

God Is an Artificer: A Response to Edward Feser

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PROFESSOR FESER'S CONTRIBUTION to the philosophical conversation he presents is particularly congenial to any theologian working in the tradition of Thomas Aquinas, where Aristotelian notions of causality and teleology serve extensively, and so it is from the perspective of Aquinas's theology that I am going to reply to one of Professor Feser's points about the theological implications of his philosophical position.

Taking an Aristotelian rather than Paleyite position, Professor Feser emphasizes the difference between organisms and artifacts. His problem with Paleyism is that natural objects are treated as artifacts, as without substantial form and intrinsic teleology, and with their teleology imposed on them from without, such that any forms are merely accidental. Having confused natural objects with artifacts, Paleyism approaches God through the wrong sort of teleology, extrinsic rather than intrinsic. But where his Aristotelianism leads Feser in regard to God is an example of a seemingly apophatic, rather than analogical, theology: God cannot be called an "artificer." Feser says, "Natural objects are not a kind of artifact, and hence God's relationship to them is not that of an artificer."¹ I reply, however, that the Christian theologian has reason to speak by way of analogy of the Trinitarian God as an artificer and creatures as divine artifacts, and that theological reflection on this analogy can suggest to Professor Feser reasons,

¹ See Edward Feser, "From Aristotle to John Searle and Back Again: Formal Causes, Teleology, and Computation in Nature," *Nova et Vetera* (English) 14.2 (2016): 459–494, at 492.

even philosophical reasons, to modify, or rather clarify, his seemingly apophatic conclusion.

I suggest that we ordinarily think of an artificer as one who devises and produces some object, doing so through his skill or art. The artificer is a skilled or wise craftsman, and the artifact is the product of this art of his. And when the Christian theologian as such looks to the authority of the Scriptures, he finds the Creator God portrayed in just this kind of way. The Letter to the Hebrews 11:10 names God as a “*τεχνίτης*”—in this case, the artificer of the city for which Abraham hoped. But God is portrayed in the Bible not only as eschatological artificer, but as the protological artificer of creation, for example, in the opening chapters of Genesis, where in 2:7 God forms a man of dust from the ground, and so on. Scripture, moreover, speaks not only of God creating by his word—John 1:3 says that through the Word was everything made that was made—but speaks also in this connection of divine wisdom. “By wisdom the Lord founded the earth,” says Proverbs 3:19. Then in 8:30, “Wisdom” is presented as a figure alongside God at the creation, putting things together, harmonizing them, so to speak. Then in the Wisdom of Solomon 7:22, Wisdom is named a “*τεχνίτης*,” where the author confesses: “Wisdom, the artificer of all things, taught me.” And in 8:5–6, we find: “What is richer than Wisdom who effects all things? And if understanding is effective, who more than she is artificer of what exists?” So, at least for those theologians for whom the Wisdom of Solomon is canonical Scripture, Catholics and others, there is biblical authority for reflecting theologically on the Creator in terms of wise artifice.

Not that these passages have been without their difficulties in interpretation. For example, it is not easy to see on which side of the Creator-creature divide the biblical figure of Wisdom belongs. When the early Church was full of debate over whether the Word of God was true God or perfect creature, where God’s Word and Wisdom were both identified with God the Son on the basis of 1 Corinthians 1:24 and other texts, varied positions were adopted on the Old Testament passages concerning Wisdom. The triumph of Christian orthodoxy in the wider debate is, of course, represented by the Creed of Nicaea, where the Son is confessed in relation to the Father as “true God from true God, begotten not made.” This placed God’s Word and Wisdom firmly on the divine side of the Creator-creature divide, and by use of the familiar distinction between the natural begetting of offspring from oneself and the artificial making of what is made out of something else, the Word is said to be begotten by the Father, in

contrast to all that is made, which is made by the Father through him, the Word.

This, of course, raises the question of where the Holy Spirit stands in all this, but we have no time to address that question here. What I do want to note is that this also raises the question of how, more precisely, the Word of God is to be understood in relation to the Father and to creatures, and to mention very briefly in the remaining time allowed how Aquinas took up here the saying of Augustine in the *De trinitate* that the Father's Word is "the art of the almighty and wise God, full of the living patterns of all things."² Apart from the suggestion to those of us who have heard Professor Feser's paper that the real patterns in nature that computational notions track themselves exist eminently in the divine Word,³ Augustine's implication is that God is an artificer, the Father making all things through his own Art, who is his Word and Son.

