

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

Sacred Heart Book Club discussion

Part 3 — March 9, 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 4: Scholastic Aptitude

Natural law

pp. 132–33 — “far from having no rational basis, the moral views now associated in the secularist mind entails a conception of morality traditionally known as natural law theory The “nature” of a thing, from an Aristotelian point of view, is, as we’ve seen, the form or essence it instantiates the fact that such defective triangles exist in the natural world and in accordance with the laws of physics doesn’t make them any less “unnatural” in the relevant sense.”

pp. 135–36 — “Let’s back up then, and see what morality in general looks like from a point of view informed by Aristotelian metaphysics Like Plato, Aristotle takes a thing’s form, essence, or nature to determine the good for it when we turn to human beings we find that they too have a nature or essence precisely the natural end or purpose of the faculties of intellect and will.”

pp. 137–38 — “The will of its very nature is oriented to pursuing what the intellect regards as good For you do by nature want to do what you take to be good for you; reason reveals that what is in fact good for you is acting in a way But that is a problem of will, not of reason.”

pp. 138–40 — “thought that there is a frightfully difficult problem of “deriving an ‘ought’ from an ‘is’ All of this falls apart if we deny that anything has a final cause or that there are forms, essences, or natures in the Aristotelian sense subjective preferences rather than reflective of objective goodness or badness.”

pp. 141, 142, 144, 145 — “Suppose, then, that things really do have final causes, including our various biological capacities. Then it is hardly mysterious what the final cause or natural purpose of sex is: procreation everything said so far, apart from the reference to final causes, would be endorsed by Darwinians as a perfectly accurate description of the biological function of sex, whether or not they would agree with the moral conclusions natural law theorists would draw from it The teleology or final causality of sex thus pushes inevitably in the direction of at least some variation on the institution of marriage Since the final cause of human sexual capacities is procreation, what is good for human beings in the use of those capacities is to use them only in a way consistent with this final cause or purpose.”

pp. 148–50 — “Another common objection is: “Wouldn’t natural law theory entail that sterile people cannot marry? Natural law theory does not condemn using a natural capacity or organ other than for its natural function, only Natural law theory does not entail that every frustration of nature’s purposes is a serious moral failing acting

contrary to them cannot fail to be of serious moral significance the metaphysics underlying natural law theory entails that marriage is, not by human definition, but as an objective metaphysical fact determined by its final cause, inherently procreative, and thus inherently heterosexual.”

p. 152 — “the tedious secularist allegation that opposition to abortion, “same-sex marriage,” and the like can only rest on “faith,” or an appeal to divine revelation, is pure fiction. Traditional morality does not rest on arbitrary divine commands backed by the threat of punishment, but rather on the systematic analysis of human nature entailed by classical philosophy.”

Faith, reason, and evil

p. 154 — “faith, properly understood, does not contradict reason in the least; indeed, in the present context it is nothing less than the will to keep one’s mind fixed precisely on what reason has discovered to it The arguments we’ve been examining, if successful, show that pure reason can reveal to us that there is a God, that we have immortal souls, and that there is a natural moral law.”

pp. 157–58 — “of course Christianity does not teach that every believer must be able to make some fancy philosophical case even though it is indirectly based on them Most people who believe that $E = mc^2$, and who believe almost any other widely known and generally accepted scientific proposition there is nothing per se wrong with it in religion.”

pp. 158–59 — “This is the sense, then, in which the sorts of arguments we’ve been examining are “preambles to faith.” They set the stage for faith by giving it a rational basis this understanding of faith has, as I have said, been the mainstream one in the history of Christianity that the point of these condemnations was to distance Christianity from the sort of irrationalism and fideism affair, cut off from any grounding in objective fact and rational argument if the “New Atheists” are serious about making a rational case for atheism mainstream Christian theological tradition has itself always condemned.”

p. 161–62 — “now that we have a fix on the relationship between faith and reason, we can turn once again to the problem of evil Aquinas, as he so often does, gets to the nub of the matter He should allow evil to exist, and out of it to produce good To quote St. Paul once again, “the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us.”

p. 163–64 — “Reason itself, as I have argued, shows us that there is a First Cause who is Being Itself constitute any evidence whatsoever against the existence of God.”

p. 164 — “Faith is not emotional; it is rather an act of the will. And again, not because faith contradicts reason, for it doesn’t. Rather, faith in God in the face of evil is nothing less than the will to follow reason’s lead when emotion might incline us to doubt.”

