Scholastic Metaphysics: A Contemporary Introduction

by Edward Feser

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In *Scholastic Metaphysics,* Edward Feser establishes Thomism as a living school of thought that remains faithful to its early proponents and centuries-old tradition yet presents a coherent antidote to modern philosophy and all its ills. Borrowing from many sources, *Scholastic Metaphysics* offers an alternative vision to scientism's imprisoned, graceless universe.

The first two chapters, "Act and Potency" and "Causation," lay the basis for the next two, "Substance" and "Essence and Existence," which are perhaps more accessible for the nonspecialist. However, this book cannot be read piecemeal, as each section builds on the preceding one, and it is best taken as a coherent, unified whole. For instance, Scholastic theories of act and potency are integrated with the main concepts related to substance, as well as to essence and existence. At its core, *Scholastic Metaphysics* highlights the centrality of act, potency, and causation in medieval Scholastic metaphysics. The author underscores the striking differences between causality as understood by Thomists, on the one hand, and by David Hume and other moderns on the other.

Feser convincingly argues that scientism, a major result of philosophy's rejection of medieval metaphysics, is easily remedied by Thomism. In fact, there is no real quarrel between modern science and Scholastic metaphysics, which examine the same phenomena from dissimilar perspectives and for different reasons. For instance, understanding how opium's chemical properties cause sleep simply presents the drug's powers as a chemical vehicle but does not offer a deeper, which is to say, metaphysical, understanding of opium's dormitive power.

The author achieves clarity through definitions and practical, commonsense examples, borrowing from others when necessary. Regarding the Thomistic requirement for the unicity of substantial form when discussing hylomorphism (matter and form), he turns to David Oderberg's memorable thoughts: "Substantial form *permeates* the entirety of the substance that possesses it, not merely horizontally in its parts—there is as much dogginess in Fido's nose and tail as in Fido as a whole—but also *vertically*, down to the very chemical elements that constitute Fido's living flesh" (179). Watches and their parts, triangles and circles, wood and metal, and whiteboards and markers are used to illustrate similar points.

Sometimes Feser's confidence regarding Thomism's ability to address the shortcomings of science and other philosophical systems is rather striking, given how timid most Christians have become when faced with modern science and culture. He repeatedly confronts scientists for violating the boundaries of science and adopting metaphysical stances they have no right to take. For example, when examining the unicity of substantial form, it is not right for science to debate whether the particles that make up a larger substance "are less real than the natural objects of which they are a part." He adds, "The issue is philosophical rather than scientific, a question of which metaphysics provides the best means of interpreting the results of science" (180). He makes this metaphysics-over-science claim repeatedly,

and it is not just any metaphysics he wants seated in this important place, but Thomism.

Not only does Feser not fear science, but he uses it to buttress his own arguments. In his view, common sense dictates that essences inhere in all things, which explains why the world possesses the unity that allows for scientific exploration in the first place. "An oak, a polar bear, and a sample of copper will each behave over time in a uniform and predictable manner … exhibiting characteristic properties and patterns of operation, persisting despite changes in superficial features, and having parts that function in an integrated way. This too is just what we would expect if each of these things had a real essence or nature" (213). Science could not investigate nature's laws if things did not possess essences. Yet the assertion that things possess essences is metaphysical rather than scientific.

Such confidence in the positive relationship between metaphysics and science does not strike the reader as blind overconfidence. In fact, it allows the author to admit that metaphysics cannot answer everything: "Whether certain natural objects really should be grouped into the same class or not, and whether a given object really exhibits a substantial or only accidental unity, might sometimes be difficult questions to settle. Precisely *what* a thing's essence is is by no means easy to determine" (213). Feser is no fundamentalist. Rather, his metaphysics is open to the mystery of the world, not confined by dogmatic certitudes, and invites a search for the truth as eagerly as science itself does.

Typical of the entire book, the discussion on hylomorphism links many concepts. For example, prime matter's characteristics parallel potency's, and both are needed to account "for the possibility of change and limitation. However, that does not entail that [prime matter] can exist separately from form, any more than potency can exist separately from act" (172). Such connections not only encourage a deeper understanding of these concepts, but show the harmony and coherence of Thomistic metaphysics.

