

The Neo-Platonic Proof

by Ed Feser

Informal statement of the argument: Stage 1

The things of our experience are made up of parts. Suppose you are sitting in a chair as you read this book. The chair is made up of parts, such as the chair legs, the screws that hold the legs to the frame of the chair, the seat and back of the chair, and a cushion and the fabric that covers it. The book itself is made up of parts, such as the cover, the pages, the glue that secures the pages to the cover, and the ink on the pages. You are yourself made up of parts, such as your arms and legs, eyeballs and ears, bones and muscles, and all the rest.

There is a sense in which, in each of these cases, the parts are less fundamental than the whole. After all, we understand what a leg or an eyeball is by reference to the whole organism whose leg or eyeball it is. A leg is something which helps an organism to move about, and an eyeball is something which allows the organism to have visual experiences of objects in its surrounding environment. The parts of the book and the chair are also to be understood by reference to the whole. A book cover is something that protects the pages of the book and indicates, via the words written on it, the author of the book and something of the book's contents. A chair leg is something which holds the chair up, a cushion something that functions to make the chair comfortable for the person sitting in it, and so forth.

Still, there is obviously also another sense in which each of these wholes is less fundamental than its parts. For the whole cannot exist unless the parts exist and are combined in the right way. For example, if there were no chair legs, no frame, or no seat, the chair would not exist. Neither would it exist if these parts were simply thrown in a pile or put together in the form of a table (say), rather than assembled into a chair, specifically. Similarly, the book would not exist if the pages, cover, glue, and so forth did not exist, or if they existed but were scattered across a field. Your body would not exist if your arms, legs, eyes, ears, bones, muscles, and so

forth were similarly scattered across the field or lumped together into a big pile, instead of being configured in the normal way.

So, the things of our experience are *composite*, or composed of parts. And a composite is less fundamental than its parts in the sense that its existence presupposes that its parts exist and are put together in the right way. You might think that this has essentially to do with there being some point in time at which the parts are not assembled into the whole, and then later on they are so assembled. And that is true in many cases. For example, the parts of a chair are made first and then assembled into a chair. But it is not true in every case. In the case of the human body, for example, it isn't that the arms, legs, eyes, and ears all come into existence first and are then assembled into a body. Rather, they all develop together as cells divide while you gestate within the womb. Moreover, a composite thing would be less fundamental than its parts in the relevant sense even if it had never come into existence but somehow had always existed. For instance, even if a certain chair had always existed, it would still be true that its existence presupposes that its parts exist and are put together in the right way. For that matter, it would also depend on its parts even if it had not existed always, and not been assembled over time either, but instead came into existence altogether and all at once.

So, a composite depends on its parts not merely (and indeed not necessarily always) in a temporal sense, but more fundamentally (and always) in an atemporal sense. At any particular moment, a composite thing's existence will presuppose that its parts exist and are put together in the right way at that moment, and this will be the case whether or not that composite thing has existed always, or only for a certain number of minutes, hours, days, or years, or only for an instant.

How do the parts of a composite come together to form the whole? It can't be the composite *itself* that causes this to happen. This is obvious enough when we're thinking in temporal terms. Chairs, for example, don't assemble themselves. Someone has to take the parts and put them together. But again, even if we think atemporally of the chair at any particular moment, the existence of the chair depends on the existence and proper arrangement of the parts. And the chair as a whole can't be the *cause* of those parts existing, and being assembled in just the right way, at that moment. We would in that case have an explanatory vicious circle, insofar as the existence of the whole would depend on the existence and arrangement of the parts, and the existence and arrangement of the parts would depend on the existence of the whole. The chair would be lifting itself up by its own metaphysical bootstraps, as it were.