Chapter 5: Descent of the Modernists

Pre-birth of the modern

pp. 167–69 — “Both Scotus and Ockham denied the possibility of the sort of knowledge of God Aquinas claimed The motivation for Scotus’s skepticism was an excessive emphasis Thus are we brought by Ockham to the idea that morality rests on completely arbitrary divine commands nothing in creation that can give us such knowledge For Ockham, there are no true universals, essences, or natures faith as the only possible source of moral knowledge.”

pp. 169–70 — “skepticism about the possibility of our knowing objective causal connections science follows theology onto the scrap heap views like Ockham’s prefigured themes that would come to define modern philosophy possibility of deriving morality from human nature faith becomes more central to religion and reason recedes, which in turn leads to skepticism about the possibility of giving religion a rational foundation at all.”

p. 171 — “Aristotelian metaphysics involves a number of complex distinctions same nominalism many of them would come to endorse themselves.”

Thoroughly modern metaphysics

pp. 171–72 — “The usual story is that modern scientific discoveries refuted Aristotelianism doctrine of the four causes, hylomorphism, and so forth the argument for the Unmoved Mover alternative metaphysical theory, not from empirical science.”

p. 173 — “Galileo’s difficulty arose, not because he advocated Copernican views arguments, it is now known, were seriously flawed.”

p. 174 — “Consider that by the time Bacon, Hobbes, Descartes, et al. were writing Aristotelian Scholasticism with the primacy of individual conscience Intentionally or not, the Reformation thus ushered in a new worldliness made religion come to seem rationally unfounded as well.”

pp. 175–77 — “to a very great extent it was a desire to further the project modern science, far from refuting Aristotle’s metaphysics simply denying the existence of anything that couldn’t be wedged in Admit formal and final causes into the world, and at once you are stuck can pretend that this refusal even to play the game counted as a “victory” “wishful thinking” lay behind the belief of the early moderns subsequent technological application.”

p. 178 — ““Mechanical Philosophy” The historical development of this new philosophy was complex this sort of object or event and sometimes it’s that sort; and that’s it.”

pp. 180–81 — “it is not as if the subsequent findings of modern science cannot be incorporated within an Aristotelian framework only a purely mechanistic or naturalistic interpretation of these findings The empirical chemical facts as now known are nothing other than failure to distinguish metaphysical issues from empirical ones.”

pp. 181–82 — “The empiricist John Locke presented some equally bad objections not members of another species or of no species Similarly, Locke’s further claim, that the fact that a human being might lose his memory potential for the exercise of rationality is actually in every human organism.”

Inventing the mind-body problem

pp. 186–87 — “The meaning and purpose that Descartes, like other moderns Mechanical Philosophy took to govern the rest of the universe this emphasis on the primacy of subjective human consciousness an unprecedented moral and intellectual catastrophe.”

pp. 188–90 — “This sort of view is also exemplified by the famous distinction between primary and secondary qualities tendency to cause us to have certain sensations Objectively, according to the Mechanical Philosophy, there are just colorless since these sensible qualities themselves cannot be material There are thus two realms, the material world no less subject to the purposeless laws of nature.”

pp. 190–92 — ““qualia,” a technical term for the characteristic features scientific reductionism the way everything else has there is a very good reason why the human mind alone should be uniquely resistant to “scientific explanation,” genuine feature of objective physical reality in this case the phenomenon to be explained just is, the existence of conscious experience itself.”

pp. 192–93 — “Far from being a desperate attempt to avoid the implications of modern science mind, treated as a mere projection.”

pp. 195–97 — “Recall that for Aristotle and Aquinas, the human soul is the form of a living human body words, the soul-body connection is no different one billiard ball knocking into another the notion of souls and bodies interacting seems consistent with the laws of physics.”

pp. 198–99 — “Without God to solve the “interaction problem” “interacting” with the material world as a formal rather than an efficient cause.”