When discussing essences, Feser sums up his own argument's coherency: "If a thing really has a substantial form, if by virtue of that substantial form it really has irreducible causal powers, if these powers really are directed at the generation of certain effects as to a final cause, and so forth, then it [is] hard to see how it could intelligibly be denied that it has an essence" (215). This lucid order is important, because Feser often criticizes modern thinkers and philosophical systems for their metaphysical incoherence.

Throughout *Scholastic Metaphysics*, Thomism is presented as holistic and generous in its ability to work with science. Despite the latter's rejection, Thomistic metaphysics can deepen and improve science. By addressing the metaphysical shortcomings of William of Ockham, Descartes, Malebranche, Hume, Kant, Locke, and others, Feser successfully argues for Thomism's proper place in the contemporary world. Thomism can help address some of the major problems created by science and technology. A living school of thought, not a medieval relic, it can help address some of the major problems created by science and technology. Its vibrancy is often reflected in its ability to address the shortcomings of scientism and modern philosophy. Feser reinforces his argument by tracing the history of modern philosophy and applying his remedy at the points where successive thinkers took Western thought away from the truths of Thomism.

One of the book's more interesting themes is the dialogue among various metaphysicians, especially those following Francisco Suárez or Duns Scotus. Feser's critique of these two philosophers points to the same weakness of much modern philosophy: its incoherence. He points out where someone is metaphysically cheating. He often portrays Thomistic metaphysics as a philosophy of categories, where each part has its own place and job. He shows where Suárez and Scotus set up shaky metaphysical categories, for example, when these two thinkers deny "the real distinction between essence and existence" or the existence and nature of prime matter (175). Suárazian and Scotist views never form the heart of the discussion but are used to show where Thomism offers its own unique contribution to Scholastic metaphysics.

Despite the author's pedagogical gifts and his welcome dialogue with other philosophers, the discussion may leave some readers behind. It is both a strength and a weakness of *Scholastic Metaphysics* that the reader is dropped into the middle of a centuries-old dialogue between various schools of philosophy. This allows Feser to get quickly to the heart of the matter but leaves readers who do not have a background in philosophy a little out of the discussion. Who, for example, are the naturalists that the author mentions in the prolegomenon?

The prose moves swiftly, from naturalists, empiricists, and rationalists to Kant, Hume, Bertrand Russell, and contemporary metaphysicians. For instance, Feser assumes the reader has a great deal of philosophical knowledge when he states, "Thus the Scholastic does not accept the basic assumptions that made Kantianism and its contemporary 'naturalized' or 'descriptive' successors seem the only alternatives to a rationalist or empiricist position" (29).

Yet the issue that metaphysics serves the truth best and provides a coherent rebuttal to the more poisonous assumptions of contemporary culture is significant for nonphilosophers, even if it is ultimately a philosophical question. The danger is that pastors, journalists, scientists, educators, and other interested people will not get the full sense of *Scholastic Metaphysics*. How could the author have made his argument more accessible to a nonphilosophical audience without compromising its depth?

For those who can follow along, perhaps the book's greatest strength is clarity, specifically how Thomistic metaphysics avoids circular reasoning. Thomism corrects the erroneous conclusions of science, empiricism, and rationalisms. One limitation of this clarity is that the author often seems to conflate metaphysics with philosophy. Is metaphysics a branch of philosophy, or prior to it?

Clarity is exemplified by the common appeal to the laws of nature, through which the scientist hopes to exclude God from the order of things by making laws of physics the highest truths. Feser sees a two-stage problem. First, "to explain regularities in nature in terms of efficient causal necessitation, efficient causal necessitation in terms of laws of nature, and laws of nature in terms of regularities, would be to go around in a circle" (96). The scientist finds himself in Feser's metaphysical trap even when appealing to another argument. This is the second problem: "If, to avoid this circularity, we say that the regularity enshrined in a law of nature is of a *higher order* than the sort we started out trying to explain, then we would now need an account of this higher-order regularity, and will thereby merely have pushed the problem back a stage rather than solved it" (96). Science's tendency to kick the can down the metaphysical road seems almost juvenile, based—unscientifically, one needs to add—on blind faith in itself.