In contrast to the words of Professor Feser's conclusion, Aquinas never denied that the Creator is an artificer.⁴ Instead, he declared: "God, who is the first principle of all things, is compared to creatures as artificer to artifacts (*ut artifex ad artificata*)."⁵ This analogy, which he could trace in both patristic and philosophical sources,⁶ he deployed to great theological advantage, both opposing false views of creation with it and using it to illumine the nexus between creation and redemption. He opposed a false view of creation that would see God creating by natural necessity the doctrine of a Trinitarian God as an intelligent and voluntary artificer creating a multitude of creatures by wisdom and love. What is crucial for Aquinas here is that a human artificer thoughtfully employs his art to produce artifacts—what he produces, he produces by way of intellect and will, and not by natural necessity; and the same is true for God.⁷ Thus, Aquinas can say: "The knowledge

² Augustine, *De trinitate* 6.10 [11], in *Corpus Christianorum Series Latina* 50, ed. W. J. Mountain (Turnhout: Brepols, 1968), 241.

³ Feser, "Aristotle to John Searle," 459–494.

⁴ For a comprehensive overview of Aquinas on divine art and human art in its various forms, see Francis J. Kovach, "Divine Art in Saint Thomas Aquinas," in *Arts libéraux et philosophie au moyen âge* (Montreal: Institut d'études médiévales; Paris: Vrin, 1969), 663–671.

⁵ *Summa theologiae* (hereafter, *ST*) I, q. 27, a. 1, ad 3. For the Latin text, see *Summa Theologiae*, ed. by T. Gilby, 61 vols. (London: Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1964–1981).

⁶ For an indication of sources, see Kovach, "Divine Art in Saint Thomas Aquinas," 663–665.

⁷ For Aquinas on divine artifice and creation, including the diversity of crea-

of God is to all creatures what the knowledge of the artificer is to his artifacts";⁸ and again: "God is the cause of things through his intellect and will, just as is an artificer of his artifacts."⁹

This approach enables Aquinas to apply here his wider integration of Platonic exemplarism with Aristotelian causation within his metaphysics, whereby an efficient cause requires an exemplary form in order to produce an effect of a determinate form.¹⁰ He says, "An artificer produces a determinate form in matter on account of the exemplar before him, whether it be an exemplar viewed externally or an exemplar conceived interiorly in the mind."¹¹ He concludes that God is the first exemplary cause of all things, where the exemplar forms or ideas exist unitedly in the divine mind, where the patterns of all things exist in the divine wisdom.¹² We should note that the resulting participation of all creatures in the divine exemplar of the divine artificer's mind arguably underwrites, in part, the very possibility of speaking of God by analogy, on which both Thomist philosophers and theologians rely.¹³

In all of this, Aquinas's analogy of the artificer is manifesting his Trinitarian doctrine.¹⁴ He holds that the Father speaks his Word by way of an intellectual procession internal to God, and that in this Word he expresses all created things. This helps Aquinas to explain John 1:3's teaching that all things were made through the Word. He further writes: "An artificer operates through a word conceived in the intellect and through love in his will regarding some object. Hence also God the Father worked creation through his Word, the Son, and through his Love, the Holy Spirit."¹⁵ This helps Aquinas show how the processions of the divine persons are the patterns of the production of creatures. The Word's role is further manifested by the

tures, see Rudi A. te Velde, *Participation and Substantiality in Thomas Aquinas* (Leiden: Brill, 1995), 102–108.

⁸ *ST I*, q. 14, a. 8.

⁹ *ST I*, q. 45, a. 6.

¹⁰ For divine artifice in the context of the divine ideas, see Vivian Boland, *Ideas in God according to Saint Thomas Aquinas* (Leiden: Brill, 1996), and Gregory T. Doolan, *Aquinas on the Divine Ideas as Exemplar Causes* (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2008).

¹¹ *ST I*, q. 44, a. 3.

¹² *Ibid.*, q. 15, and *De veritate*, q. 3.

¹³ See *ST I*, q. 13.

¹⁴ See Gilles Emery, *The Trinitarian Theology of St Thomas Aquinas* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2007), 192–200 and 338–359.

¹⁵ *ST I*, q. 45, a. 6.

appropriation to him of divine Wisdom and Art.¹⁶ The appropriation of wisdom, through which an agent acts intelligently, helps Aquinas explain the Creed's "through him all things were made."¹⁷ And when treating of John's teaching that God makes nothing except through his Word, Aquinas explicitly follows Augustine in describing the Word as the divine Art, full of the patterns of all things.¹⁸ God thus creates through the Word as an artificer works through his art.¹⁹

