

# Edward Feser, *The Last Superstition* *A Refutation of the New Atheism*

## Sacred Heart Book Club discussion

Part 1 — Feb. 23, 2015

**Pope Benedict XVI**, University of Regensburg, Sept. 12, 2006

“This attempt ... at a critique of modern reason from within has nothing to do with putting the clock back to the time before the Enlightenment and rejecting the insights of the modern age. The positive aspects of modernity are to be acknowledged unreservedly.... The intention here is not one of retrenchment or negative criticism, but of broadening our concept of reason and its application. While we rejoice in the new possibilities open to humanity, we also see the dangers arising from these possibilities and we must ask ourselves how we can overcome them. We will succeed in doing so only if reason and faith come together in a new way, if we overcome the self-imposed limitation of reason to the empirically falsifiable, and if we once more disclose its vast horizons. In this sense theology rightly belongs in the university and within the wide-ranging dialogue of sciences, not merely as a historical discipline and one of the human sciences, but precisely as theology, as inquiry into the rationality of faith.”

**Paul Addresses the Areopagus** (Acts 17: 22-28)

“So Paul, standing in the midst of the Areopagus, said: ‘Men of Athens, I perceive that in every way you are very religious. For as I passed along and observed the objects of your worship, I found also an altar with this inscription, “To the unknown god.” What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you. The God who made the world and everything in it, being Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in temples made by man, nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mankind life and breath and everything. And he made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined allotted periods and the boundaries of their dwelling place, that they should seek God, and perhaps feel their way toward him and find him. Yet he is actually not far from each one of us, for

“In him we live and move and have our being”;  
as even some of your own poets have said.”

**1 Peter 3: 13-15**

“Now who is there to harm you if you are zealous for what is good? But even if you should suffer for righteousness’ sake, you will be blessed. Have no fear of them, nor be troubled, but in your hearts honor Christ the Lord as holy, always being prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you...”

## Opening Prayer

Creator of all things, true source of light and wisdom, origin of all being, graciously let a ray of your light penetrate the darkness of my understanding.

Take from me the double darkness in which I have been born, an obscurity of sin and ignorance.

Give me a keen understanding, a retentive memory, and the ability to grasp things correctly and fundamentally.

Grant me the talent of being exact in my explanations and the ability to express myself with thoroughness and charm.

Point out the beginning, direct the progress, and help in the completion. I ask this through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

— Saint Thomas Aquinas, OP (patron of scholars)

## Introduction

p. viii — “This is a book about that error: about what the error is, why it is an error, what its consequences are, and how correcting it reveals that it is a (certain kind of) moral and religious traditionalist, and not the secular liberal, who is the true upholder of reason.”

p. xi, *écrasez l'infâme* — “Voltaire’s works, especially his private letters, frequently contain the word ‘*l’infâme*’ and the expression ‘*écrasez l’infâme*’, or ‘crush the infamous.’ The phrase refers to abuses of the people by royalty and the clergy that Voltaire saw around him, and the superstition and intolerance that the clergy bred within the people.... He stated in one of his most famous quotes that ‘Superstition sets the whole world in flames; philosophy quenches them.’”

<<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Voltaire>>

## Chapter 1: Bad Religion

### ‘The New Atheism’

p. 2 — “In their condescending assumption that belief in God could only be the product of wishful thinking ..... Secularism is, in its way, a religion to itself, and it is a religion that cannot tolerate infidels or heretics.”

p. 3 — “Several years ago, Dennett famously suggested in a New York Times piece that secularists adopt the label “brights” to distinguish them from religious believers ..... perfectly encapsulates the self-satisfaction of the secularist mentality: “We’re intelligent, informed, and rational, while religious believers are stupid, ignorant, and irrational”

p. 4 — “these authors do not even so much as understand what the word “faith” itself has actually meant ..... content and self-understanding of the mainstream Western religious tradition.”

p. 5 — “Within the classical Western philosophical tradition, belief in the existence of God and the falsity of materialism has generally been thought to rest firmly and squarely on reason, not ‘faith.’”