To wit, the rejection of universals in turn relies on some sort of universal, as when we discard the universal "red" and state that different reds resemble each other for no apparent metaphysical reason. This pushes the universal onto the notion of resemblance. Only through an appeal to higher orders can we avoid infinite regress or circularity. Concerning the attempt to avoid final causes, Feser concludes, "Every attempt to avoid doing so merely raises further puzzles which cannot be solved except by admitting finality" (97). Perhaps it all boils down to replacing one God with another, such as the laws of nature. Feser repeatedly identifies where scientism erroneously rejects the metaphysics of universality. Its assertions amount to metaphysical statements themselves and are fully reliant on some sort of a universal. It can never be a case of renouncing metaphysics, but merely of substituting one system of metaphysics for another, because the dismissal of metaphysics is itself a metaphysical claim.

Given that most of the world seems to have moved away from Thomism and Scholasticism in general, Feser's habit of highlighting the inconsistencies of various modern thinkers effectively illuminates Thomism by forcing philosophers to give it a second look. Yet the author also invokes a sense of curiosity for the natural world and the truth that scientists and philosophers share: "Possibility, contingency, and necessity

are grounded, not in the Leibnizian notion of possible worlds, but in the Aristotelian theory of act and potency. Whereas the rationalist tends to collapse all possibility into what the Scholastic calls logical or objective potency … for the Scholastic, what is possible for a thing is a function of its real or subjective potencies, which are grounded in the various ways in which it is in act or actual" (141). Such contrasts show how Thomism can speak to the contemporary world by putting the anti-metaphysician on the spot, even while pointing out some similarities. A certain charity inheres in this kind of critique, as it seeks not to destroy other schools of thought but, whenever possible, to help them flourish and even achieve their fullest potential. Consequently, the tone of *Scholastic Metaphysics* is restrained and respectful, never hostile.

In other words, Feser's Thomism can take on scientism. When examining the claim that Newton's principle of motion refutes Aristotle's, he notes that they "are *not* talking about the same thing, or at least not exactly the same thing. Newton's principle is concerned solely with *local* motion, change with respect to place or location. When Scholastic philosophers speak of 'motion,' they mean change of *any* kind" (119). Throughout the book, Feser stresses that when Scholasticism and science appear to conflict with each other, the two approachs are, in fact, talking about different things, or the same thing from very different angles. Instead of offering competing claims, they are often complementary and certainly do not refute each other.

Much of *Scholastic Metaphysics* is contrastive and builds the case for Thomistic metaphysics by comparing the failures of other systems to its successes. Feser aims to dispel the notions that, on the one hand, becoming is constant and there is no being or potency and, on the other, that to safeguard the reality of being, change is only an illusion. Aristotelian philosophy, above all Thomism, offers a rebuff to both viewpoints by placing act and potency at the heart of the argument, thus allowing for both being and change. Feser unearths many undeclared assumptions of modern philosophy that either unwittingly rest on the foundations of unworkable metaphysics or spill over into philosophy.

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Being Mortal: Medicine and What Matters in the End

by Atul Gawande

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Has medical technology rendered discussions of the *ars moriendi* obsolete*?* Is it still possible, in an era marked by ever-lengthening life spans and institutionalized caretaking, to persevere through the wintry season of senescence with some small measure of autonomy and intact dignity?

In this informative, accessible, and deftly written book, surgeon and best-selling author Atul Gawande surveys the shifting landscape of end-of-life care in the United States and is troubled by what he sees. "For more than half a century now, we have treated the trials of sickness, aging, and mortality as medical concerns. It's been an experiment in social engineering, putting our fates in the hands of people valued more for their technical prowess than for their understanding of human needs. That experiment has failed" (128). The casualties of this recurring failure include those who endure unnecessarily protracted deaths as well as those whose cherished