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## *An Aristotelian-Thomist Responds to Edward Feser's "Teleology"*

MARIE GEORGE  
*Department of Philosophy  
St. John's University  
Queens, New York*

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In his article "Teleology: A Shopper's Guide,"<sup>1</sup> Edward Feser attempts to explain why Aristotelian-Thomistic (A-T) partisans of the Fifth Way generally reject the positions of the Intelligent Design school and distance themselves from Paley. In this note, I argue that on a number of points Feser fails to accurately convey A-T views pertinent to reasoning to the existence of God starting from teleology or action for an end in nature.

Feser maintains that for Aristotle "the end or goal of a material substance is inherent to it."<sup>2</sup> Aristotle indeed sees the ordering to an end of an artificial thing to be imposed on it from without (by humans or other animals), whereas the ordering to an end of a natural thing follows upon its form. However, it is not the end itself which is inherent in the natural thing, but rather the inclination or tendency to the end. If being down inhered in a rock or being up inhered in fire, then each respectively would always have to be down or up, and they would never need to move to their proper places. Final causes can inhere in a natural thing, as is the case of health, which is the "that for the sake of which" living things eat; but it is not essential that they be such. According to the A-T tradition, what is inherent in natural things are "natural inclinations" or "natural appetites" for certain determinate ends.<sup>3</sup> Without passing judgment on whether it is necessarily inappropriate and misleading to use the expression "intrinsic teleology" to express this ordina-

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ABSTRACT: I argue that Edward Feser misconstrues the Aristotelian-Thomistic tradition on issues relevant to the arguments for God's existence that proceed from finality in nature because he misapplies the A-T view that ordering to an end is inherent in natural things: (1) Feser speaks as if human action in no way serves as a model for understanding action for an end in nature; (2) he misreads, and ultimately undermines, the Fifth Way, by substituting intrinsic end-directedness in place of end-directedness; (3) he overlooks striking similarities between Paley's argument from design and the Fifth Way. He also fails to consider the role of the good in the Fifth Way.

1. Feser, "Teleology: A Shopper's Guide," *Philosophic Christi* 12 (2010): 142–59.

2. *Ibid.*, 143.

3. See Aquinas, *Commentary on the De anima*, bk. 2, lect. 5, and *Commentary on the Physics*, bk. 1, lect. 15 (here Aquinas comments on *Physics*, 192a17–23, where Aristotle speaks of matter's desire for form).

tion, my point, again, is that it is not accurate to say that the goal of a natural substance, as such, is inherent to it.

Feser then proceeds to articulate a standard view among Aristotelian scholars: “Aristotelian teleological realism holds that teleology or final causality is intrinsic to natural substances, and does not derive from any divine source.”<sup>4</sup> It is worth noting that this is not the only view. Aristotle speaks of God ordering things to an end in *On Generation and Corruption*:

As has already been remarked, coming-to-be and passing-away will take place continuously, and will never fail owing to the cause which we have given. This has come about with good reason. For nature, as we maintain, always and in all things strives after the better, and “being” . . . is better than “not-being,” but it is impossible that “being” can be present in all things, because they are too far away from the “original source.” God, therefore, following the course which still remained open, perfected the universe by making coming-to-be a perpetual process; for in this way “being” would acquire the greatest possible coherence, because the continual coming-to-be of coming-to-be is the nearest approach to eternal being. The cause of this continuous process, as has been frequently remarked, is cyclical motion, the only motion which is continuous.<sup>5</sup>

God could not have “perfected the universe by making coming-to-be a perpetual process” apart from doing something to ensure that natural beings are capable of continual cycles of generation and corruption. One thing that plainly needed to be done was to provide living things with means of reproduction. Thus, the passage from *De Generatione* is rightly brought to bear on what Aristotle says in the *De Anima*:

The most natural act [of a living thing] is the production of another like itself, an animal producing an animal, a plant a plant, in order that as far as nature allows, it may partake in the eternal and the divine. That is the goal towards which all things strive, that for the sake of which they do whatsoever their nature renders possible. . . . Since then no living thing is able to partake in what is eternal and divine by uninterrupted continuance (for nothing perishable can for ever remain one and the same), it tries to achieve that end in the only way possible to it, and success is possible in varying degrees; so it remains not indeed as the self-same individual but continues its existence in something like itself—not numerically but specifically one.<sup>6</sup>

4. Feser, “Teleology,” 148.

5. Aristotle, *On Coming-to-Be and Passing Away*, trans. E. S. Forster, in *On Sophistical Refutations, On Coming-to-Be and Passing Away, On the Cosmos* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1955), 336b25–37a2.

