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Alexander R. Pruss, THE PRINCIPLE OF SUFFICIENT REASON: A REASSESSMENT

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one cannot *know everything* about God. When religious experts—at least the ones with which I am familiar, such as Alston, Bradshaw, Engelhardt, Plantinga, Swinburne, etc.—say that God is incomprehensible, they are using the term in something like the latter sense. Contrary to what Dennett suggests, they seem perfectly capable of demonstrating, at least to other experts, that "they know what they are talking about."

Nonetheless, my suspicion is that Dennett correctly suggests that many, perhaps the overwhelming majority, of the religious do not understand in a technical, philosophical sense the doctrines they profess and, hence, that they do not believe them in a technical, philosophical sense. Whether they 'believe,' or have 'faith,' in some other sense is an interesting question and one that has received a fair amount of attention both from philosophers and from theologians—see, e.g., Alston, Muyskens, Pojman, Plantinga, Pruss, etc.; cf. Augustine, Aquinas, Calvin, and Luther. Unfortunately, however, Dennett addresses only a very limited sample of the literature on this topic. Thus, his discussion of belief in God, though interesting and important, is rather misleading and underdeveloped.

In the third part (chapters 9–11), Dennett turns his attention to questions about the professed benefits of religion and about the practical implications of his hypothesis. There is much that is of interest in this section, but (in the interest of brevity) let me highlight just two particularly important claims. One is that if religions are going to claim to have physical or moral benefits, they should subject their claims to scientific scrutiny. The other is that the religious must stand up, forcefully and effectively, to the extremists in their midst who foster ignorance or evil in the name of their religion.

In summary, Dennett's fans will likely be disappointed to the extent with which Dennett sacrifices rigor for accessibility, and the readers he desires most to reach will likely find his writing style objectionable, in part because he likes to "tease" (p. 412n18) and in part because he is both less than fully accurate in representing and less than fully charitable in dealing with the positions with which he disagrees (see, e.g., pp. 227–228, 268, 365). Nonetheless, everyone should share his stated goal: to discover the truth about the world's religions (see, e.g., p. 311f., 319). Thus, whatever its shortcomings in substance and in style, *Breaking the Spell* is worth reading for those who are interested in a provocative and accessible survey of "the best current version" of the naturalistic study of religion.

The Principle of Sufficient Reason: A Reassessment, by Alexander R. Pruss. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006. Pp. xiii and 335. $88.00 (Cloth).

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Leibniz tells us that the principle of sufficient reason (PSR), along with the law of non-contradiction, is one of the two principles upon which we

base all of our reasoning. Those who are accustomed to reflecting on PSR within the confines of the cosmological argument might wonder about assigning such a significant role to PSR. In *The Principle of Sufficient Reason: A Reassessment*, Alexander R. Pruss parts company with Leibniz over the necessitating nature of PSR, but offers a wide-ranging discussion worthy of the seventeenth-century polymath. Among other things, Pruss relates PSR to modal fatalism, libertarian freedom, quantum mechanics, counterfactuals, self-evidence, inference to the best explanation, and alethic modality. I found his critique of ungrounded causal chains, reconciliation of PSR with indeterminacy, and linking of PSR with Aristotelian alethic modality especially intriguing.

Pruss's preferred version of PSR is *Necessarily, every contingent truth has an explanation*. Necessity here is broadly logical or metaphysical necessity, and the scope of explanation is—with respect to contingency—global. To grasp the sorts of states of affairs Pruss takes PSR to range over, it is helpful to consider his critique of the Humean claim that explanation is agglomerative.

In his *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, Part IX, David Hume writes

> Did I show you the particular causes of each individual in a collection of twenty particles of matter, I should think it very unreasonable, should you afterwards ask me, what was the cause of the whole twenty. (cited by Pruss, p. 41)

Pruss argues that, even if we suppose that each of the particles causes another, this causal account cannot be explanatorily adequate. Appealing to the first particle to explain the second, the second the third . . . and finally the twentieth to explain the first, takes us right back to where we started, leaving us with a vicious circularity.

Pruss goes on to show that there is a looping problem even with infinitely long causal chains, so long as they are "groundless," that is, lacking both a first member causing all the other members and an external cause for the entire chain. To illustrate this (see p. 43 for the formal argument), Pruss asks us to imagine an infinite sequence of chickens and eggs, with each chicken owing its existence to the preceding egg and each egg owing its existence to the preceding chicken.