In fact, of course, the existence and arrangement of the chair's parts at any moment does not depend on the chair itself, but on myriad other factors. For example, the chair legs are at any moment at which the chair exists fastened to the frame of the chair by screws, and friction ensures that the screws stay in place. The legs and screws themselves exist at that moment because their respective molecules exist and are combined in certain specific ways, and the existence of the molecules themselves is explained in turn by the existence of the atoms that make *them* up and those atoms being combined in certain specific ways. Then there are other factors, such as the temperature in the room in which the chair sits being within the right range. Naturally, if it were sufficiently hot in the room, the metal that makes up the screws would melt, the wood of the chair would catch fire, and thus the chair itself could not hold together. That the room is instead at a lower temperature is thus part of what makes it possible for the chair to exist at any moment. All of these factors (and others too) have, at any moment, to be combined in just the right way in order for the parts of the chair to exist and be combined in just the right way, so that the chair itself can exist at that moment.

What is true of the chair is true of all the other composite things of our experience. At any moment at which they exist, their parts exist and are arranged in just the right way, and that is the case only because various other factors exist and are combined in just the right way at that moment. ***Composite things have causes, and this is true not merely in the sense that something brings them into being at some point in time, but also in the more fundamental sense that their continued existence at any particular moment of time depends, at that moment, on other things which exist at that moment.***

Notice that whereas the chair's having being assembled by someone in a factory would involve a causal series of a *linear* sort, the chair's continued existence at any moment being dependent on other factors existing and being combined in just the right way at that moment involves a causal series of a *hierarchical* sort (to make use of some jargon introduced in the previous chapter). This is indicated by the fact that the factors in question are simultaneous, all operating at the same moment; but remember that what is essential to the notion of a hierarchical causal series is not simultaneity per se but rather the way the causal power of members of the series is derivative (as the power of a stick to push a stone derives from the hand which pushes the stick). The chair exists only because its parts exist and are combined in the right way, the parts in turn can exist and be combined in the right way only insofar as certain other factors exist and are combined in just the right way, and so on. If the latter factors don't "hold together", neither will the chair hold together.

We started out by considering parts of everyday material objects which are themselves everyday material objects—chair legs, screws, paper, eyeballs, muscles, and so forth—but as the discussion has progressed, we have made reference to parts that are not *everyday* material objects (such as atoms) or which are not *objects* at all (such as temperature). And the parts of a thing can be more exotic still, as they are according to various metaphysical theories. For example, according to Aristotelian philosophers, all physical substances are composites of *form* and *matter*. It is by virtue of its form that a piece of copper (say) has its distinctive properties, such as malleability and the capacity to conduct electricity; it is by virtue of its very different form that a tree has its own distinctive properties and activities, such as the capacity to take in water and nutrients through roots; it is by virtue of yet another sort of form that an animal has its own distinctive properties and capacities, such as the ability to take in information through specialized sense organs; and so forth. Now, each of these kinds of form—the form of copper, the form of a tree, the form of an animal—is *universal* in the sense that it is one and the same form that exists in different individual things at different points in time and space. This piece of copper, that one, and a third one are all *copper* (rather than lead or gold) precisely because they have one and the same form; this tree and that one are both trees precisely because they have the same form, the form of a tree; this animal and that one are both animals because they both have the form of an animal; and so forth. *Matter*, by contrast, is what ties this otherwise universal form down to a particular individual thing at a particular time and place.

Now there is a lot more to this analysis of physical objects, but whether one accepts it is irrelevant to the present argument.¹ The point is just that what has been said here about ordinary physical parts like chair legs and screws would be true also of metaphysical parts like form and matter, if they exist. That is to say, anything that is a composite of form and matter would have to have a cause which combines those parts, just as a chair requires some cause to combine the chair legs, screws, and so forth, in order for the chair to exist. For on the Aristotelian analysis, the form of something like copper or a tree is, all by itself and apart from matter, a mere abstraction rather than a concrete object. For the form to exist concretely requires that there be some matter to take that form on. But matter all by itself and apart from any form is, for the Aristotelian, nothing but the *potential* to be something. It is only *actually* some thing if it has the form of some particular kind of thing. So, though form and matter are different, there is a sense in which form depends on matter and matter depends on form. We would thus have an explanatory vicious circle if there were not something outside them which accounted for their combination.

