

Abstract:

In this essay, I examine whether ideal concrete objects exist. In the current metaphysical landscape, the distinction between abstract and concrete objects is a difficult enough concept to lock down. Asserting the existence of ideal or transcendent objects is an entirely different controversy altogether. So, I take both to task, in a way. I don't make any assertions that abstract objects *do* exist, nor do I assert that ideal or transcendent objects exist. Rather, I explore what conditions should be considered if these types of objects possibly do exist. From there, I try to determine what types of conditions are needed for a concrete ideal object to exist and what object(s) could count as an ideal concrete object. I first cover Plato's notion of an ideal object, and some of the properties described thereof, such as transcendence, eternity, an existence independent of space and time, and changelessness. While I acknowledge that these might not exhaust or even accurately reflect what an 'ideal object' truly is (for there might be an objection to one or more of these listed characteristics), but I argue that, minimally, some quality of flawlessness is required for something to be an ideal object. Next, I run through some of the traditional distinctions between abstract and concrete objects. Many of these distinctions come from Gottlob Frege. David Lewis objected to these conditions and found that they were insufficient to ground the distinction. However, there are ways to get around these objections which allows us to ground the distinction in terms of causal efficacy. That is, we can assert that concrete objects stand in some causal relation to other objects, while abstract objects are causally inert. This distinction allows us to better understand the relationship between ideal and abstract objects. We see this connection in Plato's *Republic*, wherein some of the Forms of existence are said to be ideal states of being that don't stand in any causal relationship to other objects. However, there are parts of this dialogue which also describe these ideal objects (the Forms) as actually having causal efficacy. So, it seems that Plato thought that concrete ideal objects are possible. Since there doesn't seem to be a necessary connection between ideal and abstract objects, ideal objects could be ideal. If ideal objects are possible objects, and they can concrete, then we have a much larger consequence to consider: God necessarily exists if concrete ideal objects exist – if concrete ideal objects are not possible, then, necessarily, God does not exist. That is, a concrete ideal object would be something that is eternal, perfect and exists outside of space and time. But, it would be capable of standing in a causal relationship to other objects (in this case, to all objects). Plato's Form of the Good, then, seems to function in all of the ways a traditional notion of God functions. So, if concrete ideal objects possibly exist, it seems to give rise to a much more important theological consequence, namely that God possibly exists. It has been argued that if God possibly exists, then God necessarily exists as necessarily existing is a quality inherent to God. If concrete ideal objects cannot possibly exist, then it seems to follow that God cannot possibly exist. I do not elaborate or get into much discussion about these consequences here, but I think these are consequences that are generated depending on whether concrete ideal objects can possibly exist or not. I do not take a final stand as to whether they do or not, since there may be problems with the consistency of an object being ideal and concrete. Also, the fact that so many people object to the existence of abstract objects, not to mention ideal objects, makes it hard to determine whether concrete ideal objects are possible. My aim is simply to explore this topic to see if the notion of concrete ideal objects are possible.

On the Possibility of Ideal Concrete Objects:

An Inquiry into the Nature of Transcendent Objects

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There is still much debate regarding the distinction between concrete and abstract objects. Given the unsettledness of this subject, it's unclear whether abstract objects really exist, how they stand in relation to concrete objects, and what consequences might arise by purporting their existence. Even more controversially asserted is the existence of ideal objects. These are said to be the perfect forms or structures of objects whose imperfect representations are somehow instantiated in worlds. My aim is not to needlessly assume anything about the existence of either abstract or ideal objects, but rather to discuss these concepts to determine what connection they may have to concrete objects, if they do exist. So, I will operate under the supposition that abstract and ideal objects *possibly* exist. From this, I will explore the notion of *ideal concrete* objects, what such objects might be, and what sorts of conditions they might require in order to possibly exist. Moreover, if ideal concrete objects possibly exist, what might count as an ideal concrete object? I will have to discuss the possibility that abstract and ideal objects exist before distinguishing abstract and concrete objects. Then, I will have to discuss the relationship between abstract and ideal objects and whether the conditions that qualify an object as abstract necessarily hold for ideal objects as well. Depending on whether or not the relationship between ideal and abstract objects is necessitated in some way will help determine whether ideal concrete objects are possible.