## **The old philosophy**

p. 5 — “When one seriously comes to understand the classical philosophical tradition ..... one also comes to see how powerful are the rational foundations of the Western religious tradition.”

p. 7 — “no existing materialist attempt to explain the human mind has come anywhere close to succeeding.”

pp. 7-8 — “Contrary to the caricatures peddled in secularist literature ..... secularist propaganda that has relentlessly been directed against it since the so-called “Enlightenment.”

p. 8 — “Secular theorists often assume they know what a religious argument is like ..... familiar with existing religious-based arguments in modern political theory know that this is mostly a travesty”

p. 9 — “even when secular intellectuals do bother to consider the views of serious religious thinkers ..... desire for some claim to be true which is so powerful that it trumps a sober consideration of the evidence for it.”

p. 10 — “It is true that a fear of death, a craving for cosmic justice ..... a will to believe than on dispassionate rational arguments.”

## **The abuse of science**

p. 11 — “the assumption that the question of whether religious belief is rationally justifiable is ultimately a scientific one, and that anyone who understands modern science will see that it favors the secularist answer ..... the idea in question is not itself a scientific one at all, but a philosophical one ..... the elimination of purpose and meaning from the modern conception of the material universe was not and is not a “result” or “discovery” of modern science, but rather a philosophical interpretation of the results of modern science ..... the so-called “war between science and religion” is really a war between two rival philosophical worldviews, and not at bottom a scientific or theological dispute at all.”

p. 12 — “It is not that the methods and institutions of science somehow compel us to accept a material explanation of the phenomenal world but, on the contrary, that we are forced by our a priori adherence to material causes”

p. 13 — “The conflict, then, is not over any actual results or discoveries of science ..... the naturalistic orthodoxy of contemporary secularism”

p. 13–14 — “By ignoring the challenge posed by the classical philosophical worldview, and distorting its key ideas and arguments on those rare occasions when it is taken account of at all, secularism maintains its illusory status as the rational default position.”

### **Religion and counter-religion**

p. 18 — “The fact is that secularists are “for” reason ..... animus against religion is not merely a feature of the secularist mindset; it is the only feature.”

p. 20 — “whereas Dennett proposes explaining “religion as a natural phenomenon,” ..... It affords a sense of identity and meaning to those beholden to it ..... Thus do I call it the last superstition ..... “the mother of all superstitions.”

### **Things to come**

p. 21 — “The burden of the following chapters, then ..... peddled by secularist critics.”

p. 25 — “If you make the effort to work through the ideas I’ll be setting out in this book, then even if you do not end up agreeing with me that the existence of God, the immortality of the soul, and the natural law conception of morality are rationally unavoidable, you will understand how reasonable people could be convinced of this.”

## **Chapter 2: Greeks Bearing Gifts**

### **From Thales to Socrates**

p. 28–31 — “Thales, as evidenced by his focus on a particular observable phenomenon ..... Pythagoras, given his focus on mathematics ..... Thales posits a material basis to all reality, Pythagoras posits something immaterial ..... Part of what led to this interest in first principles among the Pre-Socratics was the notice they took of the phenomena of change and permanence in the world around them ..... There is also the question of the relationship between the one and the many ..... For Heraclitus, permanence is an illusion, and change is the universal feature of reality ..... Parmenides took the diametrically opposite view. Change and

diversity are the illusions, he tells us ..... Zeno (b. 490 B.C.), a disciple of Parmenides, developed similar arguments, such as the famous paradox of Achilles and the tortoise ..... tendency to emphasize the diversity and changeability of things was associated with an emphasis on the senses ..... Socrates ... hope of finding the true essences of the things he was inquiring about.”

### **Plato's Theory of Forms**

pp. 31–32 — “This brings us at last to Socrates’ student Plato ..... just be to know the Form of Justice.”

pp. 33–34 — “What we know when we know the essence of triangularity is something universal rather than particular, something immaterial rather than material, and something we know through the intellect rather than the senses.”

p. 34 — “Now if the essence of triangularity is something neither material nor mental ..... What we grasp, in short, is a Form.”

p. 35 — “The world of the senses – of particular geometrical objects ..... we know instead through pure thought or unaided reason.”

pp. 36–37 — “the Forms, as archetypes or perfect patterns, are the standards by reference to which particular things in the world of our experience count as being the kinds of things they are ..... This entails a standard of goodness, and a perfectly objective one ..... For (Plato seems to think) if to know a thing requires knowing its Form ..... knowledge of it is the supreme kind of knowledge.”

p. 38 — “Pointing forward in time, we see in Plato ..... essences; that human beings have immaterial souls; that all of this is knowable through reason, and that knowing it is the highest end of philosophy and science.”

