

***Five Proofs of the Existence of God.* By Edward Feser. San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2017. 330 pages. \$19.95.**

Edward Feser has been on the forefront of reviving interest in traditional arguments for God's existence. This is a difficult project: few people possess the expertise in traditional metaphysics necessary to understand, let alone evaluate, the arguments. And even those who do have seemed unwilling or unable to lay out the arguments in logically valid form with analytic rigor and clarity. Feser accomplishes this and more, all while writing for a broad readership. Some exasperating flaws notwithstanding (see below), the result is an incredibly useful book.

The book centers on five “proofs,” or deductive metaphysical arguments, for God's existence: Aristotelian, Neo-Platonic, Augustinian, Thomistic, and Rationalist. The *first chapter* on the Aristotelian proof moves from the reality of change (the actualization of potential) to a being that is purely actual (something that can actualize other things without itself being actualized). *Chapter two* begins from our experience of composite things and argues that there must be a simple, non-composite being (what Plotinus referred to as “the One”) which is their cause. The *third chapter* argues from the reality of universals as abstract objects to a divine mind in which they must exist. *Chapter four* argues from the existence of contingent things in which there is a distinction between their essence and their existence, to a being in which there is no such distinction—one whose essence is to exist (as Aquinas argues in *De Ente et Essentia*). Lastly, following Leibniz, in *chapter five* Feser argues from a version of the principle of sufficient reason that contingent things can only be explained by a necessary being. These chapters are thorough enough for philosophers while remaining accessible to a general audience—a true accomplishment. Further, Feser is to be commended for interacting with a

wide swath of historical and contemporary literature. Many Thomists fail to do this, preaching only to the Thomistic choir and greatly weakening their natural theology as a result.

The final two chapters, so far as I'm concerned, are where the editor could have really earned his or her paycheck. The colossal *chapter six*—a monograph, really—discusses the divine attributes that follow upon the arguments' success (simplicity, omnipotence, etc.). This, of course, is the big payoff of the traditional arguments (cf. *Summa Theologiae* I.3-11). However, that these traditional attributes follow from the five arguments was already seen in the first five chapters, making much of the material redundant. The discussion of divine attributes should have been taken out of the first five chapters altogether; or else chapter six should have been cut or drastically reduced with any vital material added to the discussion of the divine attributes in the first five chapters. Additionally, chapter six contains a nine-page digression on analogy (176-184); a misconstrual of the standard account of knowledge (210); a facile discussion of God's knowledge and free will (212-216); and a defense of using male pronouns for God (246-248). None of this seems necessary to the book's success and only serves to try the reader's patience with this eighty-page chapter.

Chapter seven—which Stephen Davis's blurb amazingly calls "a gem," saying "it alone is worth the price of this excellent work"—reads to this reviewer like a running Word document Feser keeps of all the objections to natural theology that he has ever heard along with lengthy replies to each. The chapter is full of redundancies. Also diminishing the last two chapters is a return to some of Feser's favorite hobbyhorses. Conspicuously absent from the first five chapters are Feser's constant refrains: how impressive traditional theistic arguments are for being deductive metaphysical demonstrations rather than probabilistic or scientific arguments (in which he fails to recognize the power of inductive and abductive arguments), tangents about how

foolish William Paley and intelligent design are (with uncharitable misreadings of these potential allies), and his blog-style ranting and braggadocio—often against weak targets like the worst of the New Atheists. But they all return by the book’s end (271-273, 287-289, 249-260), leaving a bitter aftertaste to a largely excellent book. The whole thing concludes with an unhelpful and supercilious “*Quod erat demonstrandum*” (307).

Yet even these shortcomings cannot take away from the accomplishment of the first five chapters. For brevity’s sake, I will just lay out the Aristotelian proof from chapter one. Feser helpfully gives an informal statement of the argument before formalizing it in (fifty) premises. The argument begins from the reality of change, which Feser understands in an Aristotelian way as the actualization of potential. Notice that this analysis logically requires a changer to actualize the potential and create the change. And if this changer is itself changing, then it logically requires a further changer. Feser (with Aristotle) grants that this sort of series might be infinitely extended backwards in time such that there is no temporally first member of the series. Not all change (actualization of potential), however, occurs in such linear (*per accidens*), temporal series. Consider a cat lying on my couch, which rests on the second-story floor, which rests on the first-story supports, which rests on the foundation, which rests on the ground. The cat’s potential to be at this particular height is actualized by this hierarchical series (where a number of things are simultaneously dependent on each other). The ground, here, is the first cause—not temporally but causally (i.e., the other causes, such as the second-story floor, are only instrumental causes with no intrinsic power of their own to support the cat). Hierarchical (*per se*) series, then, necessarily require a first/prime/non-instrumental cause which actually possesses the power to create the effect. Even an infinite, hierarchical series implies such a first cause. An infinite chain of moving box cars on a flat plane, after all, still requires a first mover.