Other metaphysical parts too might be identified. For example, Thomist philosophers hold that we can distinguish between the *essence* of a thing and its *existence*—that is, between *what* the thing is and the fact *that* it is. There is, for example, the essence or nature of a triangle—being a closed plane figure with three straight sides— and the existence of some particular triangle, which differs from the existence of some other particular triangle. Now, a thing exists at all only as a thing of some kind or other, so that there is no such thing as the existence of a triangle (to stick with that example) apart from the essence of the triangle. But the essence of a triangle all by itself and apart from any actual triangle which has that essence is a mere abstraction rather than a concrete object. So, some particular concrete triangle’s essence has no reality apart from the triangle’s existence. As with matter and form, then, the essence and existence of a thing depend on one another in such a way that if there were no cause outside of the thing that accounts for how the essence and existence are conjoined, we would have an explanatory vicious circle.

Here too for the moment nothing rides on whether one actually accepts this distinction or the metaphysical system of which it is a part (though we will have reason to revisit the Thomistic distinction between essence and existence in a later chapter).² The point, again, is just that the principle that *whatever is composite has a cause* is completely general, applying whatever the parts are of which a thing is composed.

Now, if some composite thing is caused by another composite thing and that by yet another in a hierarchical causal series, then for the reasons set out in the previous chapter, that series must have a first member. But the first member cannot itself be composite, for then it would require a cause of its own and thus not be *first*. So, it must be something non-composite, something utterly *simple* in the sense of having no parts of any kind—no material parts, and no metaphysical parts like form and matter or essence and existence.

For any of the composite things of our experience to exist at all here and now, then, there must also exist here and now a non-composite or utterly simple ultimate cause of their existence—a cause which, following the Neo-Platonic philosopher Plotinus, we might call *the One*.

Informal statement of the argument: Stage 2

What is the One like? For example, is it unique? Could there be more than one of the One? There could not be. For suppose there were two or more non-composite or utterly simple causes of things. Then there would have to be some *feature* the possession of which distinguishes one of them from the other. Non-composite or simple cause A would differ from non-composite or simple cause B insofar as A has feature F, which B lacks, and B has feature G, which A lacks. But in that case neither A nor B would really be simple or non-composite after all. A would be a simple or non-composite cause *plus* F, and B would be a simple or non-composite cause *plus* G. F and G would be different *parts*, one of which each of these causes has and the other of which it lacks. But a simple or non-composite cause has no parts. So, there can be no feature one such cause has and the other lacks. So, there can be no way one such cause could differ from another, and so there just couldn't *be* more than one such cause. The One is "one", then, not just in the sense of being simple or non-composite, but also in the sense of being unique. It is the *same* one simple or non-composite cause to which all the composite things of our experience ultimately trace.

The One must be *changeless* or *immutable*. For to change entails gaining or losing some feature, and if the One could gain or lose some feature, it would not be simple or non-composite. Rather, it would be a simple or non-composite thing *plus* this feature, in which case the feature would be a *part*, and thus the One just wouldn't really *be* simple or non-composite. If the One is changeless or immutable, then it is also *eternal* or outside time, since to be in time entails undergoing some change. It must also be eternal in the sense of neither coming into being nor passing away. For if it came into being, it would have a cause, which entails that it has parts which were combined at the time it was caused; and it has no parts. If it could pass away, then that would entail that it has parts it could be broken down into; and again, it has no parts.