Universal acid

The problem of skepticism

pp. 199–201 — “in the Aristotelian conception of the soul, when the intellect knows something outside it, one and the same form exists both in the intellect and the thing known But the moderns rejected formal causation, and with it this picture of knowledge when the “mental representation” is caused “in the right way” whether our “mental representations” have in fact been caused by the things they purportedly represent thus opens up an unbridgeable “gap” between mind and reality.”

The problem of induction

p. 202 — “How can we know that what we haven’t observed is like what we have observed? from the past and present to the future?”

Personal identity

p. 204 — “If there are no formal causes, then the soul is not the form of the body the person himself – disappears from the world of the senses.”

pp. 207–208 — “The inevitable result of these various lines of thought convention, of how we decide to apply the word “person.” Thus is the way opened to the moral justification of killing unborn children and starving crippled women to death, while saving whales and promoting vegetarianism. And it all began with the abandonment of Aristotle by professing Christians like Descartes and Locke.”

Free will

p. 208–209 — “when formal and final causes are chucked out, intellect and will material elements recognized by the Mechanical Philosophy Intellect and will are no

longer formal and final differs in degree but not in kind from the behavior of billiard balls and soap suds.”

Natural rights

pp. 210–11 — “what becomes of natural rights if there are no formal or final causes possessions effectively violates God’s property rights God now takes center stage in a way He had not in the Aristotelian-Thomistic tradition has no choice but to go straight to God to find any plausible source of moral obligation if you say that every human being has various natural rights “But we get to decide who is a human being and who isn’t.” Oh.”

Morality in general

p. 212 — “To deny that there are any formal or final causes reference to which it can be judged objectively “right” or “wrong.””

pp. 212–13 — “For the Humean, all value is subjective; that is to say, it exists only relative to the one doing the valuing should most people sincerely come to believe that it would be good to kill unwanted infants objectively neither better nor worse than any other the Humean has nothing to say to the sociopath All the Humean can say is “Gee, hope they don’t succeed.”

pp. 213–14 — “Lots of people think more or less Hume’s way these days “right” to do whatever you feel like doing to the other parties to the agreement A “lowest common denominator” system of morality There would on this “contractarian” theory be nothing in principle wrong with kidnapping a child policy that rules out that sort of high-jinks”

p. 216 — “Morality” becomes at best an assertion of the prevailing reason, but only in sentiment and existing custom.”

pp. 219–21 — “The bottom line is that by abandoning formal and final causes, consistently the implications of the moderns’ anti-Aristotelian revolution ”

Back to Plato’s cave

pp. 225–26 — “In an article in *The Atlantic Monthly* in 1948, the then-eminent (if now largely forgotten) philosopher W.T. Stace “real cause” of the decline of religion and morality as it had traditionally been understood.”

Chapter 6: Aristotle's Revenge

p. 229 — ““eliminative materialism,” the theory that only brain processes.”

How to lose your mind

pp. 230–31 — “The Churchlands are not saying that serotonin “There are no such things as mental states,” etc. eliminative materialism is simply the last stop on the train a mechanistic-cum-materialistic picture of the world.”

pp. 234–35 — “The whole eliminative materialist enterprise belief, or thought that accurately represents reality Given what science is, we know that to accept science is necessarily and therefore the existence of minds The eliminative materialist world-view, which claims to base itself on science, is simply incoherent.”

