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On Aristotle, Aquinas, and Paley: A Reply to Marie George

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Abstract: *In a recent article in *Philosophia Christi* (Winter 2010), Marie George objects to my distancing of Aquinas’s Fifth Way from Paley’s design argument, and accuses me of misinterpreting both Paley and the Aristotelian premises from which Aquinas proceeds. By my count she presents eight lines of criticism of my position. I argue that they all fail, and that in fact it is George herself who exhibits some egregious misunderstandings.*

In a note recently published in *Philosophia Christi*, Marie George takes issue with the account of the relationship between the Aristotelian-Thomistic (A-T) tradition and Paley’s design argument that I presented in my article “Teleology: A Shopper’s Guide.”¹ She alleges that I “misconstrue,” “misread,” “misapply” and “fail to accurately convey” the A-T tradition in various ways, and that I get Paley wrong too. In fact it is her own article which misrepresents both Paley and the standard A-T attitude toward his design argument; and into the bargain, her case rests on several egregious distortions of my own position. By my count she presents eight criticisms, which I will address in the order in which they appear in her note.

First criticism: George takes issue with my statement that for Aristotle, “the end or goal of a material substance is *inherent* to it.”² To this she replies that “it is not the end itself which is inherent to the natural thing, but rather the inclination or tendency to the end.”³ This is an odd bit of nitpicking. Naturally, I agree with George; *being down* (to use one of her examples) is not in the stone itself, but is rather the end toward which the stone tends. Indeed, on the very same page as the sentence she complains about I explain that the Aristotelian notion of final causes concerns “inherent goal-directedness,” “inherent *tendency*,” and “the end or goal towards which a thing naturally *points*.” Strictly speaking, what is inherent is only the pointing, tendency, or directedness itself, and (obviously) not the end that is pointed to. Hence when I wrote that “the end or goal of a material substance is inherent to it,” I would have thought it obvious that I was merely speaking elliptically. Certainly this

¹ Marie George, “An Aristotelian-Thomist Responds to Edward Feser’s “Teleology,”” *Philosophia Christi* 12 (2010): 441-49. My article appeared in *Philosophia Christi* 12 (2010): 142-59.

² Feser, “Teleology,” p. 143.

³ George, “An Aristotelian-Thomist Responds,” p. 441.

minimally charitable reading might at least have been considered by George before putting fingers to keypad. In any event, though she makes much of this “criticism,” it plays no role in her subsequent discussion.

Second criticism: I noted in my article that while Aristotle argues from the existence of motion or change in the world to the existence of God as an Unmoved Mover, he does not regard the existence of final causes as providing a separate basis for arguing for God’s existence, as Aquinas does in the Fifth Way. George acknowledges that this is “a standard view among Aristotelian scholars” but suggests that a passage from Aristotle’s *On Generation and Corruption* implies a different view.⁴ In particular, Aristotle says that “nature... always and in all things strives after the better” and “God, therefore... perfected the universe by making coming-to-be a perpetual process.”⁵

But the passage doesn’t show what George thinks it does. What it shows is at most only that Aristotle regards God as the cause of things’ moving in such a way that they realize their ends; it doesn’t show that He is the cause of things *having* those ends in the first place. And the latter thesis is the one that Aristotle scholars typically decline to attribute to Aristotle. Moreover, there are passages in Aristotle that clearly tell against George’s preferred interpretation. For example, Aristotle says in the *Eudemian Ethics* that “the divine is not an ordering ruler, since he needs nothing, but rather is that for the sake of which wisdom gives orders.”⁶ Of course, Aristotle does take God Himself to *be* the ultimate end of things, but that is different from saying that He “orders them” to their end in the sense of *putting the inclination towards their end into them* in the first place. That it is there is, for Aristotle, just a basic fact about them given their natures.

Third criticism: George takes exception to my assertion that the difference between organic and inorganic processes is that the latter tend toward “an effect outside the cause itself and therefore [do] not promote the cause’s own good.”⁷ In response she claims that Aquinas “explicitly rejects” this view, citing a passage from the *Summa Contra Gentiles* in which Aquinas says that “all things [and not just organic things]... act for the sake of the good.”⁸

But there is no conflict between what I wrote and what Aquinas says. There would be a conflict only if I had said that inorganic processes do not act for the sake of *any* good at all. But I said no such thing; I said only that they “do not promote the

⁴ Ibid., p. 442.