Furthermore, as is noted by William Vallicella (who defends an argument similar to the argument of this chapter: [*A Paradigm Theory of Existence: Onto-Theology Vindicated*](#)) "everything is either a mind, or a content in a mind, or a physical entity, or an abstract entity." Now, the One cannot be an abstract entity, because abstract entities are causally inert. (For example, while a stone can break a window, the abstract pattern of being a stone cannot break a window, or do

anything else for that matter.) But the One is the cause of the existence of composite things. Nor can the one be a physical or material entity, because material entities have parts which need to be combined in order for them to exist, and the One has no parts. They are for that reason capable of coming into existence and passing away, which, as I have just argued, the One is not. Nor can the One be a content in a mind—a thought, say—because a mental content depends on the mind whose content it is, and thus cannot be an ultimate cause of anything. But the One is the ultimate cause of things. So, to paraphrase Vallicella, “given that [the One] is neither abstract nor physical, what we must conclude is not that [it] is a mental content, but that [it] is either a mind, or more like a mind than anything else.”

Now, the One must be the cause of all things other than itself, for since it is unique, anything other than itself is composite, and we have already seen that anything that is composite must ultimately depend for its existence on the One. I have also argued that the One is itself uncaused, simple or noncomposite, unique, immutable, eternal, immaterial, and a mind or intellect. That much would already justify us in calling the One “God”. But much more can be said. The One also has to be regarded as *purely actual* rather than a mixture of actuality and potentiality. Obviously it has to be at least *partially* actual, for the reasons set out in the previous chapter—namely, that nothing that is *merely* potential can do anything, and the One is doing something insofar as it is the cause of all things other than itself. But if it was less than purely actual, then it would be partially potential. In that case it would have parts—an actual part and a potential part—and it has no parts. So, again, it must be purely actual.

If the One is purely actual, though, and we add to our considerations the principle of proportionate causality appealed to in the previous chapter, then everything said there about the Unmoved Mover or purely actual actualizer of things will be true also of the One. We can thus add to the attributes already named, and judge the One to be also *perfect, omnipotent, fully good, and omniscient*. Indeed, the One and the Unmoved Mover are really identical. For both are purely actual, and as we saw in the previous chapter, there cannot even in principle be more than one thing that is purely actual. In arriving at the existence of the One, then, we have really just arrived at the existence of the Unmoved Mover from a different starting point. In the previous chapter, we started with the distinction between actuality and potentiality, and concluded that there must be something that is purely actual. In the present chapter, we started from the idea of things that are composed of parts, and concluded that there must be something which is simple or non-composite. But

it turns out that these are just different ways of thinking about one and the same thing.

That God, despite being unique and without parts, may be understood or conceived of in different ways is crucial to understanding what is wrong with an objection that might have occurred to some readers. One might ask, if the One is omnipotent, is an intellect, and so forth, doesn't that entail that it has parts? For aren't omnipotence, intellect, and the like *different* attributes, and thus different *parts* of the One? Part of the answer to this objection is to note that while the statement that "the One is omnipotent" doesn't *mean* the same thing as the statement that "the One is an intellect", it doesn't follow that they are not statements about the same one reality. The logician Gottlob Frege famously distinguished between the *sense* of an expression and its *reference*. The expression "the evening star" doesn't have the same sense as the expression "the morning star", but both expressions refer to one and the same thing—namely, the planet Venus. Similarly, "the One's omnipotence" and "the One's intellect" don't have the same sense, but they refer to the very same thing, to a single, simple, or non-composite reality. The intellect, omnipotence, eternity, immateriality, and so forth of the One are really all one and the same thing, just *conceived of* or *described* in different ways.

Still, it might be objected: When we talk about a human being's intellect and power, these are not *merely* different ways of *conceiving or describing* things, but ways of conceiving or describing what are themselves *different things*. A human being's power is just a different feature from his intellect. So, how can they fail to be different attributes in the One? The answer is that if we were using expressions like "intellect" and "power" in exactly the same sense when we apply them to the One as the sense in which we use them when we apply them to human beings, then they would be different features. But precisely because the One is non-composite and thus lacks distinct parts, we cannot, or at any rate should not, apply these terms to the One in exactly the same sense. We should understand them instead in what Thomas Aquinas called an *analogical* sense.