> [I]f we accept infinitely regressive explanations, then we should be willing to say that the existence and activity of the members of the set of eggs are explained by the existence and activity of the members of the set of chickens while the existence and activity of the chickens are explained by that of the eggs. This is circular and clearly fails to answer the question why there are any chickens and eggs at all. (p. 44)

If, in keeping with PSR, all contingent truths have genuine explanations and there cannot be any ungrounded causal chains, then there must be a regress-stopping, necessarily existing first cause. So, PSR's global range of explanation points pretty clearly in the direction of theism.

Pruss compares the global PSR with "local" causal principles such as *Every contingent being that comes into existence has a cause* and *Every*

contingent event has a cause (p. 66). These more restricted principles do permit ungrounded causal chains. Pruss, however, argues that the intuition behind these principles moves us past them to the global PSR.

Most of us, when surveying the wreckage of a plane, would not accept *The plane crashed for no reason* as the right account of the catastrophe. Rather, our intuition would be that there must be some explanation for this event. And, this intuition might lead us to accept a *local* causal principle like *Every contingent event has a cause*.

With this sort of principle, the correct explanation for the crash might be found in

> [A] certain event E_1 half a minute before the crash. The event E_1 is caused by some further event E_2 two-thirds of a minute before the crash. E_2 is caused by an event E_3 three-quarters of a minute before the crash. And so on: E_{n-1} is caused by an event E_n that happened $1\text{-}1/(n+1)$ minutes before the crash. But there is, in fact, no cause one minute before the crash or earlier responsible for the crash. Rather, right after one minute before the crash an infinite chain of events eventuated for no reason at all that led to the plane's crashing. (p. 47)

But this will not do because the same intuition that led us to reject "for no reason" as the truth about the plane crash, would also lead us to reject "for no reason" as the truth about this causal chain. If, in general, we cannot satisfy our initial explanatory intuition with stories about groundless causal chains, then we cannot settle for any principle weaker than PSR, that, taken alone, permits counterintuitive ungrounded causal chains.

Pruss pays close attention to a dilemma—developed by Peter van Inwagen and others—that seems to arise from PSR's global nature. Call the collection of all contingent true propositions, the big conjunctive contingent fact, BCCF. PSR requires that there be an explanation for this fact. However, a contingent truth cannot explain BCCF for contingent truths are not self-explaining. Nor can its explanation be a necessary truth for, whatever is entailed by a necessary truth is necessarily true. So, to hold that a necessary truth entails BCCF is to take away its contingency and so deny that there is a BCCF. Thus, the advocate of PSR appears to have only two unpalatable alternatives: affirm a self-explaining contingent truth or allow that a necessary truth is the explanans for BCCF.

Pruss denies that the dilemma is foolproof and argues that the proponent of PSR can grab either horn without being impaled. Holding that a necessary truth explains BCCF is problematic only if one supposes that in order for a necessary truth to serve as the explanans for a contingent truth, there must be an entailment relation between them. But, explanation need not require entailment. We count scientific explanations with ceteris paribus clauses to be genuine explanations, even though there is no entailment between explanans and explanandum. If we count as necessary truths, *God exists*, and *God considers all of the reasons in favor of each possible creation*, then these claims can serve as the explanans for the BCCF, even though they do not entail that fact. If we assume that God has liber-

tarian freedom, then the contingent truth, *God freely chooses to instantiate BCCF for reason R*, can serve as an explanans for BCCF.

Both of these proposed explanations are controversial. Some might argue that neither non-entailing necessary truths nor an exercise of libertarian freedom could serve as adequate explanans for BCCF. The former fail in that they do not provide a sufficient condition for the explanandum, while the latter is inadequate because libertarian freedom is too mysterious to be enlightening.

Pruss disagrees. A sufficient explanation need not provide a sufficient condition, a necessitating reason, for, as already noted, an entailment relation between explanans and explanandum is not a necessary condition for a genuine explanation. With regard to the appeal to libertarian freedom, Pruss argues that this explanans tells us all there is to tell, and thereby is a paradigm case of a sufficient explanation. If one wishes to dispute the appropriateness of designating such explanations as offering sufficient reason, Pruss is willing to make a present of "sufficient reason" to his critics and dub his view the Principle of Good Explanation (p. 103).