First, it's important to understand some background information about ideal and abstract objects before proceeding. The notion of an ideal object stems back as far as transcendental objects were thought to exist. Plato was among the first to put forth the notion of ideal objects as being an explanation for the way the world is. Ideal objects are typically said to include the following: having eternality, having some sort of transcendent existence, changelessness, being timeless/spaceless, incapable of being obstructed, tarnished or effected by anything. This list may not be exhaustive and might be incorrect or inadequate, but I've listed these properties because it seems that ideal objects minimally require some quality of perfection and a non-spatiotemporal existence. That may turn out

to be wrong but, as yet, I've not anticipated that being the case. For now, we can proceed with these properties in mind in terms of what might constitute an ideal object.

Next, there are a number of conditions that are said to describe what an abstract object is, though none have been sufficient to this point. While expounding some of these views, I will simultaneously touch upon some of the conditions for concrete objects as well. Most people consider things like numbers, properties, sets, universals, analytic truths, and so on, to be abstract. Such objects seem to have no particular instantiation that allows us to point and say “*that* is the number 2”, or “*this* is the color red.” Yet, many objects in the world *participate in*¹ these things, i.e. “redness”, “twoness”, etc. Some might intuitively assert that every tangible object is concrete, while everything that isn't tangible is abstract. However, we will see that this can't be the case. Likewise, we can't just say what's concrete is what's real, while abstract objects aren't 'real'. That seems to be ubiquitously rejected by contemporary philosophers, for abstract objects still ought to be counted as being *real* parts of worlds, just those that have certain features distinct from concrete ones. For everyone seems to agree that if abstract objects exist, they should be considered just as 'real' as concrete objects, though they would have unique modal properties.

Gottlob Frege (1884) suggested that “An object is abstract if and only if it is both non-mental and non-sensible”². This approach asserted that some objects are neither sensible nor purely mental (psychological) objects. The distinction Frege wanted to draw here is that abstract objects are neither mental nor sensible objects, while concrete objects are either perceptual or psychological objects.

¹ I'm aware that this language is pointedly Platonic, but I am not asserting that this is actually true of abstract objects. I'm making a point that it seems intuitive to think about abstract objects in these terms and I didn't know how else to phrase this point.

² This quote was taken from an article written by Gideon Rosen in the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy. Rosen, Gideon, "Abstract Objects", The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Spring 2017 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2017/entries/abstract-objects/>>.
Frege's work mentioned here is from his work *The Foundations of Arithmetic* (1884).

Another way of putting this is that concrete objects exist in space and time, in terms of having location, while abstract objects exist without having any spatiotemporal location. For if something is located, it seems to have the capacity for being an object of perception. Can an object be without location and still have the capacity of being sensed? I'm not sure. However, David Lewis (1986) brought up the point that this distinction, which he called "the Negative Way" [of distinguishing concrete and abstract objects], runs into some problems³. This view, according to Lewis, states that abstract objects have no spatiotemporal location, are causally inert, and are indiscernible from one another (Lewis, 1986, p. 83). To the problem with the first condition of that definition, i.e. that abstract objects are not located, Lewis states:

"I object that by this test some sets and universals come out concrete. Sets are supposed to be abstract. But a set of located things *does* seem to have a location, though perhaps a divided location: it *is* where its member *are*. Thus, my unit set is right here, exactly where I am the set of you and me is partly here where I am, partly yonder where you are; and so on. And universals are supposed to be abstract. But if a universal is wholly present in each of my located particulars, as by definition it is, that means that it is where its instances are. It is multiply located, not unlocated. You could just declare that an abstract entity is located only in the special way that a set or a universal is located – but then you might as well just say that to be abstract is to be a set or universal. Your talk of unlocatedness adds nothing. Maybe a *pure* set, or an *uninstantiated* set universal, has no location. However, these are the most dispensable and suspect of sets and universals...perhaps we have an inference: [sets and universals are] unlocated because they're abstract. If so, we had better not also say that they're abstract because they're unlocated" (Lewis, 1986, p. 83).

The statement that only pure sets and universals are located seems to imply that *impure* sets and universals *can* be located. That is, everything that is an instantiation of an abstract set is located, i.e. the set of all of the properties that comprise me. So, this aspect of Frege's distinction seems to be undermined by Lewis's objection.

