



# Five Proofs of the Existence of God

*Edward Feser*

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This book provides a detailed, updated exposition and defense of five of the historically most important (but in recent years largely neglected) philosophical proofs of God's existence: the Aristotelian, the Neo-Platonic, the Augustinian, the Thomistic, and the Rationalist.

It also offers a thorough treatment of each of the key divine attributes—unity, simplicity, eternity, omnipotence, omniscience, perfect goodness, and so forth—showing that they must be possessed by the God whose existence is demonstrated by the proofs. Finally, it answers at length all of the objections that have been leveled against these proofs.

This work provides as ambitious and complete a defense of traditional natural theology as is currently in print. Its aim is to vindicate the view of the greatest philosophers of the past—thinkers like Aristotle, Plotinus, Augustine, Aquinas, Leibniz, and many others—that the existence of God can be established with certainty by way of purely rational arguments. It thereby serves as a refutation both of atheism and of the fideism that gives aid and comfort to atheism.

## Five Proofs of the Existence of God Details

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# From Reader Review Five Proofs of the Existence of God for online ebook

## Isaac says

I just finished this book a few minutes ago and felt compelled to write about it. This is one of the best books of the existence of God I have ever read, and I've been studying this subject for roughly fifteen years. Feser defends five 'proofs' or metaphysical arguments for God's existence: (1) the Aristotelian 'argument from motion/change' to an Unmoved Mover, defended in Aristotle's 'Metaphysics', (2) the Neoplatonic 'argument from composition' to an absolutely simple being, defended in Plotinus' 'Enneads', (3) the Augustinian 'argument from necessary truths' to an eternal, omniscient Intellect, defended in Augustine's 'On Free Choice of the Will', (4) the Thomistic 'existential argument', defended in Aquinas' 'On Being and Essence'; and (5) the rationalist 'argument from contingency', defended in Leibniz' 'Monadology'. Feser does not, however, focus of an exegesis of these classic texts, but instead on a detailed, contemporary defense of the arguments themselves. Following this he shows how each of these beings (i.e., the Unmoved Mover, absolutely simple being, etc.) are actually the same being and that this being has the traits classically attributed to God, e.g. omnipotence and omniscience. Finally, Feser refutes a large number of popular atheist objections to the existence of God.

This work builds, in part, on Feser's previous writings. The first and fourth of the arguments Feser defends here will be familiar to readers of Feser's 'Aquinas' and 'The Last Superstition', as the first two of Thomas Aquinas' famous 'Five Ways' of demonstrating God's existence. Readers of Feser's article 'The New Atheism and the Cosmological Argument' will be passingly familiar of the second and fifth arguments he defends here, but he defends these arguments in much greater detail here. Those who respect Feser's previous work, as I do, will find this book even better than his other works.

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## Kenny de Rhodes says

### Fantastic!

I have been a fan of Dr Feser for awhile. But this book just blows me away, it is one of the finest books ever written on the existence of God.

I would highly recommend this book and Feser's book on Aquinas.

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## William Esterman says

i can,,t readD

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## Jayson Virissimo says

I already knew the common understanding of Aristotle's physics and metaphysics is completely wrong and

unfair (due to taking a history of science class that had us read actual source material), but I still had several misconceptions that Feser was able to help clear up in regards to his notions of change and cause.

I found the first (Aristotelian) and last ("rationalist") arguments to be "good" (valid, difficult to refute, plausible premises, etc...), while I had major problems with the other three. Going into it, I did not expect this to be the case.

I was afraid he was going to spend a lot of time going after the "new" atheists, rather than the "old," which would have been boring, but he engages with both crowds, as well as atheistic analytic philosophers that actually know what they're talking about like J. L. Mackie and Graham Oppy.

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### **Paige Skipper says**

Dense but clear explanation of basic proofs of God. It strikes me as a much less aggressive look than his previous novel 'The Last Superstition.'