Talk of contingency ultimately leads to the topic of modality, the last subject Pruss discusses. If it is true that things might not have been as they are, say George W. Bush could have been a used car salesman, why is that? Given David Lewis's "extreme modal realism," the answer is that there is a spatio-temporal realm, closed off from ours, in which an individual very much like George W. Bush (one of his counterparts) sells pre-owned vehicles. On an "actualist" approach to modality, the answer is to be found in relations among abstracta; there is a maximally consistent set of propositions that includes *George W. Bush runs a sale on gas guzzling SUVs*.

Pruss finds both views problematic as it is unclear how we could have epistemic access either to the Platonic heavens or to a spatio-temporal realm cut off from ours. If, however, one understands modality from an Aristotelian perspective on which possibility is grounded in the dispositions, capabilities and powers of actually existing entities, then our knowledge can be based upon direct experience. On the basis of this epistemic consideration, as well as ethical and metaphysical issues we cannot delve into here, Pruss favors the Aristotelian perspective. Here the truth of *George W. Bush might have been a used car salesman* is grounded in Bush's actual abilities.

After outlining this Aristotelian account of modality, Pruss identifies a major concern: "it is difficult to see how one could get *worlds* out of it" (p. 318). One way around this difficulty is to draw on the resources of Leibnizian theism and take a possible world to be: "a maximal idea, a thinking, in the mind of God about a world God could initiate the production of, with God being . . . the substance whose causal powers ground all other possibilities" (p. 320).

Pruss argues that, if we take Aristotelian modality, perhaps combined with Leibnizian theism, to be preferable to alternative modal views, we are thereby committed to PSR. To see this, suppose that the Aristotelian view is correct and a claim P is contingently true. And, for reductio, as-

sume that the PSR-denying claim, ~E: *There is no explanation for the truth of P and so no causal explanation for P*, is also contingently true. (Note: Pruss employs only the second conjunct in what I have called ~E; however, he derives it from the first.) Let W_1 be a possible world in which the conjunction, *P and ~E*, is true. Since this conjunction is, if true, contingently true, there is a possible world, W_2, in which it false. The Brouwer axiom tells us that if a claim is true, then necessarily it is possibly true. So, from the Brouwer axiom it follows that in W_2, though *P and ~E* is false, it is nonetheless possibly true. Given Aristotelian modal views, if *P and ~E* is possibly true in W_2 then some thing or things in W_2 must have causal powers capable of bringing about the truth of *P and ~E*. But, it is impossible for anything to cause it to be the case that an uncaused state of affairs obtains. So, the affirmation of the PSR-denying *~E*, together with an Aristotelian account of modality results in an absurdity. It follows that it is not possible that the Aristotelian modal view be true and PSR false.

Nor is it possible in a brief review to describe adequately the richness of Pruss's work. It exemplifies analytical rigor and invites continued reflection. Anyone interested in PSR owes Alexander R. Pruss a debt of gratitude.[1]

[1]Thanks to Douglas Groothuis and Mark Linville for very helpful comments on earlier drafts of the review.

Kierkegaard on Faith and the Self: Collected Essays, by C. Stephen Evans. Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2006. Pp. 352. $49.95 (hardback).

Kierkegaard's Ethic of Love: Divine Commands and Moral Obligations, by C. Stephen Evans. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004/2006 (paper). Pp. 376. $195.00 (hardback), $45.00 (paper).

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These two books represent the culmination of decades of reading Kierkegaard's texts and philosophical reflection on them.[1] They offer both a defense of the relevance of Kierkegaard to philosophy today and a polemic against various (mis)readings of Kierkegaard. Evans is one of few analytic philosophers who sees value in Kierkegaard's thought and who has patiently and carefully spent time in the Kierkegaardian texts. As a result, he has produced a substantial body of work over some thirty years that brings Kierkegaard's thought to bear not only on issues in philosophy of religion, but the wider questions of contemporary analytic philosophy as well. Both these books warrant close reading by anyone interested in

[1]For simplicity, both Evans and I use the term "Kierkegaard" to refer to the body of thought presented in the texts historically written by Søren Kierkegaard, whether pseudonymous or not. This is not to overlook the immense importance of pseudonymity but to simplify reference.