As for the second condition in Frege's setup, that it can't be the case that abstract objects enter into any causal relationship, Lewis states:

"Is it true that sets or universals cannot enter into causal interaction? Why shouldn't we say that something causes a set of effects? Or that a set of causes, acting jointly, causes something?...Many authors have proposed to identify an event – the very thing that most surely can cause and be caused – with one or another sort of set. (For instance...I propose to identify an event with the set of spacetime

³ Lewis, David, 1986, *On the Plurality of Worlds*.

regions where it occurs.) Must any such identification be rejected, regardless of the economies it may afford, just because sets are supposed to be ‘abstract?’” (Lewis, 1986, p. 83-4).

Lewis’s example is a pretty strong argument to consider – an event is presumably a set of causal sequences, yet most people think that an ‘event’ is something abstract. Lewis seems to indicate that events are concrete, but that’s really the wrong takeaway from this statement. What this really suggests is that, irrespective of whether events are abstract or concrete, sets can enter into a causal relationship. So, one may posit that events are abstract. But, they also have to acknowledge that it is not because they fail to stand in some sort of causal relationship.

As for the last condition, the rejection that abstract objects can be indiscernible, Lewis states:

“I do not see what could be said in favour of indiscernible universals. But as for sets, I should think that if two individuals are indiscernible, then so are their unit sets; and likewise whenever sets differ only by a substitution of indiscernible individuals. So...it seems that the Negative Way does not classify universals, or sets in general, as abstract” (Lewis, 1986, p. 84).

We can see from Lewis’s criticism of Frege’s distinction, there are problems with distinguishing abstract objects insofar as they are not spatiotemporally located, fail to enter into a causal relationship, and that they are can’t be discernible. While Lewis states that “the Negative Way” does not successfully demonstrate that certain things ordinarily thought to be abstract entities, like sets and universals, is there room to salvage these Fregean conditions? As it turns out, certain addendums can be made.

One way is to re-characterize the “Non-Spatiality” and the “Causal Inefficacy” criteria⁴. According to contemporary revisions of the former criterion, requiring that abstract objects be non-spatial or causally inert or both, can rephrase the Fregean distinction as follows: An object is abstract iff it is non-spatial and causally inefficacious⁵. This can avoid the problems the Fregean distinction ran into in terms of the following:

Concrete objects, whether mental or physical, have causal powers; numbers and functions and the rest make nothing happen. There is no such thing as causal commerce with the game of chess itself (as distinct from its concrete instances). And even if impure sets do in some sense exist in space, it is easy

⁴ Again, this information is cited from Rosen’s SEP article, § 3.1 & 3.2

⁵ Rosen, SEP article § 3.1

enough to believe that they make no *distinctive* causal contribution to what transpires. (Rosen, Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, 2017, § 3.2 Causal Inefficacy Criterion).

However, what Lewis's point does is demonstrate that there are ways an object can be abstract while going against conditions like the non-spatial and causal inefficacy criteria. There are other ways of establishing the distinction which Lewis addresses and poses challenges to (i.e. The Way of Example, The Way of Conflation, and The Way of Abstraction). However, I think it is relevant to my discussion to only focus on the Way of Negation and the two amended criteria mentioned above. For what I want to address now relates to these considerations the most.

As mentioned, Plato was among the first to tackle the subject of what an ideal object is or could be. This was well-established in his account of the Forms, of which he stated that every sensible object in the physical world is an imperfect representation of some ideal form of those objects⁶. The Forms are perfect states of being which do not exist in space or time – they are transcendent objects. Somehow, these objects are instantiated into the world such that they participate in the form from which they are derived. Plato's motivation for positing the existence of ideal objects seems to stem from his intrigue with the apparent peculiarities that emerge from geometry and arithmetic. There is a seemingly perfect nature to arithmetical numbers and structures such that is distinct from the nature of sensible objects, for that which we perceive is often mistaken and subjectively different. But, this is not true of mathematical knowledge. Mathematical knowledge is achieved through rational operations and so is not tarnished by the limits of our empirical processes. From this seeming divide between what we empirically gather and what we know about mathematics, it appeared to Plato that there is a categorical distinction between what we perceive and the objects of rational thought. What, then, is Plato's distinction? For Plato, sensible objects are merely representations that belong to ideal forms which we are able to perceive through our empirical faculties. Abstract objects, on the other hand, we