The analogical use of terms is typically contrasted with the univocal use and the equivocal use. We use a term univocally in two contexts when we use it in the same sense in both contexts. For example, if I say that Rover is a dog and that Fido is a dog, I am using the term "dog" in a univocal way. We use a term equivocally in two contexts when we use it in one context in a sense that is completely different from the sense it has in the other. For example, if I say that the baseball player swung the bat and that there was a bat flying around the attic, I am using the term "bat" in an equivocal way. The analogical use of terms is a middle-ground

sort of usage. When a term is used analogically in two contexts, the term is not used in exactly the same sense in both contexts, but the senses are not completely different either. For example, if I say that the wine is still good and that George is a good man, I am not using the term “good” in exactly the same sense (since the goodness of wine is a very different sort of thing than the goodness of a man), but the two uses are not completely different or unrelated either. The goodness of the one is *analogous* to the goodness of the other, even if they are not the same thing. Notice that the analogical use of terms (or at least the sort of analogical use we are concerned with here) is not the same as a metaphorical use. We are not speaking metaphorically either when we say that the wine is good or that George is good. In both cases we are still using the term *literally* even if not either univocally or equivocally.

When we say of God that he is powerful, or has intellect, or is good, then, we should (so Aquinas argues, rightly in my view) understand these terms analogically. We are saying that there is in God something *analogous* to what we call power in us, something *analogous* to what we call intellect in us, and something *analogous* to what we call goodness in us. These are not utterly unrelated to power, intellect, and goodness as they exist in us (the way that being a baseball bat is utterly unrelated to being the sort of bat that flies around the attic). But neither are God’s power, intellect, and goodness exactly the same as what exists in us. In particular, what we call God’s power, intellect, and goodness (as well as the other divine attributes) are all ultimately *one and the same thing* looked at from different points of view, whereas what we call power, intellect, and goodness in us are not the same thing.

This is, of course, odd, but it should not be surprising nor in any way regarded as suspect. On the contrary, it is exactly what we should expect. A scientific analogy will help us to see why. Modern physics famously tells us that elementary particles exhibit properties not only of particles, but also of waves. This is very strange and difficult to understand, but we have good reason to accept it anyway. For one thing, the observational evidence together with rigorous scientific theorizing point in that direction. For another thing, the phenomena in question are very remote from everyday experience. To describe them we have to take concepts whose original application was to the material objects we see around us every day and stretch them very far, so as to apply them to microscopic phenomena that we do not observe. It is only to be expected that the conclusions we are thereby led to should be hard to grasp. We have excellent reasons to believe both *that* wave-particle duality is real and that we should not be able fully to understand *how* it works.

Now, when we reason to the existence of a purely actual actualizer of things or to an absolutely simple or non-composite cause of their existence, we are also going very far beyond the world of everyday experience. Indeed, we are getting to *the most fundamental level of reality*, to a level even farther from experience than anything physics describes or can describe. Hence, to characterize it, we have to stretch our ordinary concepts and language to the absolute limit. It is hardly surprising if we should arrive at some conclusions that are very unusual and difficult to understand. On the contrary, it would be surprising if we did *not* arrive at such conclusions. So, we have compelling reasons to conclude not only *that there is* an absolutely simple or non-composite purely actual actualizer of the existence of things—and that this ultimate cause is one, eternal, perfectly good, an intellect, omnipotent, and so forth—but also that we should find it difficult to *understand* such a thing. Reason itself thus tells us that there is a level of reality that reason can only partially comprehend.

Much more could be said and will be said when we get to the chapter on the divine attributes. But this much suffices to show that to prove the existence of an absolutely simple or non-composite cause of things is indeed to prove the existence of God.