6. Aristotle, *De Anima*, trans. J. A. Smith, 415b1–8. I am from this point on using the translations found in *The Basic Works of Aristotle*, ed. Richard McKeon (New York: Random House, 1968).

Feser claims that: “The acorn points beyond itself to the oak—not because it was made that way, but because it just is that way by nature, simply by virtue of being an acorn.”<sup>7</sup> The text from *De Generatione* indicates rather that the acorn allows the oak to participate in the eternal and divine because God arranged living things’ reproductive processes with a view to the perfection of the universe.<sup>8</sup>

Feser is correct to say that the A-T tradition does not view teleology in nature as limited to the realm of living things. He goes on to delimit more precisely the kind of teleology found in nonliving natural things, making the claim that nonliving things’ actions realize “an effect outside the cause itself and therefore does not promote the cause’s own good.”<sup>9</sup> Aquinas explicitly rejects this view:

Further, it belongs to the same notion to flee the bad and to desire the good, just as it belongs to the same notion to move from below and to move upwards. All things, however, are found to flee the bad; for those acting through intellect flee something for this reason: that they apprehend it as bad; all natural agents, however, corresponding to the amount of power (*virtus*) they have, resist corruption, which is bad for any and everything. All things therefore act for the sake of the good.<sup>10</sup>

In addition, Aquinas, taking inspiration from Aristotle, sees the natural motions of the elements to have as their goal places that preserve them.<sup>11</sup>

A more serious problem lies in Feser’s explanation of the Scholastic position that “even the simplest causal regularity in the order of efficient causes presupposes final causality.”<sup>12</sup> While I think he is correct,<sup>13</sup> Feser fails to raise a significant problem in understanding why the A-T tradition maintains this is so. Feser admits it is an oversimplification to say “if *A* is an efficient cause

7. Feser, “Teleology,” 148.

8. More plainly needs to be said on this point. I will only note here that there are some other passages in Aristotle indicating that God orders natural things to their ends in book 12 of the *Metaphysics* at 1075a12–24 and 1075b37–76a7.

9. Feser, “Teleology,” 150.

10. Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles*, ed. C. Pera, OP, et al. (Turin: Marietti, 1961), bk. 3, chap. 3. See also *Summa Contra Gentiles*, bk. 2, chap. 55. All translations of Aquinas are my own.

11. See Aquinas, *Commentary on the Physics*, ed. M. Maggiolo (Turin: Marietti, 1965), bk. 4, lect. 1, para. 411–12. Also, Aristotle speaks of the elements sometimes undergoing violent motion. This seems to imply that such motions are harmful to them, and that the opposite is true of their natural motions.

12. Feser, “Teleology,” 150.

13. Picnics regularly produce garbage, but that is not the final cause of a picnics. However, this regular occurrence depends on efficient causes that aim some genuine final cause. Aquinas speaks of this sort of situation in a number of places. He gives the example of a knife being made out of iron for the sake of holding an edge, despite this being regularly accompanied by the knife’s eventual rusting. See *Quaestio Disputata de Anima*, unicus, 8, and *Summa Theologiae*, I, q.91, a.3.

of *B*, then *B* is the final cause of *A*.” What he does not point out is that the regular realization of an effect by an efficient cause does not suffice for concluding that that effect is the final cause aimed at by the efficient cause; the effect must also be a good. The heart regularly produces a sound detectable by stethoscope, but this is not a good for the organism, and is not the final cause of the heart. One of the first references that Aristotle makes to final cause in the *Physics* insists on this very point:

But the nature is the end or ‘that for the sake of which’. For if a thing undergoes a continuous change and there is a stage which is last, this stage is the end or ‘that for the sake of which’. (That is why the poet was carried away into making an absurd statement when he said ‘he has the end [death] for the sake of which he was born’. For not every stage that is last claims to be an end, but only that which is best.)<sup>14</sup>

It is understandable that Feser would omit mention of the good in speaking about final causality to the extent that there is a puzzle surrounding the relation of the final cause to the good. Feser points to a single passage in Aquinas where Aquinas says: “every agent acts for an end: otherwise one thing would not follow more than another from the action of the agent, unless it was by chance.”<sup>15</sup> This passage makes no reference to the good. Moreover, Aquinas in the *Summa Contra Gentiles* separates his discussion of whether “every agent act for the sake of an end” from whether “every agent acts for the sake of the good.”<sup>16</sup> Aristotle, in his discussion of finality in nature, only explicitly mentions the good in formulating the opening difficulty: “why should not nature work, not for the sake of something, nor because it is better so, but just as the sky rains, not in order to make the corn grow, but of necessity?”<sup>17</sup>