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 *Eudemian Ethics*, 1249b13-15, as translated by Monte Ransome Johnson in *Aristotle on Teleology* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2005), p. 262. Cf. Johnson’s discussion of the passage at pp. 72-74.

⁷ Feser, “Teleology,” p. 150.

⁸ *Summa Contra Gentiles* III.3, George’s own translation.

cause's *own* good.” And what I meant by this is obvious from the context of the remark George quotes, a discussion of the Scholastic distinction between *immanent* and *transeunt* causation, which is central to the A-T analysis of what differentiates living from non-living things. To cite some typical definitions, what is “immanent” in the sense in question is what “begin[s] within and remain[s] within the agent as a perfection of the agent; living”; whereas what is “transeunt” is what “proceed[s] from one being or cause to another being.”⁹ The “perfection” or “good” in question here has to do with the *flourishing* that living things are capable of and non-living things are not. What I was saying, then (as is, again, clear from the context), is that inorganic causal processes, being merely transeunt and not immanent, do not promote the good of some whole of which they are a part in the sense of promoting the *perfection* or *flourishing* of that whole, but rather terminate in something external to any whole from which they might proceed – a standard part of the A-T understanding of what distinguishes the non-living from the living.

Fourth criticism: George also makes a more general complaint to the effect that I do not say enough in my article about the relationship in A-T philosophy between the notion of final causality and the notion of the good, though she acknowledges that even Aristotle and Aquinas themselves do not always bring the latter into their discussions of the former.¹⁰ She gives the impression that this is a major defect of my article, but it is never made clear how it is. The point of the article was to compare various approaches to teleology, not to present a thorough account of the A-T view specifically. Nor does she show how my treatment of the issues I do address in the article is in any way impaired by my not having said more about this particular issue. George’s “criticism” seems to amount to little more than the expression of her personal desire that I had said more about a topic she (rightly) considers important.

Fifth criticism: George states that the A-T understanding of the differences between natural substances and artifacts “does not mean without qualification that it is ‘incoherent to model natural substances on artifacts’” and that “Feser speaks as if human action in no way serves as a model for understanding action for an end in nature.”¹¹ But she is attacking a straw man. I never said or implied either that natural substances are *without qualification* unlike human artifacts, or that action for an end in nature is *in no way* like human action. The question is whether there are similarities *of a sort* that would justify treating Paley’s design argument as if it were merely a variation on reasoning of essentially the same sort that Aquinas is engaged in in his Fifth Way. George says nothing to show that there are. On the contrary, what she does say only reinforces the conclusion that there are not, which brings us to her next criticism.

⁹ Bernard Wuellner, *Dictionary of Scholastic Philosophy* (Milwaukee: Bruce Publishing Company, 1956), pp. 57 and 125.

¹⁰ George, “An Aristotelian-Thomist Responds,” pp. 444-45.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 445 and 441.

Sixth criticism: George objects to my dissociating Aquinas’s Fifth Way from Paley’s design argument. But it is not clear why. George concedes that any A-T philosopher must insist on a distinction between natural substances and artifacts insofar as “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.”¹² Indeed, she acknowledges that “it would be incoherent to model natural substances on artifacts in a way that would ignore this difference.”¹³ She also allows that there is a crucial difference between a mere craftsman and God insofar as “the craftsman does not give an artifact its nature, but harnesses the natural tendencies of natural things to his end, whereas God... gives things their natures in virtue of which they tend to their ends.”¹⁴ And she grants that “it may well be that Paley had mechanistic tendencies.”¹⁵ In other words, George more or less concedes that Aquinas’s argument and Paley’s differ in just the ways I said they do.