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### **Petronius Jablonski says**

My only complaint is that it had to end\*. Some initial thoughts:

The counter arguments are horrible, far worse than I'd thought: What caused G-d? Quantum particles pop out of nothing so why can't the universe? Even if there's some non-contingent layer of Reality there's no reason to say it's Divine. All of these objections are refuted. Completely. The first one is exposed as missing the whole point of the arguments. Feser's treatment of the last objection is nothing short of a tour de force.

You can learn more about the arguments for theism from this book than a philosophy degree. I speak from bitter experience. "Plotinus' argument for the One? Is that some eastern thing?" (It has occurred to me that 18-25 is not the optimal period in life to do philosophy.)

Aquinas is a tough nut to crack. It's not simply the exotic terminology; it's an alien conceptual framework. The scales have fallen from at least one of my eyes on the existence/essence dichotomy.

In a debate with William Craig, Hitchens reached for this petrified tit: "None of these arguments establish the god of any particular religion." If you've heard this objection once, you've heard it a google times. Feser writes:

[T]he arguments of natural theology do have a great deal to tell us about how to evaluate the claims of the various religions. If a religion says things about the nature of G-d or His relationship to the world which are incompatible with the results of natural theology, then we have positive reason to think that religion is false. (p. 246)

Testify!

It's very difficult (for me) not to think in terms of G-d knocking over the first domino a long, long, long time ago. This book demonstrates how He keeps everything in existence from nanosecond to nanosecond and how

this does not entail occasionalism.

This book is only 300+ pages! Is it possible to be more concise when covering this much ground? I was bending page corners of particularly lucid passages until I noticed it was ruining the book. I'm looking forward to rereading it.

**This book is a decisive refutation of atheism, skepticism, and fideism.** The skeptic is making positive assertions about metaphysics (whether he knows it or not). These assertions are destroyed.

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Regarding Hitchens' query, the Kuzari argument is the next step. The eyewitness testimony of a nation makes the Torah the only self-authenticating Revelation in human history. All subsequent revelations use this foundation and claim to add the latest chapter. The practical upshot isn't religion.

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\*One quibble. On p. 245 Feser asserts that a prophet who can perform miracles must have a Divine "seal of approval." This notion is ubiquitous, treated like some axiom of deductive logic. It's only true if a prior Revelation doesn't put the kibosh on it. Deut. 13 plainly states that some miracles are tests.

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## William F says

I give it 5 stars due to its depth, it was hard to read due to that deep topic

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## Isen says

Before I start this review I should clarify what this book is. In Five Proofs of the Existence of God Edward Feser presents five arguments for God, inspired by Aristotle, Plotinus, Augustine, Aquinas, and Leibniz, rebuts common objections to them, and tries to establish that the "God" that these arguments establish is the same unique, omnipotent, omniscient, etc, god of classical theism. What this book is not is an account of those arguments themselves. You're going to find very little historical context, textual history, influence and influences, etc, for the proofs given. In fact, the author admits in the preface that it is possible that the five originators themselves would disagree with aspects of the proofs presented here. In other words, it's quite pointless to evaluate this book based on how well, say, Feser explains the Aristotelian argument because that is not the purpose of the book (which is a shame, because that would have been a much more interesting book to read). The purpose of the book is to prove the existence of God, and Aristotle's arguments are just a tool to that end, and a tool that Feser has no qualms about changing and adapting to fit his needs. As such the book will be evaluated accordingly.

The first proof begins with the observation that change happens. I accept this premise. I would struggle to make sense of the world without accepting change or causality, though I admit that these are by no means obvious notions and the more you think about them the less they make sense. I have no problems with the fact that the arguments of this book take change and causality as given, and had the answer merely said "We assume change exists" I would have been okay with it. But the author is not. The author wants to "prove"

that change is a real phenomenon, and that rejecting it is not a viable way to reject the existence of God. How do you prove something as thorny as that? Well, apparently the UCSB school of philosophy holds that the correct approach is to laugh at your opponents and call them idiots. The argument Feser offers is that change occurs because trying to convince someone that it does not involves presupposing that you can change their minds, and thus you could not consistently hold that change does not exist and argue against change existing.

