

Review: Edward Feser, *Five Proofs of the Existence of God: Aristotle, Plotinus, Augustine, Aquinas, Leibniz*, Ignatius Press, San Francisco, CA, 2017

Pages: 330

Worth the Heavy Going

This philosophical treaty is hard going at times, and depending on the reader's background, will require a second reading and study to cement each of the five philosopher's arguments.

The author presents each argument couched in modern terms, such as the principles of proportionate causality and sufficient reason, and *agere sequitur esse*. The types of Realism are also discussed when defending change and causality.

He also anticipates common arguments by providing counters to leave no stone unturned.

While any or each proof defeats Atheism, the weakness is that it can't get one to *Christian* Theism. Nevertheless, this first step is key to good apologetics and witnessing, and so quite valuable.

Introduction (pp. 9-15)

In his *Enneads*, Plotinus referred to the absolutely simple "One".

The only possible ultimate grounding of Plato's objects is divine intellect.

The Principle of Proportionate Causality (PPC) holds that every effect must in some way preexist in its total cause.

Agere sequitur esse means the behaviour of a thing always follows its nature.

The Doctrine of Divine Conservation (DDC) holds that the world would immediately cease if God did.

The Doctrine of Causal Efficiency (DCE) holds that no thing could have any causal efficacy without being imbued with causative power by God at the moment it acts.

I) The Aristotelian Proof (pp. 17-68)

There are four kinds of change: qualitative; location; quantitative; and substantial.

Parmenides argued there was no such thing as change, since before anything ‘changed’, the new state must have already existed [as potential], else something would have to come from nothing, which is impossible. The argument is self-refuting since it *itself* must invoke change as proof. Furthermore, Aristotle showed change is potential actualisation, not fiat creation.

A hierarchical causal series must have a first member; it is a sequence whose members all exist simultaneously. The first one is said to have *direct* causal power, the dependent ones *derived* power.

Every material thing can only exist in a given moment as the result of hierarchical causality, in which all requisite potentials are being actualised.

God is also called the unactualised actualiser, and is therefore immutable and not subject to time (i.e., eternal), for time-bound beings are subject to change.

The charge is often made there could be *two or more* purely actual and maximally perfect beings, or Gods. Yet this would imply some privation or lack in each of them, so they would no longer be maximally perfect.

“Intelligence” is said to involve grasping concepts, linking ideas, and making inferences.

A cause cannot give what it doesn’t already possess.

This proof does not depend on everything having a cause, rather, that every *change* requires a cause.

Objectively, past and future exist just like the present does.

It may be claimed change exists only in the mind but not in mind-independent reality [Realism]. However, this does nothing to refute the fact that change itself is still occurring.

Even in a four-dimensional Einsteinian block universe, the whole thing requires actualisation in a single, timeless moment, which therefore presupposes potential and a distinct prime actualiser, i.e., God.

Bell inequalities are named after physicist John Bell, and measure distant but correlated locations which seem to have no common cause.

Immediate causes are always simultaneous with their effects.

II) The Neo-Platonic Proof (pp. 69-86)

A composite is less fundamental than its parts by definition. At any moment, there is presupposition parts exist and are in the right configuration to function.

Composite things must have causes.

Matter is what ties a universal form down to a particular thing in time and space. Outside of this, matter is simply Aristotelian *potential*.

A perfectly simple or *noncomposite* thing has no parts, and so no cause.

Anything less than purely actual must have partial potentiality and so have parts (actual and potential).

Plato's One and Aristotle's Unmoved Mover are really identical.

An abstract entity is causally inert.

A mental content presupposes existence of mind, and so cannot be the ultimate cause.

This argument relies on, whatever is composite requires a cause, not that everything requires a cause.

Laws of nature alone only give rise to questions about other thing made of parts which demand explanation.

III) The Augustinian Proof (pp. 87-116)

Patterns like redness, roundness, etc., are called “universals” by philosophers.

Numbers, mathematical formulae, and logical postulates are abstract objects.

Nominalism denies there are real abstract objects (Realism), and Conceptualism holds they exist, but only in the human mind.

Arguments for Realism include: mathematics; propositions; scientific laws; nature of possible worlds; incoherence of psychologism (i.e., that laws of logic and mathematics are really that which govern the human mind).

