

Edward FESER, *Aristotle's Revenge: The Metaphysical Foundations of Physical and Biological Science.*
Neukirchen-Seelscheid, Editiones Scholasticae, 2019, 15 × 21 cm,
515 p., ISBN 978-3-86838-200-6

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RECENSIONS ET COMPTES RENDUS

PHILOSOPHIE

Edward FESER, **Aristotle's Revenge: The Metaphysical Foundations of Physical and Biological Science**. Neukirchen-Seelscheid, Editiones Scholasticae, 2019, 15 × 21 cm, 515 p., ISBN 978-3-86838-200-6.

At the outset of *Aristotle's Revenge*, author Edward Feser informs the reader that his book is a “sequel” to his 2014 book *Scholastic Metaphysics: A Contemporary Introduction*.¹ Feser writes that *Aristotle's Revenge* “builds on the main ideas and arguments developed and defended” in that work (p. 2). As such, Feser cautions us not to expect a full treatment of all of the core ideas which he uses during the course of *Aristotle's Revenge* – a fuller treatment of “some background assumption[s]” is present in the book’s prequel (p. 2). Indeed, as with prequels and sequels of other sorts, *Aristotle's Revenge* is best read once one is familiar with the work which is its prequel.

Yet this ought not discourage one from reading this fine work. Anyone familiar with the basic Aristotelian metaphysical framework will have little to no trouble following Feser along his line of thought. Especially helpful in this respect is Chapter 1, which is in large part dedicated to a brief, and yet surprisingly thorough, articulation of said metaphysical framework.

Feser’s book attempts to support the broad Aristotelian metaphysical structure and its interpretation of modern science as *the* interpretation, while at the same time defending that structure from the attacks of philosophical naturalists and attacking the metaphysical assumptions of said naturalists. It is a credit to Feser that he sees the inherent danger in such a project; throughout *Aristotle's Revenge* he insists that he is *not* attacking modern science itself. Feser writes: “I am not pitting philosophy of nature against physics. I am pitting one philosophy of nature against another philosophy of nature.” (p. 305) Thus, another issue central to *Aristotle's Revenge* is the correct and consistent interpretation of the findings of modern science. Ought one to interpret the findings of empirical science in a broadly Aristotelian fashion? Or ought one to interpret them in the tradition of philosophical naturalism? Feser argues for the former interpretation, and one of the strengths of *Aristotle's Revenge* is that it makes the much stronger claim that this interpretation is in fact *presupposed* by modern science itself. Feser writes: “Aristotelian metaphysics is not only compatible with modern science, but is implicitly presupposed by modern science.” (p. 1)

1. Edward FESER, *Scholastic Metaphysics: A Contemporary Introduction*, Frankfurt, Ontos, 2014.

Of course, to those already immersed in the metaphysical system of Aristotle, the idea that modern science presupposes Aristotelian metaphysics is nothing new. A number of times Feser makes a point that most in the Aristotelian tradition would regard this as obvious: the categories of substance and accident, of form and matter, and of act and potency are so metaphysically fundamental that no empirical findings could ever overturn them, even in principle. What *is* new, to both the Aristotelian tradition and to those outside of that tradition, is that we now have gathered together a comprehensive, concise, and highly articulate book-length treatment of these philosophical claims.

Aristotle's Revenge is comprehensive in that it covers a vast array of arguments, objections, and replies. Often the reader will find Feser dividing objections against his position into different types and treating them all in turn. Objections will be raised to his replies to previous objections, and in like turn they will be dealt with. The sheer number of different positions it confronts is impressive. Further, *Aristotle's Revenge* is concise in that the topics and positions with which it deals are not prolonged unnecessarily. Indeed, one might even argue that the book is *too* concise. A number of times I was struck by just how briefly a particular counter-argument was dispensed with. I could not help but imagine Feser's interlocutor protesting the short shrift he was given. No doubt the "excess" in the concise nature of the book is an inevitable byproduct of the number of positions and arguments with which Feser grapples with, yet if nothing else his book does an excellent job of alerting the reader to a particular counter-point of view, and to what a preliminary reply might look like. What's more, *Aristotle's Revenge* is highly articulate in that it deftly handles weighty terms and complex ideas. Those already familiar with the academic work of Feser will be pleased to find the same degree of rigor and the tight argumentation in *Aristotle's Revenge* for which he is well known. On display too is the ease of readability which so often characterizes Feser's work.

Aristotle's Revenge is divided into six chapters. The first provides a brief overview of the core ideas of the Aristotelian philosophy of nature and its materialistic and mechanistic rival. The second chapter concerns the very methods of modern science, as well as the scientist *qua* scientist. The third chapter broadens its scope to include extramental reality. The fourth chapter is composed of an analysis of space, motion, and time. The fifth chapter explores the nature of matter. And finally, the sixth chapter considers the phenomenon of life in nature. In each chapter, Feser concludes that the ideas under consideration presuppose the Aristotelian metaphysical framework and are incoherent with it.

