

**Alexander R. Pruss and Joshua L. Rasmussen. *Necessary Existence*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018. 240 pp. £45.00 (hbk).**

Graham Oppy  
Monash University

This book discusses arguments for and against the claim that there are necessarily existent causal beings. The main arguments for the claim that there are necessarily existent causal beings that are discussed in the body of the book are the following:

*Basic Ontological Argument* (discussed in Chapter 2)

1. It is possible that there is a necessarily existent causal being. (Premise)
2. (Therefore) There is a necessarily existent causal being. (From 1)

*Argument from Contingency* (discussed in Chapter 3)

1. For any particular contingently existent causal beings, there is an explanation of the fact that those things exist. (Premise)
2. Considering all contingently existent causal beings, if there is an explanation of the fact that those beings exist, then there is a necessarily existent causal being. (Premise)
3. (Therefore) There is a necessarily existent causal being. (From 1-2)

*Argument from Possible Causes I* (discussed in Chapter 4)

1. For any positive state of affairs that can begin to obtain, it is possible for there to be something external to it that causes it to obtain. (Premise)
2. It is possible for there to be a beginning of the positive state of affairs of its being the case that there are contingently existing causal beings. (Premise)
3. If 1 and 2, then it is possible that there is a necessarily existent causal being. (Premise)
4. If it is possible that there is a necessarily existent causal being then there is a necessarily existent causal being. (Premise)
5. (Therefore) There is a necessarily existent causal being. (From 1-4)

*Argument from Possible Causes II* (discussed in Chapter 5)

1. Normally, for any property P, if (i) P can begin to be exemplified, (ii) P can have instances that have a cause, (iii) P is basic or a determinate of a basic property, and

- (iv) there is a determinate of P that can be caused to be exemplified, then there can be a cause of P's being exemplified. (Premise)
2. There is a property C such that C = being contingent. (Premise)
  3. C can begin to be exemplified. (Premise)
  4. C can have instances that have a cause. (Premise)
  5. C is basic or a determinate of a basic property. (Premise)
  6. There is a determinate of C that can be caused to be exemplified. (Premise)
  7. If there can be a cause of the exemplification of C, then there is a necessarily existent causal being. (Premise)
  8. (Therefore) There is a necessarily existent causal being. (From 1-7)

*Argument from Modal Uniformity 1* (Discussed in Chapter 6)

1. Normally, if a proposition p differs from a proposition q by a mere quantity, and if p and q are (i) logically consistent, (ii) expressible without twin-earthable terms, and (iii) not about necessary beings, then p is possibly true iff q is possibly true. (Premise)
2. Possibly, there are finitely many contingent beings and 1% of them have a cause. (Premise)
3. (Therefore) Possibly, for any particular contingent beings, there is an explanation of the fact that those things exist. (From 1-2)
4. (Therefore) There is a necessarily existent causal being. (From 3, Argument from Contingency)

*Argument from Modal Uniformity II* (discussed in Chapter 6)

1. Normally, if a proposition p differs from a proposition q by a mere quantity, and if p and q are (i) logically consistent, (ii) expressible without twin-earthable terms, and (iii) not about necessary beings, then p is possibly true iff q is possibly true. (Premise)
2. Possibly, for some n, there is a caused beginning of there being exactly n contingently existing causal beings. (Premise)
3. (Therefore) Possibly, there is a caused beginning of there being exactly one contingently existing causal being. (From 1-2)
4. (Therefore) There is a necessarily existent causal being. (From 3, Argument from Possible Causes 1).

*Argument from Modal Uniformity III* (discussed in Chapter 6)

1. Normally, if a proposition p differs from a proposition q by a mere quantity, and if p and q are (i) logically consistent, (ii) expressible without twin-earthable terms, and (iii) not about necessary beings, then p is possibly true iff q is possibly true. (Premise)
2. Possibly, for some n, there is a cause of there being exactly n contingent things. (Premise)
3. Possibly, there is a cause of there being exactly one contingent thing. (From 1-2)

4. (Therefore) There is a necessarily existent causal being. (From 3, Argument from Possible Causes II)

*Argument from Necessary Abstracta* (discussed in Chapter 7)

1. Necessarily, there is an abstract object. (Premise)
2. Necessarily, if there is an abstract object there is a causal being. (Premise)
3. Possibly, there are no contingently existent causal beings. (Premise)
4. (Therefore) There is a necessarily existent causal being. (From 1-3)

*Argument from Perfections* (discussed in Chapter 8)

