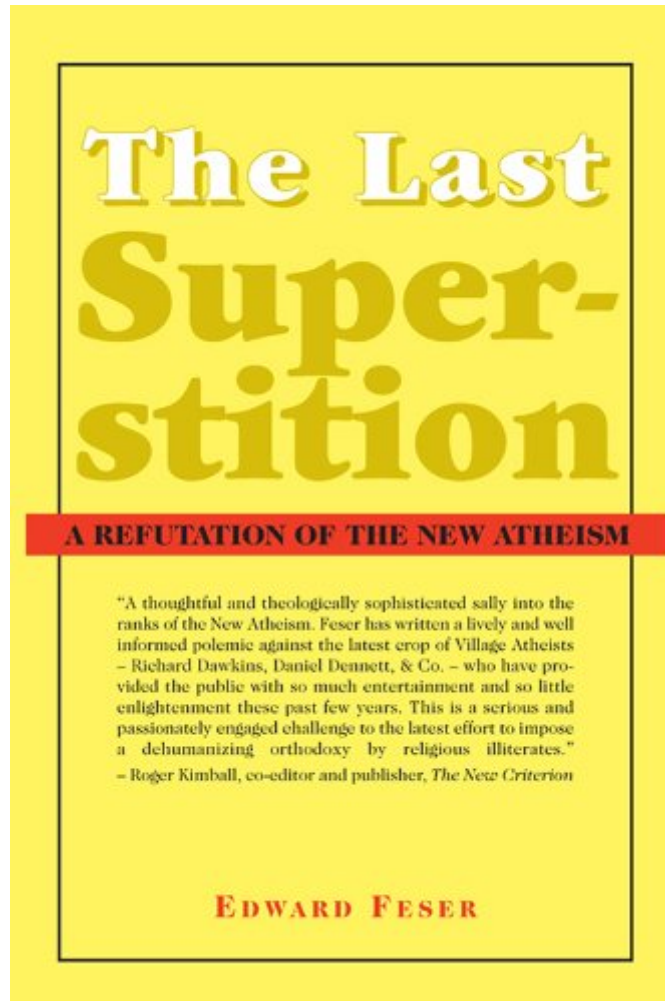


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The Last Superstition: A Refutation Of The New Atheism



Synopsis

The central contention of the *New Atheism* of Richard Dawkins, Daniel Dennett, Sam Harris, and Christopher Hitchens is that there has for several centuries been a war between science and religion, that religion has been steadily losing that war, and that at this point in human history a completely secular scientific account of the world has been worked out in such thorough and convincing detail that there is no longer any reason why a rational and educated person should find the claims of any religion the least bit worthy of attention. But as Edward Feser argues in *The Last Superstition*, in fact there is not, and never has been, any war between science and religion at all. There has instead been a conflict between two entirely philosophical conceptions of the natural order: on the one hand, the classical *teleological* vision of Plato, Aristotle, Augustine, and Aquinas, on which purpose or goal-directedness is as inherent a feature of the physical world as mass or electric charge; and the modern *mechanical* vision of Descartes, Hobbes, Locke, and Hume, according to which the physical world is comprised of nothing more than purposeless, meaningless particles in motion. As it happens, on the classical teleological picture, the existence of God, the immortality of the soul, and the natural-law conception of morality are rationally unavoidable. Modern atheism and secularism have thus always crucially depended for their rational credentials on the insinuation that the modern, mechanical picture of the world has somehow been established by science. Yet this modern *mechanical* picture has never been established by science, and cannot be, for it is not a scientific theory in the first place but merely a philosophical interpretation of science. Moreover, as Feser shows, the philosophical arguments in its favor given by the early modern philosophers were notable only for being surprisingly weak. However, not only is this modern philosophical picture rationally unfounded, it is demonstrably false. For the *mechanical* conception of the natural world, when worked out consistently, absurdly entails that rationality, and indeed the human mind itself, is illusory. The so-called *scientific worldview* championed by the New Atheists thus inevitably undermines its own rational foundations; and into the bargain (and contrary to the moralistic posturing of the New Atheists) it undermines the foundations of any possible morality as well. By contrast, and as *The Last Superstition* demonstrates, the classical teleological picture of nature can be seen to find powerful confirmation in developments from contemporary philosophy, biology, and physics; moreover, morality and reason itself cannot possibly be made sense of apart from it. The teleological vision of the ancients and medievals is thereby rationally vindicated – and with it the religious worldview they based upon it. Winner of the 2008 Book of the Year in Religion from ForeWord Magazine and the only 2008 Editors' Choice for Religion from the American

Library Association's Booklist, The Last Superstition remains the most cogent and powerful refutation of the New Atheism extent.