### **Realism, nominalism, and conceptualism**

pp. 40–41 — “let’s consider three sorts of things (though there are more than that) that give every appearance of being abstract objects of the sort Plato is committed to, viz. entities existing outside time and space and outside the human mind. The first are universals ..... A second example would be numbers and other mathematical entities ..... Nor are numbers purely mental: as with geometrical truths ..... necessary truths rather than contingent ones ..... Then we have what philosophers call propositions ..... are in some sense distinct from the material world ..... propositions are also independent of any mind.”

p. 41 — “The view that universals, numbers, and/ or propositions exist objectively ..... The standard alternative views are nominalism, which denies that universals and the like are real, and conceptualism, which acknowledges that they are real but insists that they exist only in the mind”

p. 47 — “For if we say that our concepts, standards of logic, etc., are determined ..... this sort of view completely undermines itself.”

### **Aristotle’s metaphysics**

p. 51 — “How significant is Aristotle? Well, I wouldn’t want to exaggerate, so let me put it this way: Abandoning Aristotelianism, as the founders of modern philosophy did, was the single greatest mistake ever made in the entire history of Western thought ..... practical depersonalization of man that all of this has entailed”

### *Actuality and potentiality*

p. 53 — “Parmenides’ claim was that something can’t come from nothing ..... possible candidate for a source of change ..... being and non-being aren’t the only relevant factors here; there are also a thing’s various potentialities. The distinction between actuality and potentiality, then, is the key to understanding how, contra Parmenides, change is possible.”

p. 54 — “Once you make this simple distinction between actuality and potentiality, you are on your way to seeing that there is and must be a God.”

p. 54–55 — “Aristotle holds that even though a thing’s potentials are the key to understanding how it can change, this is not the end of the story. An outside source of change is also necessary ..... no potential can actualize itself, and in this sense anything that changes requires something outside it to change it ..... Thus we have the classic Aristotelian principle: Whatever is changed is changed by another, or, in its more traditional formulation, Whatever is moved is moved by another.”

p. 55–56 — “while actuality and potentiality are fully intelligible only in relation to each other ..... It is incoherent to speak of something both existing and being purely ..... for Aristotle there is such a being, namely God ..... Potency and Act divide being in such a way that whatever is, is either pure act, or of necessity it is composed of potency and act as primary and intrinsic principles.”

## Key terms

**Fideism** — “The view that religion rests on ‘faith’ alone, understood as a kind of ungrounded will to believe.”

Feser, Edward (2012-08-15). *The Last Superstition: A Refutation of the New Atheism* (Kindle Locations 294-295). St. Augustine's Press. Kindle Edition.

**Materialism** — “A form of philosophical monism which holds that matter is the fundamental substance in nature, and that all phenomena, including mental phenomena and consciousness, are the result of material interactions.”

<<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Materialism>>

**Materialism, eliminative** — “A **materialist** position in the **philosophy of mind**. Its primary claim is that people's **common-sense** understanding of the **mind** (or **folk psychology**) is false and that certain **classes of mental states** that most people believe in do not **exist**. Some eliminativists argue that no coherent **neural basis** will be found for many everyday psychological concepts such as **belief** or **desire**, since they are poorly defined. Rather, they argue that psychological concepts of **behaviour** and **experience** should be judged by how well they reduce to the biological level. Other versions **entail** the non-existence of conscious mental states such as **pain** and **visual perceptions**.”

<[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Eliminative\\_materialism](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Eliminative_materialism)>

**Materialism, reductive** — “A **physicalist** theory, in the **philosophy of mind**. It asserts that **mental events** can be grouped into *types*, and can then be **correlated** with types of physical events in the brain.”

<[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Type\\_physicalism](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Type_physicalism)>

**Nominalism** “A metaphysical view in philosophy according to which general or abstract terms and predicates exist, while universals or abstract objects, which are sometimes thought to correspond to these terms, do not exist.”

<<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nominalism>>

**Naturalism** “The view that the natural, material world is all that exists and that empirical science is the only rational source of knowledge;” the “idea or belief that only **natural** (as opposed to **supernatural** or **spiritual**) laws and forces operate in the world.”