⁶ We see discussion and hints about the Forms in various dialogues, such as the *Timaeus*, but Plato really expounds this account in Book VI of *The Republic*.

don't "sensibly perceive" in terms of picking them out with our empirical faculties. But, in a way, he also gives the impression that we do 'sense' abstract objects – but only in a purely rational way. So, Plato's distinction between abstract and concrete objects seems to be from the perspective that concrete objects are perceived through our sense perception, while abstract objects are perceived through "the mind's eye". Consider the following passage of *The Republic*⁷ :

“...the offspring of the good which the good begat, is in relation to the good itself an analogy, and what the good effects, by its influence, in the region of the mind towards mind and things thought, this the sun effects, in the region of seeing, towards sight and things seen...When a man turns his eyes...no longer to those things whose colours are pervaded by the light of day, but on those pervaded by the luminaries of the night, the eyes grow dim and appear to be nearly blind, as if pure sight were not in them...But whenever he turns them to what the sunlight illumines, they see clearly, and sight appears to be in these same eyes...Understand then, that it is the same with the soul, thus: when it settles itself firmly in that region in which truth and real being brightly shine, it understands and knows it and appears to have reason but when it has nothing to rest on but that which is mingled with darkness – that which becomes and perishes, it opines, grows dim-sighted...and is like something without reason...Then that which provides their truth to the things known, and gives the power of knowing to the knower, you must say is the idea or principle of the good, and you must conceive it as being the cause of understanding and of truth in so far as known; and thus while knowledge and truth as we know them are both beautiful, you will be right in thinking that it is something different something still more beautiful than these. As for knowledge and truth, just as we said before that it was right to consider light and sight to be sunlike, but wrong to think them to be the sun; so here, it is right to consider both these to be goodlike, but wrong to think either of them to be the good – the eternal nature of the good must be allowed a yet higher value...The sun provides not only the power of being seen for things seen, but...also their generation and growth and nurture, although it is not itself generation...Similarly with things known...the good is not only the cause of their becoming known, but the cause that knowledge exists and of the state of knowledge, although the good is not itself a state of knowledge but something transcending far beyond it in dignity and power” (Rouse, 2015, p. 359-61; *The Republic* (508C – 509D).

This is quite an involved passage, but it seems that he spells out the nature ultimate Form (the Form of the Good). It is an ideal state of being, eternal and perfect, which produces all other Forms and glimpses of which are recognized by us through rational means. However, both sensible object and rationally perceived objects are perceived through the Forms “giving us” these sensations, for Plato. While abstract objects aren't instantiated in the world, *per se*, (only insofar as they aren't spatiotemporally located) they seem to be distinguished from concreteness in this unique sense their primary ontological features include “not being sensibly perceived”. But, they still exist “in the world”.

⁷ This excerpt was taken from a translation of W.H.D. Rouse's Book *Great Dialogues of Plato* (2015):

Plato, W. H. D. Rouse, Matthew S. Santirocco, and Rebecca Goldstein. *Great Dialogues of Plato: Complete Text of The Republic, The Apology, Crito, Phaedo, Ion, Meno, Symposium*. NY, NY: Signet Classics, 2015. Print.

Transcendence seems to be unique to the ideal objects, e.g. the Forms. Yet, they don't lack causal efficacy. In fact, the Forms are *the* causes of knowledge and truth. Curious though it may seem, Plato ascribes causal efficacy to transcendent ideal objects. But, if our distinction calls for abstract objects to have causal inefficacy, at the very least, then how could these ideal objects be anything but concrete? The primary distinction seems to hinge upon the sorts of causal abilities have and the causal relations these objects stand in. How is this possible? Could ideal objects really stand in causal relations to things?