One of the highlights of *Aristotle's Revenge* is the way in which Feser applies the Aristotelian metaphysical framework to interpretive problems of modern science. In defending the structural realist interpretation of the empirical findings of modern science (especially physics), Feser argues that "The kind of structural realism I am affirming is perhaps best understood as simply an application, to the interpretation of the mathematical models put forward by physics and other sciences, of general Aristotelian realism vis-à-vis universals, mathematical entities, and other abstractions." (p. 170) By way of an example, Feser argues that an abstract concept such as *triangularity* does not exist in mind-independent reality like a Platonic universal. "Rather," writes Feser, "it exists there only in individual triangles, and thus only

together with particularizing features such as a certain specific color, size, etc.” (*ibid.*) Here Feser is simply applying the Aristotelian notions of form, matter, andhylomorphism to the abstract idea of *triangularity*, something that is obvious to any Aristotelian. However, Feser goes on to transfer this line of thinking to the structure of nature. The text is worth quoting at length:

I am proposing that, in a similar way, the abstract mathematical structure of nature described by physics and other sciences does not exist *qua* abstract mathematical structure in mind-independent reality. Rather, it exists there only *in* a concrete natural order which has various features that go beyond the ones that can be captured in the mathematical description (just as concrete particular triangles have features [...] which go beyond the ones captured by the concept *triangularity*). [...] *Qua* pure mathematical structure, the world as the physicist describes it exists only as *abstracted from or pulled out of* the concrete natural order by the intellect, which considers it apart from the world’s concrete features (just as geometry considers *triangularity* apart from the concrete features of particular individual triangles). (pp. 170-171; emphases in the original.)

Feser’s case for such reasoning is based upon the fact that the alternatives, as he sees them, are riddled with philosophical problems and, at times, outright absurdities. Moreover, if the reader has followed Feser’s arguments until this point in the book, a strong case has been made for the need for a philosophy of nature of the Aristotelian metaphysical sort.

Feser further develops this line of reasoning in the third chapter of *Aristotle’s Revenge*, in a section titled “The hollow universe” (pp. 191-194). There, he uses the analogy of a blueprint. Just as a blueprint contains a lot of information about a building, so does the abstract mathematical structure of nature described by physics contain a lot of information about reality. However, argues Feser, the blueprint does not tell you everything there is to know about the building, and indeed, it contains features which are not actually present in the building it represents, such as literal white or blue lines which are the walls, the curved lines which indicate a door and its swinging radius, etc. In the same way, the abstract mathematical structure of nature described by physics does not tell us everything there is to know about physical reality, and it contains features that are not actually present in reality; Feser argues that this simply “reflects the mode of [the abstract mathematical structure of nature’s] mode of representation rather than objective physical reality itself” (p. 191). The point here is that, like with *triangularity*, there seems to be some misstep in reasoning occurring when someone claims that the abstract mathematical structure of reality afforded to us by modern science – and especially physics – exhausts the nature of reality. Feser aptly labels this, following Alfred North Whitehead, “The Fallacy of Misplaced Concreteness,” and describes it as “the error of confusing an abstract mathematical representation of reality with the concrete reality represented” (p. 193).

My negative critical remarks of *Aristotle’s Revenge* are few. The typos are infrequent, roughly one every ten or so pages, and aside from one glaring typo in the table of contents (see the page listing for section 4.3.6. and compare it with its neighboring sections), none are terribly obvious. I have already mentioned my biggest issue with this book, minor though it is: in its efforts to be as comprehensive and concise

as possible, I could not help but wish that *Aristotle's Revenge* would have spent more space on articulating and building up some of the many arguments against his position. Yet, as I have already indicated, this is understandable given the scope of the project. At the same time, it is no small praise for a book to wish that there was more of it.

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Paul TILlich, **Écrits philosophiques allemands. 1923-1932**. Textes traduits de l'allemand et annotés par Marc Dumas, Luc Perrottet et Jean Richard. Introduction de Marc Dumas. Genève, Labor et Fides, 2018, 14,5 × 21 cm, 552 p., ISBN 978-2-8309-1650-8.

La traduction en langue française des œuvres de Paul Tillich (1886-1965) ne s'essouffle pas. Des traductions de qualité se succèdent presque chaque année, principalement chez Labor et Fides. Récemment, la Maison d'édition a publié la dernière traduction de Tillich, *Quand les fondations vacillent* (2019). Il s'agit d'un recueil de sermons. Paul Tillich avait déjà suggéré que ceux qui souhaitaient s'initier à son œuvre devaient lire d'abord ses sermons. Précédemment, nous avons eu les traductions suivantes : *Christianisme et judaïsme* (2017), *Le christianisme et la rencontre des religions* (2015), ainsi que *Le courage d'être* (2014), réédité dans la collection « Classiques ». Mentionnons également la récente traduction présentée par Alain Durand, *Religion biblique et recherche de la réalité ultime* (2017), éditée aux Éditions du Cerf.

L'ouvrage qui nous intéresse ici est *Écrits philosophiques allemands. 1923-1932*, publié en 2018. Il s'agit d'un recueil de neuf textes philosophiques. Le plus substantiel est « Le système des sciences ». À lui seul, ce document occupe plus de la moitié du volume. Les huit autres textes sont des conférences prononcées par Tillich, sinon des articles ou des chapitres de livres. Une introduction de Marc Dumas (Université de Sherbrooke) présente l'ouvrage. Il souligne l'apport précieux de Luc Perrottet qui a soigneusement révisé la traduction et qui a produit la majorité des notes infrapaginales. Il mentionne également le précieux travail de Jean Richard qui a relu et revu les textes à plusieurs reprises.

Il faut savoir que ces écrits philosophiques allemands de Tillich accompagnent des écrits théologiques. Les Presses de l'Université Laval avaient publié en 2012 les *Écrits théologiques allemands. 1919-1931*. Ces textes étaient traduits et présentés aussi par Marc Dumas. C'est dire que, durant une décennie, Tillich a publié des textes, à la fois philosophiques et théologiques. Ces écrits se chevauchent et se complètent. Paul Tillich, jeune professeur en Allemagne, a publié ces textes avant d'être déporté aux États-Unis en 1933. Le livre qui nous intéresse rassemble des écrits que le jeune Tillich a publiés en Allemagne avant la prise du pouvoir d'Hitler.

Dans sa présentation, Marc Dumas prend judicieusement le soin d'apporter des éléments biographiques précieux avant de présenter le contenu. Paul Tillich est né le