what follows. This Element has some significant overlap with that debate, but my concern is somewhat different.

## 2.2 Creation First

Most importantly, my guiding concern here is the doctrine of creation, not aseity or sovereignty. In this emphasis I take myself to be following the lead not only of Philo himself, but of the patristic and medieval divine ideas theorists who most inspire my own work. For example, consider St. Augustine’s (d. 430) influential description of divine ideas. They are the

original and principal forms of things, i.e., reasons, fixed and unchangeable, which are not themselves formed and, being thus eternal and existing always in the same state, are contained in the Divine Intelligence. And . . . everything which can come into being and pass away and everything which does come into being and pass away is said to be formed in accord with these ideas.<sup>25</sup>

<sup>23</sup> Craig, *God Over All*, p. 67.    <sup>24</sup> Gould, *Beyond the Control of God?*

<sup>25</sup> Augustine, *Eighty-Three Different Questions*, q. 46.

The divine ideas for Augustine have a place in theology because of their role in creation,<sup>26</sup> and here are even defined by their role in God's creative activity: they are the unchangeable forms of changeable things – that is, creatures. Similar examples may be found in Pseudo-Dionysius,<sup>27</sup> who probably wrote in the late fifth and early sixth centuries, St. Maximus the Confessor<sup>28</sup> (d. 662), St. Anselm<sup>29</sup> (d. 1109), St. Thomas Aquinas<sup>30</sup> (d. 1274), Bl. John Duns Scotus (d. 1308),<sup>31</sup> and many others.

This Element is therefore more an inquiry into the nature of God's creative thinking than the metaphysics of so-called abstract objects such as properties, propositions, states of affairs, or mathematical objects. The problem of God and abstract objects only arises if we take seriously the sorts of arguments philosophers offer for abstract objects, quite independent of the theological implications of those arguments. It is because the abstractionist's view has a ring of plausibility that religious philosophers have felt the need to problematize it.

But I have next to nothing to say about the independent plausibility of arguments for abstract objects. I am thinking about God before creation, and so thinking of God thinking of creatures before there are any. There is some structural similarity between this picture and the abstractionist's picture: for example, I am happy to say that the Lion, or the property of being leonine, exists independent of all creaturely lions. The abstractionist says this, too. But, of course, I think God is the Lion, whereas they think the place of the Lion is the eternal abstract realm, to which God goes for instruction about leonine nature. So, just to be clear, I am not assuming a broadly Platonic or realist or abstractionistic ontology and then trying to find a way to make it work out with God. I am assuming that God is the creator and exploring what this means.

What I think this means is that God is the sole ultimate source of intelligibility; God himself contains multitudes, more even than Walt Whitman. Whatever exists, whatever can exist, any possible way that things can be, is because God is what God is. God has ideas of all the ways things can be, and he gets all these ideas just by thinking about himself. The exercise of this Element may therefore be thought of as a complement to the Ignatian exhortation to find God in all things. I hope that we will find all things in God.

<sup>26</sup> Panchuk, "Created and Uncreated Things," p. 106.

<sup>27</sup> Pseudo-Dionysius, *Divine Names* V, 7, 821B. <sup>28</sup> Maximus, *Ambigua* 7, p. 99.

<sup>29</sup> Anselm, *Monologion* 9–10, in *Basic Writings*, pp. 17–19.

<sup>30</sup> Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* Ia, q. 15, a. 1.

<sup>31</sup> Scotus, *Reportatio* I, d. 36, p. 1, q. 1–2, n. 69–75.