A more formal statement of the argument

With the overall thrust of the reasoning of this second argument for God's existence having now been made clear, it will be useful to have a summary presented in a somewhat more formal way. It might be stated as follows:

1. The things of our experience are composite.
2. A composite exists at any moment only insofar as its parts are combined at that moment.
3. This composition of parts requires a concurrent cause.
4. So, any composite has a cause of its existence at any moment at which it exists.
5. So, each of the things of our experience has a cause at any moment at which it exists.
6. If the cause of a composite thing's existence at any moment is itself composite, then it will in turn require a cause of its own existence at that moment.
7. The regress of causes this entails is hierarchical in nature, and such a regress must have a first member.
8. Only something absolutely simple or non-composite could be the first member of such a series.
9. So, the existence of each of the things of our experience presupposes an absolutely simple or non-composite cause.
10. In order for there to be more than absolutely one simple or non-composite cause, each would have to have some differentiating feature that the others lacked.
11. But for a cause to have such a feature would be for it to have parts, in which case it would not really be simple or non-composite.

12. So, no absolutely simple or non-composite cause can have such a differentiating feature.
13. So, there cannot be more than one absolutely simple or non-composite cause.
14. If the absolutely simple or non-composite cause were changeable, then it would have parts which it gains or loses—which, being simple or non-composite, it does not have.
15. So, the absolutely simple or non-composite cause is changeless or immutable.
16. If the absolutely simple or non-composite cause had a beginning or an end, it would have parts which could either be combined or broken apart.
17. So, since it has no such parts, the absolutely simple or non-composite cause is beginningless and endless.
18. Whatever is immutable, beginningless, and endless is eternal.
19. So, the absolutely simple or non-composite cause is eternal.
20. If something is caused, then it has parts which need to be combined.
21. So, the absolutely simple or non-composite cause, since it has no parts, is uncaused.
22. Everything is either a mind, or a mental content, or a material entity, or an abstract entity.
23. An abstract entity is causally inert.
24. So, the absolutely simple or non-composite cause, since it is not causally inert, is not an abstract entity.
25. A material entity has parts and is changeable.
26. So, the absolutely simple or non-composite cause, since it is without parts and changeless, is not a material entity.

27. A mental content presupposes the existence of a mind, and so cannot be the ultimate cause of anything.
28. So, the absolutely simple or non-composite cause, being the ultimate cause of things, cannot be a mental content.
29. So, the absolutely simple or non-composite cause must be a mind.
30. Since the absolutely simple or non-composite cause is unique, everything other than it is composite.
31. Every composite has the absolutely simple or non-composite cause as its ultimate cause.
32. So, the absolutely simple or non-composite cause is the ultimate cause of everything other than itself.
33. If the absolutely simple or non-composite cause had potentialities as well as actualities, it would have parts.
34. So, since it has no parts, it must have no potentialities but be purely actual.
35. A purely actual cause must be perfect, omnipotent, fully good, and omniscient.
36. So, there exists a cause which is simple or non-composite, unique, immutable, eternal, immaterial, a mind or intellect, the uncaused ultimate cause of everything other than itself, purely actual, perfect, omnipotent, fully good, and omniscient.
37. But for there to be such a cause is just what it is for God to exist.
38. So, God exists.

Some objections rebutted

Some of the objections a critic might think to raise against this argument are the same as those raised against the Aristotelian proof, to which I have already replied or will reply. For example, objections might be raised against the arguments given here for the claim that the simple or non-composite cause of things would have to have the various divine attributes. As I have said, I am going to address the question of the divine attributes at length in a later chapter, and such objections will be addressed there. The point to emphasize for the moment is that what has been said so far suffices to show that it is no good lazily to object (as is often done) that even if there is a first cause of things, we have no reason to think it would be a divine cause. For we have just set out reasons to think it *must* be a divine cause. Hence, it will not do for the critic glibly to suggest that an ultimate cause of things need not be God.