So what exactly is her problem with what I have said? The closest we get to an answer is George’s bizarre suggestion that on my view, the way God makes natural things “must be other than [by] employing intelligence.”¹⁶ But I have never said or implied such a thing. On the contrary, in my article I summed up the Fifth Way as holding that “final causation in the natural world is intelligible because there is an intelligence altogether outside the natural order that directs natural objects to their ends.”¹⁷ No one denies that both Aquinas and Paley argue for an intelligent cause of the order in the world. What A-T philosophers (other than George) object to is the *way* Paley argues for this conclusion (a way which is incompatible with a metaphysics of immanent finality) and his implicitly *anthropomorphic construal* of divine “intelligence” (which is incompatible with the Thomist position that attributes like intelligence are to be predicated of God and of human designers in an analogous rather than univocal way).

Seventh criticism: As we have seen, several of George’s criticisms rest on a failure to give what I wrote even a minimally charitable reading, and in particular on a tendency to ignore context. Perhaps the strangest example of these foibles is her statement that “Feser claims that ‘it is at least theoretically possible, even if improbable, that a watch-like arrangement come about by chance,’” which is followed by her remark that “Aristotle, Aquinas, and Paley would all regard such a proposition as absurd.”¹⁸ As any fair-minded reader of my article can see, the line George has

¹² Ibid., p. 445.

¹³ Ibid., pp. 445-46.

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 446.

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 447.

¹⁶ Ibid. p. 446.

¹⁷ Feser, “Teleology,” p. 158.

¹⁸ George, “An Aristotelian-Thomist Responds,” p. 447, note 33.

ripped from context was not an expression of my *own* view, but rather a description of what I take to follow from the views of Paley and of Intelligent Design theorists.¹⁹

Moreover, while I agree that Aristotle and Aquinas would regard the proposition in question as absurd (and *I* certainly regard it as absurd), George is mistaken to claim that Paley would so regard it.²⁰ Paley argues that, just as we would judge a watch found upon a heath to have been the product of intelligence rather than of unintelligent causes, so too should we judge natural phenomena to be the product of intelligence. “[F]or every indication of contrivance, every manifestation of design, which existed in the watch, exists in the works of nature; with the difference, on the side of nature, of being greater and more, and that in a degree which exceeds all computation.”²¹ In other words, the inference to a designer of the natural order is in Paley’s view even *more* certain than the inference to a designer of the watch. But as is well known, Paley still regarded the former inference as a matter of *probability* – very high probability, to be sure, but still probability rather than demonstrative reasoning of the sort Aquinas was interested in.²² That is why he devotes so many pages to describing minute details of the natural order, so as to construct as powerful a cumulative case as possible; if the inference from a single complex natural object sufficed for a strict demonstration of a designer, he needn’t have bothered with such details.²³ But if even what Paley regards as the *stronger* inference to a designer of the universe is only a matter of probability, then what he regards as the *weaker* inference to a designer of the watch can also only be in his view a matter of probability, even if high probability.²⁴ Which is, of course, what I meant when I said that for Paley, “it is at least theoretically possible, even if improbable, that a watch-like arrangement come about by chance.”

¹⁹ Feser, “Teleology,” p. 154.

²⁰ It is telling that while George provides citations from both Aristotle and Aquinas to back up her claim that they would find the proposition in question absurd, she provides no such citation from Paley’s works.

²¹ William Paley, *Natural Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), p. 16.

²² Paley appeals to what is “probable” or to “probability” or “improbability” several times in the course of his argument for a designer of the natural world, e.g. at pp. 108, 135, 162, 167, 179, and 201.

²³ See Matthew Eddy and David Knight’s “Introduction” to the edition of Paley’s *Natural Theology* cited above for a useful brief discussion of the rise of interest in probabilistic arguments in Paley’s day.

²⁴ Note also that when considering for the sake of argument the hypothesis of a watch that generates other watches, Paley allows that for someone finding such a watch on the heath “it be now no longer *probable*, that the individual watch which our observer had found, was made immediately by the hand of an artificer” though the observer would still judge that an artificer had been indirectly responsible for it (*Natural Theology*, p. 12, emphasis added). This implies that the original inference from the watch to a designer was in Paley’s view a matter of probability.