1. If A is positive, then  $\sim A$  is not positive. (Premise)
2. If A is positive and A entails B, then B is positive. (Premise)
3. Existing necessarily is positive. (Premise)
4. Possibly causing something is positive. (Premise)
5. (Therefore) There is a necessarily existent causal being. (From 1-4)

In addition, the book includes an Appendix that presents—but does not discuss—a further thirty arguments for the claim that there are necessarily existent causal beings. I shall give just two of these arguments here:

*Argument from our Readers' Cleverness*

1. At least one of our readers is smart enough to be able to rework one of our arguments into a sound argument for the existence of a necessarily existent causal being. (Premise)
2. No one can do the impossible. (Premise)
3. Necessarily, the conclusion of a sound argument is true. (Premise)
4. (Therefore) There is a necessarily existent causal being. (From 1-3)

*Master Argument*

1. The disjunction of the conjunctions of the premises of the other deductive arguments for a necessarily existent causal being in this book is true. (Premise)
2. All the deductive arguments for a necessarily existent causal being in this book are valid. (Premise)
3. (Therefore) There is a necessarily existent causal being. (From 1-2)

Finally, the book includes a discussion of six arguments against the claim that there is a necessarily existent causal being, two of which are given a standard form presentation:

*Argument from Conceivability* (discussed in Chapter 9)

1. A world empty of causal beings is conceivable. (Premise)

2. If a world empty of causal beings is conceivable, then such a world is possible. (Premise)
3. If a world empty of causal beings is possible, then there is no necessarily existent causal being. (Premise)
4. (Therefore) There is no necessarily existent causal being. (From 1-3)

*Argument from Subtraction* (discussed in Chapter 9)

1. Possibly, there is a finite number of causal things. (Premise)
2. For any non-zero finite number of causal things there might be in total, if there could be that number of causal things, then there could be fewer. (Premise)
3. If 1 and 2 are true, then there is no necessarily existent causal being. (Premise)
4. (Therefore) There is no necessarily existent causal being. (From 1-3)

The major criticism that Pruss and Rasmussen make of these two arguments is that there are ‘parity’ arguments for the conclusion that there is a necessarily existent causal being:

*Argument from Conceivability\**

1. A world in which there is an explanation for the existence of all contingently existing causal things is conceivable. (Premise)
2. If a world in which there is an explanation for the existence of all contingently existing causal things is conceivable, then such a world is possible. (Premise)
3. If a world in which there is an explanation for the existence of all contingently existing causal things is possible, then there is a necessarily existent causal being. (Premise)
4. (Therefore) There is a necessarily existent causal being. (From 1-3)

*Argument from Subtraction\**

1. Possibly, for some  $n$ , there is an explanation of there being at least  $n$  casual things. (Premise)
2. For any  $n \geq 2$ , if there could be an explanation of there being at least  $n$  causal things, then there could be an explanation of there being at least  $n-1$  causal things. (Premise)
3. If 1 and 2, then there is a necessarily existent causal being. (Premise)
4. (Therefore) There is a necessarily existent causal being. (From 1-3)

In Chapter 9, Pruss and Rasmussen claim that the existence of *these* ‘parity’ arguments creates a kind of ‘stalemate’: at most, the arguments are ‘equal in force’, and the upshot of the production of these arguments is ‘a wash’. However, there are ‘parity’—or near ‘parity’—arguments, for the conclusion that there are no necessarily existent causal beings, to be set against many of the arguments that Pruss and Rasmussen discuss:

*Basic Ontological Argument\**

1. It is possible that there is no necessarily existent causal being. (Premise)
2. (Therefore) There is no necessarily existent causal being. (From 1)

*Argument from Contingency\**

1. For some causal beings, there is no explanation of the fact that those beings exist.
2. For all other causal beings, what explanation there is of the fact that those beings exist appeals to nothing other than contingently existing causal beings.
3. (Therefore) There is no [causally active] necessarily existing causal being.

*Argument from Possible Causes 1\**

1. It is possible for there to be a beginning of the positive state of affairs of there being none but contingently existing causal beings. (Premise)
2. If it is possible for there to be a beginning of the positive state of affairs of there being none but contingently existent causal beings, then it is possible that there is no necessarily existent causal being. (Premise)
3. (Therefore) There is no necessarily existent causal being.