Feser then pivots, arguing that “every series of the linear sort presupposes series of the hierarchical sort” (25). This is where the argument takes an existential turn. What makes the changing things in linear series (such as cats) exist at all right now (i.e., what keeps them in being)? If you answer “molecules, chemical bonds, particles, and sub-atomic particles,” Feser will simply repeat the question with regard to those entities. His point is that the things all around us (at every level) are currently realizing their potential to exist. Hence, there must be a fully actual first cause on which they depend to actualize their potential to exist. There could be other causes (angels or demigods) between the first cause and the contingent things all around us, but if so, they must also have their potential for existence realized by something else. This is not a chain that can go on forever. If nothing is able to actualize other things without being actualized, then there would be no causal power to pass along and move things from potentially to actually existing. Thus, this first cause is purely actual, not needing to be actualized by another. If there were any potential in it, there would have to be something making it realize some potentials rather than others. This is Aristotle’s Unmoved Mover, or what Feser calls “an unactualized actualizer” (29). Because we know that this being is purely actual, we can derive several other attributes: its immateriality, eternity, etc.

One strength of the argument is that it avoids difficult scientific and metaphysical questions about whether the universe had a beginning. In fact, the argument isn’t about the universe as a whole at all but about each and every thing which only exists because of a dependence on other things. Another possible strength is that the argument appears to begin with change—something very obvious to us, unlike other features of the world with which a theistic argument might begin. Note, however, that change actually seems irrelevant to the argument. In the end, we didn’t rely on change at all but on the fact that things around us are contingent: they

are one way but might have been otherwise; in fact, they might not have existed at all. And so the argument doesn't really rely on the obvious fact of change but on the more difficult metaphysical notion of contingency. The discussion of change did allow him to get several important metaphysical concepts on the table, such as act vs. potency and linear vs. hierarchical series. Still, change seems incidental to the proof.

This leads to a more general worry about the book: looked at in this way it contains two arguments for God rather than five. In fact, he seems to hint at this himself (159). All but the Augustinian proof take this existential turn and argue to a necessary, purely actual being that actualizes contingent things' potential to exist. This is a worry I've long had about Feser's interpretation of Aquinas's Five Ways: on his existential interpretation they seem to collapse down to contingency arguments. (I often worry that, given Feser's extreme popularity among Thomists, other interpretations may be forgotten.) How much of a problem this is, if at all, is unclear. On the one hand, giving these arguments this existential reading may signal that Feser's preference for contingency arguments is being read into these classical arguments. On the other hand, perhaps it only signals a real unity in the arguments themselves: there are multiple ways to realize the fundamental metaphysical truth of our contingency (and hence our dependence on a fully actual being).

At times, Feser writes as though he has framed his argument in reasonably neutral terms—that the argument doesn't presuppose a fully Aristotelian-Thomistic metaphysic (28-29). Yet one might worry that an Aristotelian metaphysic is often assumed. For instance, Feser appears to take for granted the Aristotelian analysis of change. He defends the reality of change and causation against historical figures like Hume, Kant, and Russell (40-46). But fending off skeptical challenges to the *reality* of change is not the same thing as arguing for the Aristotelian

account of change itself. Nor does arguing that modern science has not destroyed all Aristotelian ideas (57-60) provide a positive argument for this account of change. It would have been helpful to argue for the fundamentality of powers and dispositions against those who focus on subjunctive conditionals or laws of nature as metaphysically fundamental as well as neo-Humeans like David Lewis. Feser also assumes much more than argues for several Aristotelian-Thomistic theses, such as that intellectual activity consists in the possessing of forms in one's mind (32) and that "to cause something to exist is just to cause something having a certain *form*" (33).

These worries are far from decisive, of course. Aristotelian metaphysics is perfectly respectable and is currently enjoying a great revival. Further, Feser's *Scholastic Metaphysics: A Contemporary Introduction* (Editiones Scholasticae, 2014) contains a number of arguments that would help shore up this Aristotelian proof in the ways I'm suggesting. Still, it is worth noting that this heavy reliance on Aristotelian terminology and principles weakens its dialectical force with most people. For all the boasting (58, 271-272) about the five (two?) arguments being metaphysical demonstrations rather than contemporary, probabilistic arguments, Feser's arguments are dialectically less helpful for requiring an understanding of Aristotelian metaphysics which few possess. At any rate, why pit these types of arguments against one another? Why not let a thousand arguments bloom, differentiated by both point of departure and logical structure?

All this said, the major arguments are incredibly well-executed and likely sound. The first five chapters will be profitable for undergraduates for years to come. They are suitable for use in the classroom, especially for elucidating difficult primary texts. They will introduce students not only to the arguments (and their attendant metaphysics) but also let them see how

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traditional natural theology entails a number of important divine attributes—something sadly missing from much contemporary apologetics.

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