Eighth criticism. George's final and perhaps oddest objection comes at the end of her article, where she claims that:

Ultimately, [Feser] 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.²⁵

Here we have an assertion that is simply bizarre, especially given that I have *defended* the Fifth Way at length.²⁶ It is, in any event, not clear *why* George thinks my position unwittingly undermines the Fifth Way. It *seems* that she is reasoning that, if we regard finality as inherent to natural substances in a way it is not inherent in artifacts, then we have blocked any means of inferring from the finality of natural substances to a divine intelligence. But if so, then she is simply begging the question against my position. For I have argued that the Fifth Way constitutes a middle ground position between Aristotle's view (as most Aristotle scholars interpret him) that the teleology that is immanent to the natural order is completely divorced from intelligence, and Paley's view that any teleology that derives from intelligence must not be immanent in natural order, but imposed from outside after the fashion of human artifice. George appears to assume that since Aquinas, in the Fifth Way, obviously rejects Aristotle's view, he must be committed to something like Paley's. I have argued that this is a false choice, and George hasn't *shown* otherwise but merely *asserted* otherwise.

Furthermore, while it is true that there is a *sense* in which I would deny that "God creates natural things *in the same manner* that a craftsman makes an artifact," it is not the sense George apparently supposes. I do not deny that God is, ultimately, the source of the finality in things. What I do deny is that creation involves anything comparable to the taking of pre-existing materials with their own natures and fashioning them into a kind of artifact that serves a function not inherent in the materials, in the manner of a human inventor. (The question of temporal order is irrelevant here; it does not change the point at all if we supposed that the designer somehow conjured the raw materials into existence while *simultaneously* imposing some function on them not already inherent in the materials.) Rather, God creates by conjoining an essence to an act of existence, where the finality of the thing created is inherent in the essence itself rather than "tacked on" in a separate creative act. Since George is an Aristotelian-Thomist, I take it that she agrees with this understanding of

²⁵ George, "An Aristotelian-Thomist Responds," p. 449.

²⁶ See my books *Aquinas* (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 2009), at pp. 110-20, and *The Last Superstition: A Refutation of the New Atheism* (South Bend, IN: St. Augustine's Press, 2008), at pp. 110-19.

creation. In that case, though, it is even harder to see what her problem is with my reading of the Fifth Way.

The uninitiated reader might nevertheless wonder whether a Paley-like view of creation is suggested by a passage from Aquinas cited by George, in which he says that “just as artifacts are compared to human art, so also all natural things are compared to divine art,” and gives arrows and clocks as examples of artifacts.²⁷ In fact the passage suggests just the opposite. For the distinction between “natural things” and “artifacts” that Aquinas takes for granted here is the very distinction Aristotle draws in Book II of the *Physics* between those things which have the principle of their activity inherent in them (what Aquinas calls “natural things”) and things which do not (which includes what Aquinas calls “artifacts,” and also objects resulting from chance). Indeed, Aquinas explicitly cites Book II of the *Physics* in the passage from the *Summa* quoted by George; and in his commentary on Book II of the *Physics* he *contrasts* animals, plants, and their parts with artifacts like knives, beds, clothing, and the like, precisely because there is no principle of “knife-like” or “bed-like” or “clothing-like” activity *inherent* in the artifacts in question, while there *is* a principle of “animal-like,” “plant-like,” “eye-like,” etc. activity inherent in animals, plants, and their parts. A bed, for instance, is something whose parts already have some other inherent principle – to function in a “tree-like” way, say, if the wood from which the bed is made is still fresh. The “bed-like” function has to be imposed on it from outside by an artisan, in a way that the “tree-like” function does not.

So, even though natural things are like artifacts in being made by an intelligence (God in the former case, human designers in the latter), the *way* they are made is not the same, and cannot be the same. In particular, God does not make natural things (animals, plants, etc.) the way artifacts are made by a craftsman, viz. by combining parts which already have some other inherent principle, the way the wood making up a bed has. They wouldn’t *be* natural things in that case. Rather (as I have said) he makes them by conjoining an essence to an act of existence. And anything less than this wouldn’t be true *creation* at all, which for Aquinas is always creation *out of nothing* – something which, needless to say, human craftsman are incapable of in principle.

