

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

Sacred Heart Book Club discussion

Part 2 — March 2, 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)

Chapter 2: Greeks Bearing Gifts

Aristotle's metaphysics

Form and matter

p. 57 — “Aristotle insists that common sense is right in affirming irreducible composites of matter and form.”

p. 58 — “some of the forms a thing has are non-essential makes a thing the kind of substance or thing that it is, its essence.”

The four causes

pp. 62–63 — “The first is what is traditionally called the material cause these causes provide a complete explanation of a thing”

p. 64 — “A thing's formal cause is, at the deepest level, its substantial form so forth just as material and formal causation are deeply intertwined appearances notwithstanding.

p. 65 — “Aristotle would be mystified by the modern tendency to treat cause and effect different in this case? Logically speaking, the events are “loose and separate,” discovering these correlations.”

p. 66 — “for common sense it is ultimately things that are causes considered under different descriptions.”

pp. 67–69 — “a further Aristotelian principle concerning efficient causation the cause of a fire might itself be on fire how the effect came about in just the way it did evolution does nothing to disprove the principle”

pp. 69–71 — “Aristotle regards final causation – goal-directedness, purposiveness Aristotle takes final causation or goal-directedness to exist throughout inorganic nature mostly totally divorced from any conscious mind or intelligence Aquinas refers to the final cause as “the cause of causes,” efficient causality cannot be made sense of apart from final causality”

p. 71 — “modern philosophers, scientists, and intellectuals in general claim not to believe in final causality it is held that modern science shows that there are no formal or final causes meaningless, goal-free causes and effects.”

Chapter 3: Getting Medieval

What Aquinas didn't say

p. 77 — “if you haven't both understood Aquinas and answered him anything even remotely like an attempt to answer him, feeble as it is.”

p. 80–81 — “Dawkins assumes that Aquinas is engaged in a kind of empirical theorizing Aquinas does not argue in this lame “God of the gaps” manner”

p. 82–83 — “Aquinas's arguments, like Plato's and Aristotle's, are metaphysical in character, not scientific. Scientific arguments start from empirical premises certain metaphysical conclusions follow necessarily.”

pp. 83–84 — “Part of the problem with Dawkins's criticisms of Aquinas scientism is shown thereby to be incoherent.”

p. 85 — “This brings us to the second thing to keep in mind you simply cannot understand the arguments in question,”

pp. 85–86 — “Aquinas does not argue from the claim that “everything has a cause,” being, change, and goal-directedness.”

pp. 87–88 — “To understand what serious religious thinkers do believe, we might usefully distinguish five gradations in one's conception of God: Such concepts make no sense when literally applied to God. ”

The existence of God

p. 90 — “it is very hard to avoid realism about universals Hence it follows that God exists.”

The Unmoved Mover

p. 91 — “Aquinas thought that the most evident of the arguments for God's existence was that which showed that the very existence of change requires that there be a first unchanging changer of everything that changes, which analysis reveals is identical to God as usually understood..”

p. 92 — “a crucial distinction Aquinas and other medieval philosophers made between two kinds of series of causes and effects, namely “accidentally ordered” and “essentially ordered” series (or causal series per accidens and per se.”

p. 93 — “an accidentally ordered series, like the fathers begetting sons who beget more sons there must be a first member.”

pp. 94–95 — “the hand is not really the first member of the series depends on the simultaneous actualization of another,”

pp. 95–96 — “a first mover in such a series must be itself unmoved or unchanging the only way to stop this regress no admixture of potentiality whatsoever Aquinas goes on to say: “. . . and this we call God a being describable in philosophical terms as “Pure Actuality,”

p. 96 — “once we have this much in hand, we can go on to deduce all sorts of things about what a being of Pure Actuality would have to be like, and it turns out that such a being would have to be like the God of traditional Western religious belief.”

pp. 97–98 — “there cannot possibly be more than one being who is Pure Actuality A being of Pure Actuality, lacking any potentiality whatsoever, would also have to be immaterial But the Unmoved Mover, as the source of all change, is the source of things coming to have the attributes they have He not only has knowledge, but knowledge without limit, being all-knowing.”

p. 99 — “To show that an Unmoved Mover exists, then, is just to show that there is a single being who is the cause of all change, Himself unchangeable, immaterial, eternal, personal (having intelligence and will), all-powerful, all-knowing, and all-good. It is, in short, to show that there is a God.”

p. 101 — “the analysis of motion or change as a transition from potentiality to actuality is a metaphysical analysis that is deeper than any empirical scientific theory. Theories of the latter sort merely give us different accounts of the specific physical mechanisms by which the transition from potentiality to actuality occurs in the material world, and can never call into question the distinction itself, which can only be evaluated by philosophical means.”

