

*The Non-Existence of God*

By Nicholas Everitt

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This book aspires to be a reasonably comprehensive assessment of “the arguments for theism, the objections to those arguments, the objections to the truth of theism, and criticisms of those objections” (305), with an intended audience at “third-year undergraduate and postgraduate level” (xiii). As Everitt notes from the outset, the book is “avowedly partisan” (xiii): on Everitt’s own reckoning, “...the balance comes down heavily against theism. Overall, there are good reasons for thinking that theism can be proved false; and even if those reasons are found not to be compelling, overall there are further good empirical grounds for the falsity of theism.” (305) However, after he adduces this reckoning, Everitt goes on almost immediately to add a qualification: “Of course this case against theism does not settle the matter—arguments in philosophy ... virtually never do.” (305) So perhaps his final verdict is not quite as uncompromising as the back cover blurb suggests. (“Everitt’s controversial conclusion is that there is a sense in which God’s existence is disprovable, and that even in other senses a belief in God would be irrational.”) Moreover, it is important to understand the limits that Everitt imposes on the words “theism” and “God” for the purposes of his discussion. At the outset, Everitt adopts a philosophically familiar understanding of the term “God”: “[H]e is the creator and preserver of everything, a being who is omnipotent, omniscient and perfect. He is in some sense a conscious or minded being, in that he is the subject of various psychological predicates ... He is eternal, and omnipresent; and he is without bodily parts. Finally, he is an appropriate object of worship.” (15) Moreover, Everitt insists—in parallel with Sobel (2004:9)’s observations about the “core attitudinal conception of God”—that it is crucial to theism that the God for which it argues is “one who is worthy of worship” (305), and he goes on to claim that this requirement “has been a powerful factor in pulling the articulation of theism, and of the divine attributes in particular, towards extreme formulations” (305).

The range of topics discussed in the course of the book is mostly traditional. There are two introductory chapters, one devoted to a range of preliminary questions that come up in discussions of reasoning about God, and the other dealing with the question of how recent work on reformed epistemology bears on those preliminary questions. These initial chapters are followed by eight chapters that examine pro-theistic arguments, five chapters that examine anti-theistic arguments, and a brief concluding chapter that discusses the balance of argument.

The chapters on pro-theistic arguments include:

a chapter on *ontological arguments*: Anselm, Descartes, Plantinga, Malcolm, Hartshorne, and alleged general faults in ontological arguments;

a chapter on *cosmological arguments*: Craig on first causes, Leibniz on contingency, Swinburne on likelihoods, and Hawking and Atkins on the prospects for scientific explanation of the existence of the universe;

a chapter on *teleological arguments*: Swinburne on order as such, Polkinghorne on cosmic order, Paley, Hume, Darwin, and Behe on flora and fauna, and Dembski on inference to design;

a chapter on *arguments to and from miracles*: Hume on violation miracles and Holland on coincidence miracles;

a chapter on *God and morality*: the Euthyphro problem, Kant's moral argument, Ward's moral argument, and Mackie on the supervenience of the moral;

a chapter on *religious experience*: Swinburne and Alston;

a chapter on *naturalism, evolution and rationality*: Plantinga's anti-naturalist argument;

and a chapter on *prudential arguments*: Pascal, James, and an argument from "solace".

The chapters on anti-theistic arguments include:

a chapter on "the argument from scale";

a chapter on arguments from evil: Mackie, Plantinga, Rowe, Leibniz, Adams, Swinburne and Hick;

and chapters on omnipotence, omniscience, and eternity and omnipresence, in which the possibility of instantiation of these properties is considered.

Each of the chapters concludes with a useful, brief guide to further reading, including suggestions about where to look for arguments whose conclusions contradict those that are reached by Everitt himself.

There are a number of books that were designed to play the role that Everitt's book is designed to play—e.g. Matson's *The Existence of God* (1965); Mackie's *The Miracle of Theism* (1982); Martin's *A Philosophical Justification of Atheism* (1990); Le Poidevin's *Arguing for Atheism* (1996); and Sobel's *Logic and Theism* (2004). In my view, Everitt's book is a worthy addition to this list, and would make a suitable text for an upper-level course on arguments about the existence of God (paired with, say, Swinburne's *The Existence of God* (1979) or Davies' *Introduction to Philosophy of Religion* (1982)). The book is lively, engaging, well-written, and full of interesting arguments and analyses.

Because the discussion in a book such as this ranges over such a wide range of considerations, it is likely that almost any reader will find some things with which to be dissatisfied. Some causes for dissatisfaction are relatively minor. One might note, for example, that at p.82, Everitt attributes to Hawking a conflation of the Hubble expansion

of the universe with the inflation of the very early universe that is postulated in inflationary cosmologies—a conflation that Hawking certainly does not make, and that seems to be the product of confusion on Everitt's part. Or, for a different example, one might note that, at p.109, Everitt's critique of Dembski is based on a summary of Dembski's arguments that is too compressed to be worthy of discussion. (Even more trivially, there is a very curious mention of "Anselm (1998)" at p.285: I suspect that this was meant to be a reference to Hasker's *God, Time and Foreknowledge*—but it's very hard to be sure.)

A more serious ground for dissatisfaction—at least on the part of some readers—will be that really recent developments in the topics that are discussed are mostly ignored. So, for example, there is no discussion of Gödel's ontological argument; no discussion of the arguments from contingency defended by Koons, and by Gale and Pruss; no discussion of Leslie or Smith on cosmic fine-tuning; no discussion of Draper or Schellenberg on problems of evil; and so forth. Moreover, there are families of arguments that are ignored that might have been discussed: e.g. Smith's atheological cosmological arguments; Drange's argument from non-belief; quite a few of Plantinga's two dozen or so "good" arguments for theism; and so on. Some readers might have preferred a less "traditional" menu, at least as fare for beginning postgraduate students.

On the other hand, there are things in the book that are genuinely new. In particular, the chapter on "the argument from scale" is very interesting. (The argument: If the God of classical theism existed, then he would create a universe on a human scale. But the world does not display a human scale (but it rather unimaginably large, unimaginably old, etc.). So there is [some] evidence against the hypothesis that the God of classical theism exists.) Moreover, some of the analyses in the book are very forceful. I particularly liked the discussions of James on the will to believe, Alston on mystical perceptual practices, and the chapters on miracles, Plantinga's critique of naturalism, and problems of evil. On these—and some other topics—Everitt's book goes to the very top of the class that I identified above.