How incredibly trite. There are so many questionable assumptions tied up in that -- people only do what is rational, people do anything at all, people have free will to choose one way or another, objective reality exists, etc -- that is hard to see how Feser could possibly find that argument convincing. I don't believe that he does. This, like many points in the book where Feser runs into trouble, is argument by intimidation. Look at me, I have an authoritative tone of voice, and I think this argument is silly! Well I'm sorry, I'm a little too old to think that teaching philosophy at a community college automatically makes you right. You have to present a reasoned argument like everyone else, and dropping something like this on the second page of your first proof is a bad way to start.

I know this sounds incredibly petty, and I wouldn't have mentioned it had the rest of the book convinced me he is arguing in good faith, but unfortunately it does not.

Having accepted causality, we are lead to consider causal chains. Feser is very careful to point out that he is not supposing that *\*everything\** has a cause, only change. To use his example, coffee cools (undergoes change) because the surrounding air is cold. The surrounding air became cold (underwent change) because the air conditioner is turned on. The air conditioner was turned on (underwent change) because somebody flicked the switch, and so on. Feser refers to this as a linear series. Now such a series could be finite or infinite. In the first case it would need to have an initial first element which is capable of causing change without being changed itself, "The Unmoved Mover", in the second it would chain back indefinitely (the third possibility, that the series forms a loop, is never considered by Feser. Presumably it's isomorphic to the infinite chain).

However, Feser is not interested in linear chains precisely because the plurality of possibilities do not prove God. He wants a chain that *\*definitely\** has a first element, so he defines what he calls a hierarchical chain. Now, the difference between the two chains is that in a linear chain an element gets power from its parent in an *\*inherited\** way, while in a hierarchical chain it is done in a *\*derived\** way. It is hard to tell what Feser means by this because he argues by examples. So for example a long line of children is a linear series, with each child inheriting their power from their parents, but a long line of geometry textbooks, copied from one another, is a hierarchical series, that derive power from their ancestors. What exactly is the difference between copying genes and copying letters? The author does not specify.

Feser then goes on to claim that a hierarchical series *\*must\** have a first element. The example he uses is that if you put a desk on top of a desk on top of a desk, eventually the stack of desks must rest on the ground. An infinite series of desks wouldn't be supported.

Uh. Wouldn't it? I don't know. It might? Supported against what, anyway? The desks won't fall down on their own accord, there needs to be a force of gravity acting on them. And if we assume that there is such a force of gravity, then we're begging the question -- we're trying to prove that the series terminates on the ground, we can't assume that the ground is already there. And if we don't assume the ground, we don't need an infinite series to show that the ground is not necessary. Two desks will support each other against each other. A single desk will float in space and never collapse anywhere. Now I suppose that Feser would argue that it's not the ground that matters, it's the force of gravity, which is present inside the desks, and on which the dependence is a derived one and a hierarchical series still exists, but at that point I'm writing his book for

him. The point is that this is by far the most important argument of the book. Four out of five proofs rely on it. If you don't find it convincing, there is no reason to keep reading. And the best way Feser can demonstrate it is with an example that is either wrong or meaningless.

Having (failed to have) established that hierarchical series have a first element, Feser seems to argue that existence is the actualisation of the potential to exist, and thus it also needs a cause. Treating existence as a potential seems extremely suspect to me, as if a thing fails to exist surely that means all of its potentials disappear with it? I'm not claiming that this is definitely the case, but it could certainly use some clarification. You obviously won't find them in this book.

Putting that aside, I can probably accept that if something exists now, something must have caused it to exist at some earlier point in time, ie we have a linear series. But Feser is not happy with a linear series, because it doesn't give him the conclusion he needs. He claims that we have a hierarchical series, because something that exists, needs to have that potential actualised RIGHT NOW else it would fall into non-existence. The first element in this series, that keeps everything in existence, is God.