This analogy of the artificer also helps Aquinas to appreciate the unity of the Scriptural narrative of creation and redemption by drawing on the patristic teaching that it is the same Word who becomes incarnate to restore us as was the Word through whom all things were made.²⁰ Aquinas writes: "The person of the Son, who is the Word of God, has a common relationship to every creature. For the word of the artificer, that is, his concept, is an exemplary likeness of those things which exist through his artifice. Hence the Word of God, which is his eternal concept, is the exemplary likeness of every creature. And therefore, just as creatures were constituted in their proper species, though changeably, through participation in that likeness, so it was fitting that the creature be restored through a personal, not participative, union of the Word with a creature. For the artificer restores an artifact, if it be damaged, through the same form of art as he conceived it when he made it."²¹ Thus, Aquinas's use of the notion of artificer for God has a particular power in bringing out the theological connection between our creation and our recreation.²² Moreover, in his commentary on Hebrews 11:10, he says that God is the artificer of the heavenly city, which is arranged according to divine wisdom at its most splendid.²³

Not that the Creator is an artificer in precisely the same way that humans can be artificers.²⁴ For example, while the human artificer's concept is no more than an intelligible form in the mind, the Word of

¹⁶ Ibid., q. 39, a. 8.

¹⁷ Ibid., q. 45, a. 6, ad 2.

¹⁸ *Super Ioan.* 1, lec. 2.

¹⁹ *ST I*, q. 39, a. 8.

²⁰ For example, Athanasius, *De Incarnatione* 1.

²¹ *ST III*, q. 3, a. 8, resp. See *Summa contra gentiles* (hereafter, *SCG*) IV, ch. 42.

²² For Aquinas's use of the analogy in his doctrine of providence, see Boland, *Ideas in God*, 264, 268–70.

²³ *Super Heb.* 11, lec. 3.

²⁴ On the differences between divine and human art, see Kovach, "Divine Art in Saint Thomas Aquinas," 665–670, and Doolan, *Aquinas on the Divine Ideas*, 223–228.

God is itself subsistent, allowing for Scripture to speak of him as Artificer and not simply as Art.²⁵ More pertinently, in contrast to human artificers, who do their making out of pre-existing material, God creates the whole being of something out of nothing, with nothing else presupposed. However, this in no way undermines the force of the analogy for Aquinas. He says, “Just as the created artificer makes something from matter, so God makes from nothing.”²⁶ It is not that the two makings are entirely unrelated, but rather that God’s artifice is responsible for more than the created artificer is capable of, not just for giving accidental form, but for imparting substantial form and being in its entirety. He says: “God does not only move things to operate as though applying their forms and powers to operation just as an artificer applies his axe to cutting, while nevertheless at times not giving the axe its form, but he also gives created agents their forms and holds them in being.”²⁷ Here we have a true artificer who can give substantial as well accidental form, imparting intrinsic as well as extrinsic teleology. And so Aquinas can truly say: “All natural things have been produced by divine art, such that they are in a certain way the artifacts of God himself.”²⁸ Divine artifice is powerful enough to produce natural objects precisely as divine artifacts, just as God can signify meaning not only by words, as we do, but by his creatures themselves.²⁹

However, if one were to adopt Aquinas’s analogical position on the divine artificer, would one thereby be committed to Paley’s mechanical argument from artifact to artificer? No more, I think, than is the theologian committed to such an argument by Wisdom 13:1b: “They did not recognize the artificer, while paying heed to his works.” Acknowledging God as a divine artificer need not mean confusing natural objects with human artifacts. Rather, as extrinsic teleology in human artifacts can lead us to their human artificers, so intrinsic teleology in divine artifacts can lead us to the divine artificer. Thus, while Professor Feser must doubtless continue to exclude from his natural theology what elsewhere in his paper he calls the “early modern conception of God as artificer,”³⁰ he is perhaps able to incorporate some insights from a theological approach that predates that

²⁵ See SCG IV, ch. 13.

²⁶ ST I, q. 41, a. 3. See also *ibid.*, q. 45, a. 2.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, q. 105, a. 5.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, q. 91, a. 3.

²⁹ See *ibid.*, q. 1, a. 10.

³⁰ Feser, “From Aristotle to John Searle and Back Again,” at 465.

of Paley. For, while Aquinas's doctrine of the divine artificer belongs to a robustly Trinitarian theology, and the doctrine of the Trinity is, according to Aquinas, not accessible to philosophical reason,³¹ there is surely much in the doctrine of creation, including the divine artifice, that *is* open to philosophical investigation. In short, my theological reply to Professor Feser, who has already written on arguments for God's existence and the divine attributes,³² is to ask him now to apply his philosophical art to questions of divine creation. **N&V**

³¹ *ST* I, q. 32, a. 1.

³² Edward Feser, *Aquinas: A Beginner's Guide* (Oxford, UK: Oneworld Publications, 2009), 62–130.