There are three forms of Realism:

1. Platonic: there are Platonic Forms, but these do not trace back to a causative mind, but reside in a “Third Realm”, and so fail to explain the objects they imitate.
2. Aristotelian: abstraction is a mental process, and forms do not exist in mind-independent reality. E.g., one could never encounter “roundness” per se, only round objects from which the mind abstracts “roundness”. The essence of things lies in the thing itself in this view.
3. Scholastic: mental abstraction of forms is real, and the forms themselves exist in the mind of God, which is infinite and eternal.

There must be e necessary existing intellect capable of grasping all local relationships between all propositions and universals., i.e., “a conceptually omniscient being, that eternally understands all essences, possibilities, and necessary truths.” [p105]

An intellect which knows all possible truths must by definition know all actual ones too.

Under Cantor's theorem in set theory, the power set of a set contains more members than the set itself.

IV) Thomistic Proof (pp. 117-145)

If essence and existence of a thing were the same, then knowing the former would mean knowing the latter (and vice versa), but this is false.

If existence of a contingent thing was not distinct from its essence, then its essence would entail existence, meaning it would not really be contingent.

Something can't impart anything to another without first existing.

A thing can't cause its own existence at any moment in time.

Subsistent existence itself must be God.

This argument only assumes anything whose essence and existence are distinct requires a cause.

Essentialism holds there are real essences, but these would be hard to precisely define and identify anyway.

V) The Rationalist Proof (pp. 146-168)

The Principle of Sufficient Reason (PSR) states everything must have an explanation.

For PSR to hold and God to exist, He must have sufficient reason in Himself.

PSR cannot be rationally denied, for doing so would need to invoke PSR itself (this is radical scepticism).

The explicability argument holds one is justified in rejecting an argument if at base it simply relies on a brute fact.

PSR is hostile to the notion of brute facts.

An infinite multiverse is an infinite series of contingent things, which can't explain existence *of the series itself*.

Infinite series is not sufficient reason to erase contingency, only a necessary non-contingent being can.

Explanandum: that which needs explaining.

Explanans: the things used to explain the *explanandum*.

Whether or not quantum mechanics have a cause, they certainly still require an explanation.

VI) The Nature of God and of His Relationship to the World (pp. 169-248)

Evolution is often put forward as a counter to PPC, since 'complex' life arises from 'simple', or effects are greater than causes. However, the dogma states all the basic genetic information is aboriginal, and only random mutation and time intervene to vary this.

PSR leads to PPC, for if an effect could go beyond its total efficient cause, mystery would exist.

Whole potential being is not an actual, it still is a kind of analogous being.

Positive statements can be made about God by applying analogies of attribution and proper proportionality.

To deny God is noncomposite is to deny his ultimacy.

Since God acts as Creator, this necessitates Him changing, but *not* changing His being. Assuming otherwise is a Fallacy of Accident.

What dies must have parts that can separate and which were potentially nonexistent or contingent.

If God were time-bound, then He would always be adding moments of time to his life. Instead, God from outside of time causes a single act in

which all of time, space, and matter instantiate and then play out. One analogy is the story in an author's mind, which may arrive in an instant, yet beginning, story, and ending must still be written out.

An analytical statement is one true by virtue of its terms.

Evil is derivative or absence of goodness, or a kind of unrealised potentiality.

It is argued God's failure to create all the good He could have is a character defect counting against omnibenevolence. He should have created a world in which free agents only freely chose to do good, never evil [!].

Earthly virtues learned by the saints are believed to be maintained in heaven, since they are never forgotten.

God's will is free if nothing external or internal compels Him to act a certain way.

Since love entails being affected by a beloved, and being affected means changed, an immutable God cannot really love anyone. However, this antropomorphises God; He doesn't change when loving, for His love is found in His will towards creatures, not in their response or otherwise.

Attempting to define God by compartmentalising Him will always fail since he is fundamentally noncomposite.

Occasionalism holds nothing in the created world has causal efficacy, but that God is really the direct cause of all. However, this would really mean only God truly exists.

Concurrentism holds that real change outside of God is possible, yet it ultimately derives from Him, he merely "concurrs" with each action.

VII) Common Objections to Natural Theology (pp. 249-316)

The existence of chance demands non random regularities.

Thomas Nagel (*The Last Word*, OUP, 1997, pp130-1): “My guess is that this cosmic authority problem is not a rare condition and that it is responsible for much of the scientists and reductionism of our time.”
[p305]

Some good acts of freewill like granting mercy *necessitate* the existence of evil.

Aquinas’ Five Ways are:

1. Unmoved Mover (argument from motion).
2. Causality (efficient to uncaused).
3. Contingency of creation.
4. Perfection: from degrees ending in the Perfect.
5. Final Causality (a Supreme Intellect).