Some might also object that the present argument assumes that the universe had a beginning, or is open to the retort “If everything has a cause, then what caused God?” We have already seen why these objections are completely without force when raised against the Aristotelian proof, and they have no more force when raised against the Neo-Platonic proof. For one thing, as should already be clear to anyone who has been reading carefully, the argument is simply not concerned in the first place with whether or not the universe had a beginning in time. The claim is *not* that the chain of causes of composite things traces backward into the past until it terminates in a simple or non-composite cause. Rather, the claim is that it traces *here and now* to a simple or non-composite cause. Nor does the argument rest on the premise that “*everything* has a cause.” What it says is that *whatever is composite* requires a cause. And the reason God does not have a cause is not that he is an arbitrary exception to a general rule, but rather that only what is in some way composite needs to have, or indeed could have, a cause. Something absolutely *simple* or *non-composite* not only needs no cause but could not have had one. Nor is this point something defenders of the argument have come up with as a way to try to sidestep the “What caused God?” objection. It was *always* what the Neo-Platonic tradition had in mind from the beginning. As in the case of the Aristotelian proof, the “What caused God?” objection, far from being the devastating reply many atheists suppose, is in fact utterly incompetent, completely missing the point of the arguments at which it is directed.

The reader is advised, then, to review what was said in the previous chapter in reply to the various objections there considered, for many of the points made there are relevant here also. For example, some critics may appeal to Hume, or to quantum mechanics, in order to cast doubt on the premise that whatever is composite requires a cause. But these objections too are no better when raised against the Neo-Platonic proof than they were when raised against the Aristotelian proof.

But there are other potential objections which take aim at what is distinctive about the present argument. Whereas the Aristotelian proof reasons from the fact that some potentials are actualized to the existence of a purely actual actualizer, the Neo-Platonic proof reasons from the fact that some things are composite to the existence of an absolutely simple or non-composite cause. But it might be suggested that there are alternative ways to account for the existence of composite things. For the argument assumes that for a composite thing to exist, its parts have to be unified by some *external* cause. But why assume this? Why not suppose instead that it is precisely some *part* of a composite thing that unifies its parts, rather than something external? Or why not suppose that the fact that a composite thing's parts are unified is just an irreducible fact about it?

[But as Vallicella has argued, neither of these suggestions really makes any sense.](#) (William F. Vallicella, "From Facts to God: An Onto-Cosmological Argument", *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 48 (2000): 157—81; see also Vallicella, *Paradigm Theory of Existence*, chap. 7. What I present here are just brief summaries of lines of argument Vallicella develops in much greater detail. I should also note that my terminology differs from his.)

Start with the suggestion that the parts of a thing are unified by some further part. For instance, consider a thing composed of parts A and B. What makes it the case that A and B are united in such a way that the composite thing in question exists? The suggestion at hand would be that there is some further part, C, which accounts for A and B being united. But the problem is that this just pushes the problem back a stage, since we now need to ask what unites C together with A and B. If we posit yet another further part, D, in order to account for the unity of A, B, and C, then we will merely have pushed the problem back yet another stage. And of course the problem will just keep recurring for each further part we posit. We will not have solved the problem of explaining the unity of A and B at all, but rather just compounded the problem.

Suppose instead that we opt for the alternative suggestion, to the effect that a composite thing's parts A and B being unified in such a way that it exists is just an irreducible fact about the thing. What exactly does this claim amount to? Does it mean that the composite thing made up of A and B is *itself* the cause of A and B being unified in such a way that the composite thing exists? That would entail that the composite thing is both the *cause* of its parts A and B being unified and the *effect* of its parts A and B being unified—which is incoherent. As we saw above, nothing can be the cause of itself, lifting itself up by its own metaphysical bootstraps. Is the idea instead that a composite thing's parts A and B being unified in such a way that the thing exists has no cause at all, but is just a brute fact? In that case, the critic is not really offering an *alternative* explanation to the Neo-Platonic argument at all, but rather giving *no* explanation. Yet an alternative explanation is what he claimed to be offering.

