The Neo-Platonic Proof for the existence of God


Summarized by: Mohammed Zamin
Preface and methodology

The below is meant to break down the Neo-Platonic proof for the existence of God as explained by Edward Feiser. Given that I intended to maintain the language and meaning of the author, most of the passages below are direct excerpts from the book. However, this is a summary of the chapter in the book as a result, all aspects have not been covered particularly the rebuttals.

A video explanation of the argument: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rPrbKD-EppA

A read of the previously summarised argument would assist in grasping the current argument: https://secondchanceread.wordpress.com/2021/06/18/the-aristotelian-proof-of-the-existence-of-god/

The Argument

The things of our experience are made up of parts, for example, a chair is made up of parts such as the chair legs, screws, cushion and the fabric that covers it. A book is made up of parts such as the cover, the page, 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 arm and legs, eyeballs and ears, bones and muscles, and all the rest. Such examples exist all around us.

In each of the above examples, there is a sense that the parts are less fundamental than the whole. We understand what a leg or an eyeball is by reference to the whole organism whose leg or eyeball it is. The parts of the book and the chair are also to be understood by reference to the whole. However, simultaneously, there is another sense in which each of these wholes is less fundamental than its parts for, the whole cannot exist unless the part exists and are combined in the right. For example, if there were no chair legs, no frame, or no seat, the chair would not exist.

The things of our experience are composite or composed of parts. 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. 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. 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 multiple 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 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.

At any moment at which a composite exists, 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 been 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\(^1\) sort. 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.

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 noncomposite, 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

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\(^1\)A hierarchical series was defined earlier in the book on Page 20 that is: “What we have here, as you may have noticed, is something like the cup which is held up by the desk which is held up by the floor. Only in this case it is the very existence of a thing that is at issue rather than merely its particular location. The potential of the coffee to exist here and now is actualized, in part, by the existence of the water, which in turn exists only because a certain potential of the atoms is being actualized, where these atoms themselves exist only because a certain potential of the subatomic particles is being actualized. This is a hierarchical series—one which, as we have seen, must have a first member. We have also seen that what it means for such a series to have a first member is that there is something which can impart causal power to the other members of the series without having to have that power imparted to it—something that has its causal power in a "built-in" or nonderivative way. Now since what is being explained in this case is the actualization of a thing’s potential for existence, the sort of "first" cause we are talking about is one which can actualize the potential for other things to exist without having to have its own existence actualized by anything.”
existence—a cause which, following the Neo-Platonic philosopher Plotinus, we might call the One.

**A formal argument**

Premise 1- Every composite object has a cause.
Premise 2- If every composite object has a cause, then an absolutely simple and non-composite First Member exists.
Conclusion 1- Therefore, an absolutely simply and non-composite First Member exists.
Premise 3- If there is an absolutely simply and non-composite First Cause, then God exists.
Conclusion 2- God exists.

**Attributes**

1. **One-** For there to be two of something, there would have to be some feature that distinguishes one of them from another. To assume two exist would mean that A has a part that is lacking in B however, a simple and non-composite cause has no parts. Therefore, there can be no feature that one such cause has and the other lacks.

2. **Changeless-** For something to undergo change entails gaining or losing a feature. If the One could gain or lose some feature, it would not be simple or non-composite.

3. **Eternal-** If the One is changeless, then it is also eternal or outside time in the sense that it neither came into being nor passes away. For if it came into being, it would have a cause, which entails that it has parts that 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.