Yet explicit reference to the good is made in the Fifth Way, as well as in the same basic argument as it appears in the *Summa Contra Gentiles*.<sup>18</sup> The Fifth Way begins:

We see that some things which lack cognition, namely, natural bodies act for an end; which appears from this that they always or more frequently act in the same manner such that what follows is the best; whence it is manifest that they arrive at the end from a tendency, and not from chance.<sup>19</sup>

Moreover, the good is included in the account of the final cause Aristotle gives in the *Metaphysics*: “fourth [is] the cause opposed to this [that is, the agent], the purpose [*hou heneka*] and the good (for this is the end of all gen-

14. Aristotle, *Physics*, trans. R. P. Hardie and R. K. Gaye, 194a27–33.

15. Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I, q.44, a.4, quoted by Feser, “Teleology,” 150n14.

16. Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles*, bk. 3, chaps. 2 and 3.

17. Aristotle, *Physics*, 198b17–18.

18. See Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles*, bk. 3, chap. 64.

19. Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, ed. Institutii Studiorum Medievalium Ottaviensis (Ottawa: Commissio Piana, 1953), I, q.2, a.3.

eration and change).<sup>20</sup> As Aquinas highlights in his commentary, the third note that Aristotle gives here for the final cause is that “it is per se desirable, for which reason it is called good.”<sup>21</sup>

Here is not the place to attempt to explain why both Aristotle and Aquinas often make no explicit mention of the good in their discussions of whether nature acts for an end.<sup>22</sup> I only note that it is not immediately apparent that it is the same thing to argue from regularity in natural causality to an intelligent being as to argue from natural causality which regularly achieves some good, and this is something Feser fails to bring out.

It is worth noting that the aspect of goodness involved in final causality explains why Aquinas looks most often to biological examples when speaking of finality in nature. The goods achieved by the parts of animals are much more apparent than the goods achieved by nonliving natural things:

[T]hose that held that nature did not act for the sake of something, tried to confirm this by removing that from which nature chiefly appears to act for the sake of something. This however is what chiefly shows that nature acts for the sake of something, [namely,] that from the operation of nature something is always found to become the best and most advantageous that it can be: as the foot comes to be according to nature in a manner such that it is apt for walking; whence if it recedes from its natural disposition, it is not apt for this use; and similarly with the rest [of things that come to be by nature].<sup>23</sup>

In Feser’s final section on teleological arguments in Paley, ID Theory, and Thomism, he draws a number of unwarranted conclusions from an important point that he makes concerning natural things. Feser reiterates<sup>24</sup> that the parts of natural things are inherently ordered to their ends, whereas the parts of artificial things are ordered by us (and by certain other animals) to ends that they have no tendency to realize. But the fact that “artifacts and the ends they are *made* to serve presuppose natural substances and the tendencies they *naturally* exhibit,” does not mean without qualification that it is “incoherent to model natural substances on artifacts.”<sup>25</sup> Plainly, it would be incoherent to model natural substances on artifacts in a way that would

20. Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, trans. W. D. Ross, 983a32.

21. Aquinas, *Commentary on the Metaphysics*, bk. 1, lect. 4, para. 71.

22. Which notion is prior to which in our understanding, “good” or “final cause?” Again, identifying a final cause seems to be nothing other than identifying what good an agent is achieving. On the other hand there are passages in Aquinas that seem to indicate that final cause is the better known notion, e.g., “But to the contrary is what the Philosopher says in II *Phy.*, that ‘the that for the sake of which is as the end and good of other things.’ Good therefore has the notion of final cause” (*Summa Theologiae*, I, q.5, a.4); and, “First and principally, good is said of being perfective of another in the manner of an end” (*Quaestiones Disputatae de Veritate*, 21.1).

23. In Aquinas, *Octo Libros de Physico Auditu sive Physicorum Aristotelis Commentaria*, ed. Angeli-M. Pirotta (Neapoli: M. D’Auria Pontificius, 1953), bk. 2, lect. 12, para. 491.