The First Cause

p. 104 — “This distinction between essence and existence Existence or being is what “actualizes” a form or essence nothing can cause itself; whatever comes into existence, or more generally whatever must have existence added to its essence in order

for it to be real, must be caused by another Notice that it does not say that “Everything has a cause” – something which, as I have said, Aquinas never asserted or would have asserted. The principle says only that what does not have existence on its own must have a cause.”

pp. 108–109 — “everything in the universe, and indeed the universe as a whole, must be sustained in being here and now by a cause outside it, a First Cause which upholds the entire series it would have to be a being whose essence just is existence; or, more precisely, a being to whom the essence/ existence distinction doesn’t apply at all, who is pure existence, pure being, full stop: not a being, strictly speaking, but Being Itself He would also, as Being Itself, exist “necessarily” rather than “contingently” God would have to be an absolutely simple being the First Cause, since He is not a composite of essence and existence but just is pure existence itself, is simple. There are no parts or components in Him, not even metaphysical ones God is not one instance of a category or essence, not one particular existing thing of a general type.”

The Supreme Intelligence

pp. 111–12 — “Aquinas’s Fifth Way has nothing to do with either Paley’s design argument or the creation/ evolution debate whereas Aquinas is attempting to provide a strict and airtight metaphysical demonstration of the existence of God, Paley – like the “Intelligent Design” theorists who follow him – is arguing instead on the basis of empirical probabilities”

pp. 114–16 — “The universe is filled with natural regularities; this is uncontroversial But there is no way to make sense of these regularities apart from the notion of final causation, of things being directed toward an end or goal causes don’t simply happen to result in certain effects, but are evidently and inherently directed toward certain specific effects as toward a “goal.” Yet it is impossible for anything to be directed toward an end unless intellect outside that universe which directs things toward their ends.”

Chapter 4: Scholastic Aptitude

The soul

pp. 120–22 — “for Aristotle, a soul is just the form or essence of a living thing “By ‘soul’ we simply mean to refer to the nature of a living thing, whatever that turns out to be.” the relationship between kinds of souls illustrates there is a natural hierarchical relationship between them.”

pp. 122–23 — “Rationality – the ability to grasp forms or essences and to reason on the basis of them actions that further the hierarchically ordered natural ends entailed by human nature the deepest truth about the world, as we have seen, is that it is caused and sustained in being by God. The highest fulfillment of the distinctively human power of intellect, then, is, for Aristotle and Aquinas, to know God.”

p. 123 — “that the powers of nutritive and sensory souls are completely tied to the material stuff that makes up the living things they are the souls of if the matter that makes up a plant or animal goes away, the soul goes with it, for there is nothing left to underlie the operation of its powers things are very different with the power of intellect. This power cannot possibly require a material or bodily organ for its operation.”

pp. 123–26 — “Central to the intellect’s operation is its grasp of forms, essences, or universals, and other abstractions like propositions the immaterial nature of these things entails that the intellect which grasps them must itself be immaterial as well any thought is going to involve universals, propositions, numbers or the like, which we have seen are all abstract and determinate in a way material objects and processes never can be suppose a thought about the universal triangularity was something material triangle, this one too would be just one particular material thing among others, and not universal at all he is saying that given the facts about universals, etc., and our thoughts about them, it is conceptually impossible (not merely improbable) for the intellect to be material, whatever else might be true of it.”

pp. 126–27 — “If Aquinas doesn’t think of the intellect as a piece of “ectoplasm,” then, how does he conceive of it? When the intellect determines that a certain course of action is the best of which the firing of the neurons, flexing of the muscles, etc. are the material cause.”

pp. 127–28 — “Unlike the souls of plants and animals, then, the rational soul is immortal, on Aquinas’s view For a thing to perish is just for it to lose its form. But the soul doesn’t lose its form, because it is a form When does the rational soul’s presence in the body begin? At conception Rationality, locomotion, nutrition, and the like are present even at conception “in potency” or as inherent potentialities.”

pp. 129–30 — “Far from any of this being undermined by modern science, it is confirmed by it To have a certain trait “in the DNA” just is to have as a “primary actuality” the potential to realize it as a “secondary actuality.” given Aristotelian metaphysics together with the facts of modern biology, abortion necessarily counts as murder”

Key terms

Hylomorphism — “A philosophical theory developed by Aristotle, which conceives being as a compound of matter (Gk. *hyle*) and form (Gk. *morphe*).

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

Positivism — “The philosophy of science that information derived from logical and mathematical treatments and reports of sensory experience is the exclusive source of all authoritative knowledge,[1] and that there is valid knowledge (truth) only in this derived knowledge.”

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

Teleology — “An account of a given thing's purpose. For example, a teleological explanation of why forks have prongs is that this design helps humans eat certain foods; stabbing food to help humans eat is what forks are for. A purpose that is imposed by a human use, such as that of a fork, is called extrinsic. Natural teleology contends that natural entities have intrinsic purposes, irrespective of human use or opinion.

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

These notes and additional materials can be downloaded from:

<http://www.thehostetters.net/public/Sacred_Heart/bookclub/Feser_Superstition>