What the hell? Let's go back to our initial premises. If something is changed, then it is changed by something. By the law of contrapositives, if something is not changed by something, then it is not changed. In other words, we have inertia. Not from my own scientific-or-whatever-the-hell-Feser-wants-to-call-it background, but from the very same premises he provided. A table going from existence to non-existence constitutes a change. If a table already exists, IT WILL NOT STOP EXISTING UNLESS SOME FORCE ACTS UPON IT.

So what we have here is some kind of weird Manichean theology where there is a dark and terrible void that exerts constant pressure on objects to pull them into non-existence. And if we do assume such a void, and the fact that the derived/inherited distinction is meaningful, and that a hierarchical series has a first element, then sure. We can prove the existence of an Unmoved Mover, whom Feser will later argue satisfies all the standard properties of divinity. I didn't bother reading those arguments in detail because they rest on a whole lot of ifs.

What is this terrible void? The only theologically consistent answer is God. Everything exists or does not exist only because God wills it to. That would be consistent. But it would also involve begging the question - we are assuming God exists as the Destroyer to prove that God exists as the Maintainer. We set out to prove A and instead prove A implies A. A and a whole bunch of highly suspect premises imply A. This is weaker than the law of identity. Not exactly convincing stuff.

It boggles the mind that Feser cannot see this flaw in his argument. It's not like he's unaware of inertia. He brings it up twice, once in the rebuttals section of the first proof, and once in the rebuttals at the end of the book. But there he seems completely incapable to understand what the issue is. He cannot understand where inertia comes from, and seems to think that inertia is this weird, unjustified property of objects that the scientific atheist posits a propos nothing, and haughtily dismisses it with "Existential inertia is not to answer those arguments but simply to ignore the arguments". Really? How hard is it to understand that inertia is not some kind of existential raincoat that you put on to not get wet -- it is the principle that if it is not raining, YOU WILL NOT GET WET. I am not positing a raincoat. Feser is positing the rain. The principle that without rain I remain dry is also posited by Feser. You can't escape inertia if you accept causality. They go hand in hand.

The only possible way I see to reconcile this is to argue that non-existence is not a potential, and hence an object ceasing to exist does not constitute a change. This seems extremely suspect, and would need a lot of justification. Feser offers none.

So much for the first proof. Unfortunately, proofs 2, 4, and 5 are exactly the same. They do introduce some additional oddities, however.

In the second proof Feser claims that some entities are composite, and in order to remain composite they need to be held in existence by some other entity in a hierarchical series. The first element of this series must be entirely non-composite, the One, which is God. In this proof Feser claims that the mind is immaterial without bothering to justify the fact. It's not crucial to his argument, but it doesn't exactly help -- lumping on questionable assertions is the difference between stating "The US government serves the interests of multinational corporations" and "The US government serves the interests of multinational corporations who are controlled by an international conspiracy of Jews who conspire with the Reptilians to hide the fact that the Earth is flat and surrounded by a giant wall of ice". Sometimes less is more. It's also interesting to note that Feser mentions that in the original formulation Plotinus did not attribute intellect to the One, rather the intellect was at a stage below the one. Well, that sounds vaguely interesting. It'd be kinda neat to hear what Plotinus had to say on the matter, without having his proof perverted to fit Feser's personal theological beliefs. Well, this is the wrong book.

The fourth proof consists of claiming that objects consist of an "essence", roughly speaking "what" the object is/ought to be, and an "existence", the fact that they exist. So the essence of a lion is a big, furry cat or whatever, and its existence can be found at the local zoo. The essence of a unicorn is a horse with a horn on its head, but it has no existence. The argument is that essences can exist just because, while existences need to be actively maintained, so the first element in this series must be something whose existence is derived from its essence, also known as God. The trouble here is just what exactly is an essence, anyway? How do you define a lion, in a precise way? A lion is a collection of genes, and different lions have different genetic compositions. When those genetic compositions are pretty close we call them both lions, when they're a bit farther apart we call one a tiger. Any attempt to make the distinction exact runs into the sorites paradox, which I have never seen a satisfactory resolution to. The concept of "species" does not correspond to some unambiguous biological fact. It is an abstraction that helps us make sense of the data. This is not a problem for biology because biology does not depend upon species in an essential way -- you could still do biology without species, it would just be a lot messier and with higher dropout rates in university. This is a problem for Feser's proof because unless we establish that essences are a real thing, the proof doesn't go anywhere.