Suppose the critic of the Neo-Platonic argument bites the bullet at this point and says: “OK, so I haven't actually offered an alternative explanation. I guess I'm really just suggesting that there is no explanation at all for why a composite exists.” As Lloyd Gerson has pointed out, this is hardly a serious response to a Neo-Platonic argument for God's existence.

(Lloyd P. Gerson, *Plotinus* (London: Routledge, 1994), This way of putting the point makes it sound as if laws of nature are something *extrinsic* to the things the laws govern, which is not how Aristotelian philosophers understand laws. As we will see in a later chapter, from an Aristotelian point of view, a law of nature is a shorthand description of the way a thing will tend to operate given its nature or substantial form, where its nature or substantial form is something *intrinsic* to it. But this is no help to the critic of the Neo-Platonic proof, since a thing's substantial form is, together with prime matter, one of two basic principles of which it is composed. Hence, on the Aristotelian view, the operation of a law of nature *presupposes* the combination of the basic metaphysical parts of the thing it governs. So it can hardly be what *explains* that combination.)

The defender of the argument can reasonably say: “What are you talking about? I *just gave you* an explanation—namely, that its parts are conjoined by an absolutely simple and non-composite cause. And you have offered no non-question-begging reason to reject that explanation. So, it's silly to say ‘Maybe there's no explanation’!”

Might the critic of the Neo-Platonic proof acknowledge that there is an explanation, and acknowledge that it must be a cause that is external to the

composite thing itself (rather than being either the composite as a whole or some further part of the composite), but without having to agree that the cause is divine? In particular, could he not say that a composite thing's parts being combined in such a way that the thing exists can be explained scientifically? The idea here would be that we can explain why the composite thing's parts A and B are conjoined in terms of *laws of nature* (whether laws of atomic structure, or laws of molecular cohesion, or whatever).

But this proposal too does not provide a genuine alternative at all. For however we construe laws of nature—and we will consider the various possible accounts of what a law of nature is in a later chapter—any explanation in terms of laws of nature will inevitably just leave us with some further thing made up of parts whose composition requires an explanation, thus continuing rather than terminating the regress of causes. For instance, if we say of some composite thing composed of parts A and B that it is a law of nature that things of type A and things of type B will combine under such-and-such circumstances to form the whole, then we have to ask why things of type A and type B are governed by *that* particular law rather than some other. A and B as well as the law governing them will together constitute a kind of composite whose existence is just a further instance of the sort of thing for which the critic of the Neo-Platonic proof was supposed to be providing an alternative explanation.

(To be sure, Neo-Platonic philosophers like Plotinus located intellect in a *second* divine reality after the One. But one need not agree with all of the specific details of their position in order to embrace the general Neo-Platonic approach to arguing for the existence of God.)

There simply is no way to terminate this regress other than by positing something absolutely simple or non-composite, and for the reasons given, this cannot be something less than divine.

As I have said before, in later chapters we will consider various further objections which might be raised against any first cause argument for God's existence. Suffice it for present purposes to note that the objections that might be raised against a specifically *Neo-Platonic* argument, like those raised against the Aristotelian proof, all fail.

Want to “understand” G-d? Contemplate His Unity

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[Mandatory Feser](#)

[Does “Hear O Israel...” apply to a Noahide?](#)

"Essentially what Rambam is saying is that ANY person -- *this is an important point to mention* ... this refers to non-Jews as well. ... Clearly Rambam meant to include Gentiles in this statement. ... A Jew *or a Gentile* who chooses to dedicate his life to studying the Word of HaShem and to become a spiritual and pious person and spread the knowledge of HaShem in the world, such a person is considered to be doing the work of HaShem. ... And therefore HaShem will look out for him. Rambam is saying something very interesting ... HaShem will apply a special kind of Providence." [Rabbi David Bar Hayim](#)

[MVN: Most Valuable Noahide](#)

[MVR: Most Valuable Rationalist](#)