24. See Feser, “Teleology,” 156 and 143.

25. *Ibid.*, 155.

ignore this difference. However, we do not want to deny that we know action for an end first from our action for an end. As Aquinas notes, “every agent acts by nature or through intellect. There is no doubt that those acting through intellect act for the sake of an end.”<sup>26</sup> We cannot bypass what we know first and best about action for an end in trying to discern whether it is present in nature. It is true that the first argument that Aristotle gives in the *Physics* in favor of the proposition that nature acts for an end makes no explicit mention to human action, seeking rather to eliminate chance as an alternate explanation for natural causality.<sup>27</sup> Yet if one looks at Aristotle’s prior discussion of chance, one sees that he starts by looking at examples in the realm of our intentional actions.<sup>28</sup> Moreover, all of Aristotle’s subsequent reasoning in defense of the notion that nature acts for an end involves explicit comparisons with the realm of human intention: “Each step in the series is for the sake of the next. . . . If, therefore, *artificial products* are for the sake of an end, so clearly also are natural products. The relation of the later to the earlier terms of the series is the same in both.” “This is most obvious in animals other than man: they make things *neither by art nor after inquiry or deliberation*. Wherefore people discuss whether it is by *intelligence* or by some other faculty that these creatures work.” “Now mistakes come to pass even in *the operations of art*. . . .”<sup>29</sup>

Feser’s overemphasis on the difference in natural and artificial teleology results in another error; he asserts that the difference in the intrinsic ordering of natural things to their ends as opposed to the extrinsic ordering of (the parts of) artificial things to their ends “entails that God does not create them [natural things] in the way a craftsman arranges parts so as to produce an artifact.”<sup>30</sup> This is not entirely true. It is true that the craftsman does not give an artifact its nature, but harnesses the natural tendencies of natural things to his end, whereas God (assuming for the moment that he is the Maker) gives things their natures in virtue of which they tend to their ends, their natural perfection. This difference, however, does not entail that the way that God and a craftsman arranges parts of natural things and artificial things respectively must be other than employing intelligence. The difference in the teleology of natural and artificial things does not preclude one from drawing a conclusion based upon the generic characteristic of acting for an end. Indeed, to say that a difference in teleology of the natural and the artificial indicates that there is no need for both to have the same type of cause is to pronounce the Fifth Way defunct. Aquinas does not see the said difference in teleology as relevant to the argument of the Fifth Way. Aquinas says: “Everything which tends to an end, lacking knowledge, is a thing that is directed by some

26. Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles*, bk. 3, chap. 2.

27. See Aristotle, *Physics*, 198b17–199a8.

28. See Aristotle, *Physics*, 196a1–4 and 196b33–197a8.

29. Aristotle, *Physics*, 199a15–19, 199a20–23, and 199a34 (emphasis added).

30. Feser, “Teleology,” 155.

knowing and intelligent being, as the arrow by an archer.” He does not say things whose tendencies are within as opposed to imposed from without. He says “everything.” Feser, following again his usual course, goes on to claim that in Aquinas’s conclusion regarding natural things—“Hence it is plain that not fortuitously, but designedly, do they achieve their end”—“designedly” “must be read in an Aristotelian way, as connoting final causality or immanent end-directedness as opposed to chance.”<sup>31</sup> Aquinas, again, is not talking about “immanent end-directedness,” but simply end-directedness. The correct translation makes this clear: “whence it is manifest that they arrive at the end from a tendency, and not from chance” (“unde patet quod non a casu, sed ex intentione perveniunt ad finem”).<sup>32</sup>

We can see now that while it may well be that Paley had mechanistic tendencies, they do not necessarily undermine his design argument, any more than Aquinas’s argument is undermined by not looking to the differences in the teleology of natural and artificial things. I think Feser’s preoccupation with the distinction between natural and artificial things prevents him from seriously entertaining that there might be a fundamental similarity in Aquinas’s and Paley’s approaches. For example, note how Aquinas readily sees the example of a clock—an obvious equivalent of Paley’s watch—as equivalent to the arrow example he uses over and over again to illustrate the principle that the end-directedness of non intelligent beings must ultimately be reduced to beings that are intelligent:

It ought to be said, as is said in III *Phys.* “Motion is the act of the mobile [proceeding] from the mover.” And therefore the virtue of the mover appears in the motion of the mobile. And on account of this, the order of the reason of the mover appears in all things which are moved by reason, granted the thing itself which is moved by reason may not have reason; for thus does the arrow tend directly to the target from the motion of the archer, as if it itself had the reason of the one directing it. And the same appears in the motion of clocks, and of all works of human ingenuity, which come to be by art. However, just as artifacts are compared to human art, so also all natural things are compared to divine art. And therefore order appears in those things which move according to nature, just as in those things which move through reason, as is said in II *Phys.*<sup>33</sup>

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31. *Ibid.*, 156.

32. Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I, q.2, a.3. Aquinas points out in *Summa Theologiae*, IaIae, q.12, a.5, that “*intendere*” means “to tend to something.” A thing can tend to something because it is moved, e.g., an arrow, or because it is a mover, capable of ordering by way of reflection its own motion or another’s motion.

33. Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, IaIae, q.13, a.2, ad 3. Feser claims that “it is at least theoretically possible, even if improbable, that a watch-like arrangement come about by chance” (“Teleology,” 154), and seems to justify this claim by pointing to the lack of any inherent tendencies of the bits of metal that make up the watch toward functioning as a timepiece. I see no argument there, and Aristotle, Aquinas, and Paley would all regard such a proposition as absurd;



The same claim that Feser makes with regard to Aquinas—that Aquinas is not making a weak induction or giving an argument by analogy<sup>34</sup> starting from the example of the arrow—applies equally well to Paley. Paley simply uses a watch to illustrate a basic principle that is either similar or the same as that invoked by Aquinas. (Aquinas, again, says: “everything which tends to an end, lacking knowledge, is a thing that is directed by some knowing and intelligent being, as the arrow by an archer”). When Paley applies the general principle to nature, he chooses biological examples, which, as we have seen, Aquinas acknowledges to be the clearest example of finality.

This philosophical note is not the place to make a full-blown case that Aquinas’s and Paley’s arguments are basically the same. A final suggestion that I will make here is that the same idea underlies both Paley’s general principle that a multiplicity of parts ordered and adjusted to achieve a goal must ultimately be traced back to an intelligent being and the corresponding principle in Aquinas’s argument that “those things which lack cognition do not tend to an end unless directed by someone knowing and intelligent.” As Paley puts it: “Arrangement, disposition of parts, subserviency of means to end, relation of instruments to an [sic] use, imply the presence of intelligence and mind.”<sup>35</sup> As Aquinas puts it:

However, in order for the action of the agent to be suited to the end, it is necessary for it to be adapted and proportioned to it, which cannot come about except from some intellect which knows the end and the notion of the end and the proportion of the end to that which is to the end; otherwise the suitability of the action for the end would be chance. But the intellect ordering things to the end is sometimes conjoined to the agent . . . sometimes separate, as is manifest in the case of the arrow.<sup>36</sup>

I have tried to show that Feser’s understanding of the A-T tradition on issues relevant to arguments for the existence of God that proceed from action for an end in nature is flawed in a number of ways. Some of these flaws are of limited scope, for example, the failure to recognize that the A-T tradition holds that appetite, and not the final cause as such, is inherent in natural things, and also that nonliving natural things act for their own good. Feser’s repetition of the standard view concerning Aristotle’s God not being responsible for finality in natural things is finally innocuous, as it does not prevent people from formulating arguments to challenge that view.

The problems of wider import in Feser’s analysis are two. The first is his failure to consider the role of the good in the argumentation of the Fifth

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see Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, 1034a8–22 and Aquinas, *Commentary on the Metaphysics*, bk. 6, lect. 8.

34. See Feser, “Teleology,” 157.

35. William Paley, *Natural Theology* (1802; Houston: St. Thomas Press, 1972), 9.

36. Aquinas, *Quaestiones Disputatae*, vol. 2, *Quaestiones Disputatae de Potentia*, ed. P. M. Pession (Turin: Marietti, 1965), 1.5.

Way. The second is the multiple inappropriate applications he makes of the A-T view that ordering to an end is inherent in natural things. He speaks as if this inherent ordering means that human action in no way serves as a model for understanding action for an end in nature. He ends up misreading the Fifth Way, substituting intrinsic end-directedness for what is simply end-directedness. Ultimately, he proposes that the inherency in the ordering to an end present in natural things is reason to reject the Fifth Way—although he is unaware that he has done so—insofar as he maintains that such inherent ordering differs from the ordering to an end found in artificial things, and therefore one cannot conclude that God creates natural things in the same manner that a craftsman makes an artifact. In addition, his emphasis on the intrinsic directedness to an end of natural things leads him to be unduly critical of Paley's argument, when in fact there are many striking similarities between Paley's argument and the Fifth Way, similarities that merit careful reflection.

I hope that the reader of this note will not judge it to have an exclusively critical goal, but will see it as providing suggestions for a more fruitful A-T understanding of design arguments.