**Realism** — “The view that universals, numbers, and/ or propositions exist objectively, apart from the human mind and distinct from any material or physical features of the world;” “The belief that some aspect of our reality is ontologically independent of our conceptual schemes, perceptions, linguistic practices, beliefs, etc. Realism may be spoken of with respect to other minds, the past, the future, universals, mathematical entities (such



as natural numbers), moral categories, the material world, and thought. Realism can also be promoted in an unqualified sense, in which case it asserts the mind-independent existence of a visible world, as opposed to skepticism and solipsism. Philosophers who profess realism state that truth consists in the mind's correspondence to reality.”

<[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Philosophical\\_realism](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Philosophical_realism)>

**Reductionism** — “A philosophical position that holds that a complex system is nothing but the sum of its parts, and that an account of it can be reduced to accounts of individual constituents. This can be said of objects, phenomena, explanation, theories, and meanings. Reductionism strongly reflects a certain perspective on causality. In a reductionist framework, the phenomena that can be explained completely in terms of relations between other more fundamental phenomena, are called epiphenomena. Often there is an implication that the epiphenomenon exerts no causal agency on the fundamental phenomena that explain it. The epiphenomena are then termed to be ‘nothing but’ the outcome of the workings of the fundamental phenomena. In this way, for example, religion can be deemed to be “nothing but” an evolutionary adaptation, and beliefs can be considered “nothing but” the outcome of neurobiological processes.”

<<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Reductionism>>

**Scholasticism** — “A method of critical thought which dominated teaching by the academics (“scholastics,” or “schoolmen”) of medieval universities in Europe from about 1100 to 1700.... Not so much a philosophy or a theology as a method of learning, scholasticism places a strong emphasis on dialectical reasoning to extend knowledge by inference, and to resolve contradictions. Scholastic thought is also known for rigorous conceptual analysis and the careful drawing of distinctions. In the classroom and in writing, it often takes the form of explicit disputation: a topic drawn from the tradition is broached in the form of a question, opponents' responses are given, a counterproposal is argued and opponent's arguments rebutted. Because of its emphasis on rigorous dialectical method, scholasticism was eventually applied to many other fields of study. As a program, scholasticism began as an attempt at harmonization on the part of medieval Christian thinkers: to harmonize the various authorities of their own tradition, and to reconcile Christian theology with classical and late antiquity philosophy, especially that of Aristotle but also of Neoplatonism.... Some of the main figures of scholasticism include Anselm of Canterbury, Peter Abelard, Alexander of Hales, Albertus Magnus, Duns Scotus, William of Ockham, Bonaventure, and Thomas Aquinas. Aquinas's masterwork *Summa Theologica* [is] considered to be the pinnacle of scholastic, medieval, and Christian philosophy.

<<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Scholasticism>>

**Scientism** — “Belief in the universal applicability of the scientific method and approach, and the view that empirical science constitutes the most authoritative worldview or most valuable part of human learning to the exclusion of other viewpoints.... It has been

defined as ‘the view that the characteristic inductive methods of the natural sciences are the only source of genuine factual knowledge and, in particular, that they alone can yield true knowledge about man and society.’”

<<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Scientism>>

## Further Reading

Beckwith, Francis. "Intelligent Design, Thomas Aquinas, and the Ubiquity of Final Causes". <[http://biologos.org/uploads/projects/beckwith\\_scholarly\\_essay.pdf](http://biologos.org/uploads/projects/beckwith_scholarly_essay.pdf)>

Copleston, Frederick. *Aquinas: An Introduction to the Life and Work of the Great Medieval Thinker*.

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<<http://www.amazon.com/Aquinas-Beginners-Guide-Edward-Feser/dp/1851686908/>>

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———. "What Is It Like to Be a Bat?". *The Philosophical Review*, Vol. 83, No. 4. (Oct., 1974), pp. 435-450.

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Schall, James V. *The Regensburg Lecture*.

<<http://www.amazon.com/Regensburg-Lecture-James-V-Schall/dp/1587316951/>>

Wippel, John F. *The Metaphysical Thought of Thomas Aquinas*.

<<http://www.amazon.com/Metaphysical-Thought-Thomas-Aquinas-Renaissance/dp/0813209838/>>

These notes and additional materials can be downloaded from:

<[http://www.thehostetters.net/public/Sacred\\_Heart/bookclub/Feser\\_Superstition](http://www.thehostetters.net/public/Sacred_Heart/bookclub/Feser_Superstition)>