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Customer Reviews

I am an atheist/agnostic, and "The Last Superstition" is the apologetics book I have recommended to several evangelical friends and relatives. Although I have several problems with Edward Feser's claims in the book, this book is far superior to those by Lee Strobel, Josh McDowell, and any other book I've ever read that attempts to prove the existence of God. Edward Feser is a Roman Catholic scholar who is an expert on classical and medieval philosophy, and his point of view is a breath of fresh air when compared to fundamentalist defenses of the faith. Feser's central argument is the Cosmological Argument (First Cause or Uncaused Cause or Unmoved Mover). For years the Cosmological Argument has been put forth by believers as the ultimate defense for the existence of God, and just as often nonbelievers have found it all too easy to discredit. Part of the problem is that both the believers and the nonbelievers (especially nonbelievers who are biologists with little understanding of philosophy) all have a weak grasp of the concept and are only aware of simplified versions of the Cosmological Argument. Fortunately Feser does not make this mistake. Feser starts

with Plato's Theory of Forms. He then shows how Aristotle modified Plato's theory and came up with his version of the Cosmological Argument. Feser then traces the evolution of these ideas through Augustine and later Thomas Aquinas. Feser's starting point is a bit questionable. I tend to think that there are major problems with Plato's Theory of Forms, but I am too ignorant of philosophy to be able to explain why I believe it is wrong.

Edward Feser's *The Last Superstition* is a polemical work. However, this should not be surprising for two reasons. First, Feser is dealing with amounts to not mere nonsense, but nonsense on stilts. Second, Feser once wrote an essay entitled, *Can Philosophy be Polemical?*, pondering whether it is appropriate to engage in polemical debate over philosophical questions. In this book, Feser answers that question in the affirmative. He freely admits in the preface, "If this seems to be an angry book, that is because it is." (TLS, x) Feser regards the creed of the New Atheists as dangerous both personally and socially, and his response is *À crasez l'infâçme*. *The Last Superstition* is the book I had been wanting, not because it is a tract against the New Atheism, but because it summarizes the best arguments for an Aristotelian-Thomist metaphysics in the face of modern objections. This metaphysics is presented as it developed historically, beginning with the pre-Socratics, on through Plato and Aristotle, to its full flowering among the Scholastics. Feser covers change, actuality and potency, form and matter, the four causes, arguments for the existence of God, and the rational foundations of morality. By succinctly providing this history, Feser is providing a service to all those who have forgotten, or never truly knew what are the main features of an Aristotelian philosophy. For Feser's most damning criticism of Richard Dawkins et al. is that they have simply not bothered to do their homework. By not collecting the relevant data, they have sinned against the spirit of the science in whose name they crusade. To publish a scientific paper without any evidence would be scandalous, but is precisely the case that Feser makes against them.

Edward Feser's 2008 work *The Last Superstition: A Refutation of the New Atheism* is a provocative polemic that manages to skillfully do exactly what it sets out to do: refute atheism. Feser's project is twofold: one, to expose the so-called "New Atheism" (a position represented by writers like Richard Dawkins, Daniel Dennett, the late Christopher Hitchens, and Sam Harris, among others) as a faux intellectual project whose pretensions of rational authority in the marketplace of ideas is bereft of philosophical justification; two, to demonstrate that theistic belief is, and has been for thousands of years, rationally supported by a number of painstakingly detailed arguments that, despite popular

belief, have never actually been refuted by atheists--only ignored by them. By Feser's own admission, the book is meant to fight a little dirty. He perceives (rightly in my estimation) that the New Atheists were the first to strike below the belt in the dispute over religious belief, and he deems it appropriate to respond to them in kind: "[T]his book will be as polemical as it is philosophical, though hardly more so than the books written by the 'New Atheists' to whom I am responding. I believe this tone is appropriate, indeed necessary, for the New Atheism derives whatever influence it has far more from its rhetorical force and 'sex appeal' (as I have called it) than from its very thin intellectual content. It is essential, then, not only that its intellectual pretensions are exposed but that its rhetoric is met with equal and opposite force" (p.25). Although my response to Feser's book overall is quite favorable, I do question the aptness of his chosen technique.

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