The lump under the rug

pp. 236–37 — “The conception of matter that modern materialism inherited from the Mechanical Philosophy the moderns were wrong to abandon it in favor of mechanism.”

pp. 238–39 — “Now let’s consider the dominant materialist approach to explaining the mind is implemented on this “computer.” But the basic idea is this encoded in the form of neural firing patterns Thinking – going from one thought to another they bear to objects and events in the world outside the brain.”

pp. 239–40 — “nothing counts as a “symbol” apart from some mind or group of minds which interprets and uses it as a symbol By themselves they cannot fail to be nothing mind, the theory goes around in a circle and is simply incoherent.”

p. 244 — “Even if the meanings of the symbols purportedly encoded why we draw the conclusions we do In short, if the materialist’s story is correct including arguments for materialism itself. ”

p. 246 — “when materialists appeal to notions like “algorithms,” gives the illusion that this recognition is consistent with mechanism.”

Irreducible teleology

pp. 247–48 — “The mind cannot possibly fail to be a “holdout” could not fit the mechanistic picture of the world Human thought and action are the most obvious

examples of phenomena that exhibit irreducible teleology, but they are far from the only ones.”

Biological phenomena

pp. 254–57 — “the whole point of naturalism and Darwinism is of course to reduce everything in the natural order to material elements governed by efficient causes the contemporary biologist’s absolute favorite place to relocate teleology is DNA DNA contains the “information,” “code,” “instructions,” “data,” or “blueprint” represents something beyond itself the way a thought does what modern biology reveals to us is the existence realization of a form or essence The point is not that natural selection cannot explain Darwin was supposed to have banished Concepts like information and software undermined by the work of modern biologists themselves.”

Complex inorganic systems

pp. 257–58 — “Both in science and in common sense explanation of this or that certain causal chains have a significance that others don’t identified as such without also identifying final causes.”

Basic laws of nature

pp. 259–60 — “Since we cannot observe essences, powers, final causes and the like scientific picture of the world in terms of the latter alone For Hume, the idea of a necessary connection between events constant conjunction between the events.”

pp. 261–62 — “a serious problem with the Humean idea ordinary circumstances impossible to observe None of this is consistent with the idea that science a nature that is universal to things of that type.”

pp. 262–63 — “The deeper point, however, is that it only makes sense powers that are being interfered with Strictly speaking, what science discovers are the universal natures and inherent powers of things ”

pp. 263–64 — “to affirm the existence in physical phenomena of inherent powers point to states of affairs beyond themselves The late “new essentialist” philosopher George Molnar Aristotelian notion of final causality In this sense, though contemporary from the action of the agent more than another.”

It's the moon, stupid

p. 266 — “(a) when rightly understood, the traditional arguments for an Aristotelian metaphysical picture of the world are powerful, (b) the modern philosophers’ criticisms of that picture are no good and their own attempted replacements of it are fraught with various paradoxes and incoherencies, and (c) modern science is not only not inconsistent with that metaphysical picture but at least to some extent tends to point in its direction. At the very least, then, there can be no doubt that a broadly Aristotelian philosophical worldview is still as rationally defensible today as it ever was”

Key terms

Dualism “In philosophy of mind ... the position that mental phenomena are, in some respects, non-physical, or that the mind and body are not identical. Thus, it encompasses a set of views about the relationship between mind and matter, and is contrasted with other positions, such as physicalism, in the mind–body problem.”

<[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dualism_\(philosophy_of_mind\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dualism_(philosophy_of_mind))>

Intentionality “The power of minds to be about, to represent, or to stand for, things, properties and states of affairs”.

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

Qualia “Individual instances of subjective, conscious experience. The term derives from the Latin adverb *quālis* meaning "what sort" or "what kind". Examples of qualia are the pain of a headache, the taste of wine, or the perceived redness of an evening sky.... The importance of qualia as a concept in the [philosophy of mind](#) comes largely from the fact that it is seen as posing a fundamental problem for [materialist](#) explanations of the [mind-body problem](#).”

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

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