To be fair, Feser does address this in the rebuttals section (and given that Feser doesn't bother with definitions, you almost have to start with the rebuttals and work your way backwards if you want to make sense of his argument). He brings up the example of chemical substances, and quote some guy as saying "these differences were not invented by us, or chosen pragmatically to impose order on an otherwise amorphous mass of data. There is no continuous spectrum of chemical variety that we had somehow to categorize.". Well, sure. I can probably agree that Helium has a clear essence, namely an atom with the atomic number 2. But that's curious, isn't it? Every object I have had concrete, direct experience with -- be it lions, tables, mountains, what have you -- IS an amorphous mass of data that I DO pragmatically impose divisions on to make sense of the world. To find actual, discrete essences I have to delve into the world of atoms and molecules, things I have never interacted with directly but only understand through the formalism of high school/undergraduate models. So what's actually going on here? Is it the helium that has a clear, discrete essence, or just my mental model of helium? Because if it's the latter, then the proof merely shows that every abstract object has a first cause. But that's not a proof of God, that is a proof of the Form of the Good.

The variation in the fifth proof is that the Principle of Sufficient Reason states that everything must have a reason, this series must have a first element that is its own reason, and that element is God. It's interesting that Feser sketches an argument of Leibniz for this which does not appear to rely on hierarchical series. This



would have been great to develop because Leibniz is a smart guy, and whatever he said is worth listening to. Unfortunately Feser is so convinced that his argument is irrefutable that he doesn't bother developing Leibniz's argument, and just hits the reader with the hierarchical series again. Even if we accept PSR and reject the existence of brute facts, which is by no means as straightforward as Feser makes it out to be, we reach the same problem that his argument from thereon just doesn't hold water.

This brings us to the third proof, the only one that doesn't fall flat immediately because it relies on the same argument as the others. Here Feser starts with the premise that abstract objects exist, if only in the mind of beings, which is fine, and if they exist they must exist somewhere (why?). He then offers three (or five, quickly dismissing two) possible explanations. The Platonic, that holds that they exist in the World of Ideas, the Aristotelian, that they exist, in part, in real objects, and as an abstraction in the minds of men, and the Scholastic, that they exist in the mind of God. He then argues that the Scholastic view makes more sense than the others.

Well, that's not really a proof, is it? Even if we accept all of Feser's arguments, all we have is "The best explanation of abstract objects we have involves God". That's a theory of God, contingent on further developments that might disprove it. Is it at least a good theory? Well, I tried hard to understand Feser's arguments but it's hard to read this proof as nothing more than bare assertions. For example in the Aristotelian view objects have a certain property that makes them red, namely that they reflect/radiate light in the 620-750 nm range, and a human being observing these objects has a concept of "redness" in their mind that ties these objects together. Feser claims that if all the humans were to suddenly disappear we would still have these red objects, so obviously we would still have redness which must exist somewhere outside of men's minds.

Would we? We would still have objects that reflect/radiate light in the 620-750 nm range, sure, but that is not redness. In the Aristotelian view redness is a human concept, so without humans it wouldn't exist. I fail to see how this is somehow inconsistent or not sensible. More generally, the notion of existence here used is extremely hazy. According to Feser, facts like " $2+2=4$ " exist. What does that actually mean? Is it actualising a potential to exist? But surely that must mean it is possible for it to not exist?