*Argument from Modal Uniformity I\**

1. Normally, if a proposition  $p$  differs from a proposition  $q$  by a mere quantity, and if  $p$  and  $q$  are (i) logically consistent, (ii) expressible without twin-earthable terms, and (iii) not about necessary beings, then  $p$  is possibly true iff  $q$  is possibly true. (Premise)
2. Possibly, the probability that there are thoroughly contingent things—i.e. things that do not have causal worldmates that exist of necessity—is  $\epsilon$ .
3. (Therefore) Possibly, the probability that there are thoroughly contingent things is one. (From 1-2)
4. (Therefore) There is no necessarily existent causal being. (From 3)

*Argument from Modal Uniformity II\**

1. Normally, if a proposition  $p$  differs from a proposition  $q$  by a mere quantity, and if  $p$  and  $q$  are (i) logically consistent, (ii) expressible without twin-earthable terms, and (iii) not about necessary beings, then  $p$  is possibly true iff  $q$  is possibly true. (Premise)
2. Possibly, for some  $n$ , there is an uncaused beginning of there being exactly  $n$  causal things.
3. (Therefore) Possibly, there is an uncaused beginning of there being exactly zero causal things. (From 1-2)
4. (Therefore) There is no necessarily existent causal being. (From 3.)

*Argument from Modal Uniformity III\**

1. Normally, if a proposition  $p$  differs from a proposition  $q$  by a mere quantity, and if  $p$  and  $q$  are (i) logically consistent, (ii) expressible without twin-earthable terms, and (iii) not about necessary beings, then  $p$  is possibly true iff  $q$  is possibly true.  
(Premise)
2. Possibly, for some  $n$ , there are  $n$  exemplifications of the property of being a causal being.
3. (Therefore) Possibly, there are zero exemplifications of the property of bring a causal being. (From 1-2)
4. (Therefore) There is no necessarily existent causal being. (From 3)

*Argument from Perfections\**

1. If  $A$  is fine by me, then  $\sim A$  is not fine by me.
2. If  $A$  is fine by me, and  $A$  entails  $B$ , then  $B$  is fine by me.
3. Being thoroughly contingent is fine by me.
4. (Therefore) There is no necessarily existent causal being. (From 1-3)

*Master Argument\**

1. The disjunction of the conjunctions of the premises of the deductive arguments for the claim that there is no necessarily existent causal being given in this review is true. (Premise)
2. The deductive arguments for the claim that there is no necessarily existent being given in this review are valid. (Premise)
3. (Therefore) There is no necessarily existent causal being. (From 1-2)

Is the upshot of the production of these kinds of arguments a wash? I suspect that the following things are true. First, those philosophers who suppose that there is no necessarily existent causal being will quite properly be unmoved by those among these arguments with the conclusion that there is at least one necessarily existent causal being. Second, those philosophers who suppose that there is at least one necessarily existent causal being will quite properly be unmoved by those among these arguments with the conclusion that there are no necessarily existent causal beings. Third, those philosophes who are undecided about whether there is at least one necessarily existent causal being will quite properly be unmoved by any of these arguments. Fourth, those who are not already experts in the field to which the production of these arguments belong ought to be moved by the thought that, since these arguments quite properly have no effect on those who are expert in the field, they should not properly have any effect on anyone else. Fifth, everyone should be moved to wonder whether the best response to the obvious fact of disagreement about whether there are any necessarily existent causal beings is to go in for the production of the kinds of arguments that are here on offer.

One of the striking features of the book is that it exhibits more or less no interest in the question what packages of views—about modality, causation, ontology, epistemology, axiology, etc.—are likely to be accepted by those who take particular stances on the question whether there are any necessarily existent causal beings. Some philosophers suppose that every possible world shares laws and initial causal history with the actual

world. Those philosophers divide into two camps: those who suppose that there is just one possible world; and those who suppose that there are many possible worlds. Philosophers in the first camp suppose that causal laws are deterministic; philosophers in the second camp suppose that causal laws are not deterministic. One thing that these philosophers have in common is that they suppose that, if there is an initial causal state, then that initial causal state, and anything that exists in that initial causal state, is necessary: if these philosophers are naturalists, then they suppose that the initial natural state is necessary; if these philosophers are theists, then they suppose that the initial divine state is necessary. Of course, other philosophers suppose that, if there is an initial causal state, then that initial causal state is contingent; and these philosophers divide further on the question whether there is anything that exists in the initial state that is necessary. It is to be expected that what philosophers have to say about the kinds of arguments that Pruss and Rasmussen discuss is determined by their background views about modality, causation, ontology, epistemology, axiology, and so forth. (For example, the first premise in the modal uniformity arguments will likely be less attractive to those philosophers who suppose that, if there is an initial causal state, then that state, and anything that exists in that state, is necessary.)