It seems then that, and in fact it is the case, that many views assert the existence of abstract objects without positing the existence of ideal objects. Moreover, Plato asserted the existence of ideal concrete objects, which indicates that clearly there is not a necessary connection between an object being ideal and an object being abstract. But, does this mean that there are no ideal objects which are also abstract? Well, it doesn't seem that that's the case. For example, Plato seems to indicate that abstract objects *do* have causal efficacy or stand in some sort of causal relationship with us insofar as they give rise to the concepts we are able to abstract from their representations (i.e. sensible objects). Our recognition of these abstract concepts seem to be caused by the abstract objects themselves, because Plato also recognized that we can't see the entirety of any Form, in and of itself. But rather, we can see glimpses of them through these abstract concepts entering the appropriate rational space (e.g. when our mind's eye is properly situated such that it can access them). So, the role that abstract objects seem to play in Plato's account is that they act as a sort of buffer between our knowledge (of the sensible world) and the Forms themselves. So, despite what we can gather from this passage in terms of ideal objects being concrete, in other passages and dialogues (which I have not the time to get into), it seems that he treats them as abstract objects as well. Because he attributes causal efficacy to abstract objects, they may not be concrete. So, it's very difficult to pin down whether Plato thinks these ideal objects are concrete, abstract, or both. If we stick with the notion that only concrete objects

are causally efficacious, then it seems that these ideal objects can only be concrete. But, Plato himself doesn't abide by this distinction. So where do we proceed from here?

Could concrete objects be ideal? It certainly seems possible. But, that depends on whether we designate causal efficacy strictly to concrete objects. As we've seen above, (according to Lewis) it does seem possible that abstract objects can be causally efficacious. If we think that's not true or possible, then it does seem that the type of ideal objects that Plato was describing could be concrete. Let's suppose that's true (for the moment and for the sake of argument). There might be another problem. Recall that in order for an object to be ideal, one of the conditions described above is that it has to not only be transcendent, but changeless and perfect. If that's true, it might be a problem to assert that something that has causal efficacy has the property of possibly changing something or being changed by something. But that would seem to diminish or alter or change in some way the ideal thing that is causally efficacious. Can something be incapable of itself being effected, without compromising its ability to be causally efficacious? It seems that because it has the property of possibly changing or being modified or altered in some way, that which is casually efficacious is less than ideal. The presumption here is that the definitive condition necessary for a concrete object is that it is causally efficacious. If it is possible that this causal property of concrete objects isn't itself a *necessary* condition for an object to be considered concrete, then how else might we define a concrete object? So, it seems impossible if that thing is in fact ideal it can be causally efficacious. However, perhaps one could say, the ideal object stands in a one-way causal relationship. That is, the ideal object can causally effect or influence everything, but nothing can causally effect or interact with it. This seems to be possible, but tends to go against some of the traditional theistic notions of a concrete ideal object.

Perhaps one of the biggest errors in this paper is the fact that I've failed to mention before this point that most (traditional) theistic accounts posit the existence of ideal concrete objects. For, in

order for an all-powerful, all-knowing God to exist, he must do so in the same or similar manner as an ideal object would be described above. He must be eternal, exist outside of space and time, be perfect and changeless. But, he must also be causally efficacious. The same problems and solutions that might apply to a Platonic sense of a concrete ideal may apply to a theistic notion of God, until you get to the point mentioned a moment ago: the one-way causal interaction. The problem for theists here might be that they would want to suggest that God has a two-way causal interaction with us and our maker, in terms of being able to petition him through prayer. That wouldn't be the case if concrete ideals are possible in the sense in which I've described, because it seems that the only way (I've suggested) to get around the issue of change diminishing the nature of an ideal object is to posit that that ideal object only operates in a one-way causal relationship. Perhaps the theist could argue that change doesn't result in this consequence of 'God's diminishment', or that there isn't really a problem with God having a two-way causal relationship.

I've not thought these responses thoroughly enough to make up my mind as to whether they work, or if my problem is even a problem at all. As it stands, I'm tentative to conclude that ideal concrete objects are possible, but I'm not sure I want to argue that they are impossible objects either. I believe the key to this is to determine whether it is possible for an ideal object to have causal efficacy without changing. If that's possible, then I think ideal concretes are possible. If not, then I don't think ideal concretes are possible. However, this point is not trivial. In fact, it could have serious theological ramifications. For if ideal concrete objects are impossible to exist, then we can definitively assert that God not only doesn't exist but cannot exist either (at least not in the traditional sense that accords with this Platonic notion). If ideal concrete objects are possible, then this might be something positive for theism. I'm not aiming to do either, but rather to open a dialogue and room for further inquiry.