A Formalist might say that  $2+2=4$  is a consequence of a formal system like Peano arithmetic that was invented out of convenience to model the world. But  $2+2=4$  even in a world with no humans, Feser retorts. Uh, does it? Sure, if we accept the Platonic interpretation of number, which I do, it would. But a Formalist does not. A Formalist probably wouldn't even interpret such a statement as wrong, just meaningless, because to assert that  $2+2=4$  you would need to draw up a formal system and demonstrate that  $2+2=4$  is a consequence of it. But then you have just invented a formal system, and so you did not establish any metaphysical reality of your claim. And Formalism is hardly a fringe current of mathematical thought. It's a respectable and sensible tradition, and merely asserting that they're wrong is not an argument.

The last section of the book reiterates on the fact that all these arguments apparently prove the same God, and He is the God of classical theism (yes, down to the masculine pronoun). I'm running into the character limit so I can't say all I wanted to say here, which is a shame because I had a long rant on why using language "analogously" is a cheap cop out in a field that claims to be an analytical discipline. Instead I'll just say that it is remarkable how confident Feser is that his arguments are 100% bulletproof, and no one in good faith could find an issue with them. He has a section where he rebuts the criticism some atheists have that God's existence should be obvious, by pointing to his book as an example. He even ends the book with a QED. It's funny how it never strikes him as strange that no one seems to claim that an inconvenient mathematical proof is wrong. They may take issue with the premises or the applicability, but if the argument is valid then it is valid. Surely the fact that so many people find the proofs presented in the book suspect

suggests that either:

They are suspect.

Feser does a terrible job of explaining them.

No, as far as Feser is concerned the only possible reason you are not convinced by his drivel is that if you are not reading the book in good faith, and are approaching the arguments with a view to justify your preordained conclusions.

“Natural theology is a confident discipline” Feser writes, and this book is a good example of why I have a very low opinion of confidence. If you’re right, you come across like an asshole. If you’re wrong, you come across like an idiot.

Feser comes across like an idiot.

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## **John says**

If you are semi-acquainted with God-proofs like me, meaning you have encountered them and read about them and even understood them, their force and some of their weaknesses, then this book is a great way to establish and understand their strengths and grasp them even further.

This is not a book about the 5 proofs of Aquinas, but rather an inspired take on five different kinds of proofs including one of Aquinas. This is a great read because it gives you a breadth and a qualified discussion on the proofs, you get a very good introduction to them that becomes quite complex and then the objections to the proofs. These proofs hints, or points at, the qualities of God - and these are then discussed further in the sixth chapter, and then a seventh and last chapter is then added to discuss more objections but more primarily the modern new atheist strawman arguments.

The book does have a fair share of repetition, as many of the arguments have some of the same elements (like infinite regress) and encounter the same kinds of objections (who caused the cause?) - but in a way, they are alluded to and ignored (rather than repeating them in detail), but expanded on if necessary. There is a weakness in that the "formal" argument made has so many points that the chain of reasoning is doomed to be found weak in some of the parts - at least if one takes them in themselves without the previous discussion in mind.

I will definitely come back to this book to both reiterate the arguments, but also to check the proof if some arguments against them are made. That being said, it is a very good and in-depth book that is well written, but it is also written in a style that is accessible to more than people within academics. Feser could, as I know him, have been much more thorough and detailed even though the disposition feels just good enough.

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## **Rob says**

While a challenging read and very philosophical, this book gives impressive arguments from philosophy supporting the existence of one God. It was surprising to me that both Plato and Aristotle reasoned to many of the attributes of the Judeo-Christian god through natural reasoning.

The qualities are: one, immutable, eternal, immaterial, incorporeal, perfect, fully good, omnipotent, intelligent, and omniscient.

Feser also gives an excellent critique of the "new atheists" and scientism. More than other authors I've read I think he really devastates scientism.

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### **Renee Kahl says**

Apparently you have to mark a book "read" to get it off "currently reading", but I have added this to my get back to later shelf after reading about a third of it.

My gut feeling is that it is only the possibility of the existence of God that can be irrefutably proved, not His actual existence. But it is worthwhile to understand the classical reasoning.

This book does a good job of fulfilling its aim to lay out these proofs systematically and precisely in terms the layman can understand. I will definitely use it for reference.

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