The uninitiated reader might also get the impression from George’s article that my views on Paley and design arguments more generally are somehow eccentric, and that hers represent the “mainstream” Aristotelian-Thomistic position. This is the reverse of the truth; in fact my own views are nothing more than a reiteration of what one finds in a great many A-T writers. For example, Maurice Holloway insists that:

We should be careful not to confuse the fifth way of St. Thomas Aquinas, which argues from the existence of order in the universe to the existence of an infinite intelligence, with Paley’s argument from design. In the latter’s argument the universe is seen as a complicated and intricate machine... [and

²⁷ Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, IaIIae, q. 13, a. 2, ad 3, George’s own translation.

he] reasons, by way of analogy, to the existence of a divine watchmaker, or supreme architect of the universe. This argument from design, as given by Paley and unfortunately repeated in many books on Christian apologetics, does not prove the existence of God. An architect of the universe would have to be a very clever being, but he would not have to be God... Many of the objections directed against what some writers believe is the fifth way of St. Thomas are really directed against the watchmaker of Paley. St. Thomas's proof is entirely different. It is grounded in the metaphysics of finality...²⁸

Similar views are expressed by John F. McCormick,²⁹ Cardinal Mercier,³⁰ Joseph Owens,³¹ R. P. Phillips,³² Henri Renard,³³ and John Wippel.³⁴ Benedict Ashley objects to the “philosophical naiveté” of authors like Paley “in confusing extrinsic and intrinsic finality.”³⁵ Etienne Gilson complains of the “anthropomorphic God” of “simple-minded metaphysicians [who] have unwillingly led agnostics to believe that the God of natural theology was the ‘watchmaker’ of Voltaire, or the ‘carpenter’ of cheap apologetics.”³⁶ Herman Reith says that the trouble with the design argument is that “the examples used and the interpretation given them prevents the argument from rising to the metaphysical level... above the order of the physical universe,” so that “it cannot conclude to anything more than the existence of some kind of intelligence and power” within that universe.³⁷ Ronald Knox characterizes Paley’s design argument as “feeble,” and does not regard it as even a “modification” of any of Aquinas’s Five Ways.³⁸ Christopher F. J. Martin, in the course of defending the Fifth Way, dismisses Paley’s design inference as “really a rather poor argument,” and avers

²⁸ Maurice Holloway, S. J., *An Introduction to Natural Theology* (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1959), p. 146-47.

²⁹ John F. McCormick, S. J., *Scholastic Metaphysics, Part II: Natural Theology* (Chicago: Loyola University Press, 1943), p. 75.

³⁰ Cardinal Mercier, “Natural Theology or Theodicy” in Cardinal Mercier, et al., *A Manual of Modern Scholastic Philosophy*, Volume II (St. Louis: B. Herder, 1933), pp. 53-54.

³¹ Joseph Owens, *An Elementary Christian Metaphysics* (Houston: Center for Thomistic Studies, 1985), p. 349 and “Aquinas and the Five Ways,” in *St. Thomas Aquinas on the Existence of God: The Collected Papers of Joseph Owens*, edited by John R. Catan (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1980), pp. 136-37.

³² R. P. Phillips, *Modern Thomistic Philosophy*, Volume II (Westminster, Maryland: The Newman Press, 1950), p. 290.

³³ Henri Renard, S.J., *The Philosophy of God* (Milwaukee: Bruce Publishing Company, 1951), p. 48.

³⁴ John Wippel, *The Metaphysical Thought of Thomas Aquinas* (Washington, D. C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2000), p. 480.

³⁵ Benedict M. Ashley, *The Way toward Wisdom* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2006), p. 512, n. 11.

³⁶ Etienne Gilson, *God and Philosophy* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1941), p. 142.

³⁷ Herman Reith, *The Metaphysics of St. Thomas Aquinas* (Milwaukee: Bruce Publishing Company, 1958), p. 198.

³⁸ Ronald Knox, *Broadcast Minds* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1933), pp. 52 and 222.

that “the Being whose existence is revealed to us by the argument from design is not God but the Great Architect of the Deists and Freemasons, an impostor disguised as God.”³⁹

The themes that I have emphasized recur in these Thomistic writers: that design arguments like Paley’s are arguments from analogy, while Aquinas’s Fifth Way is not; that they are probabilistic, while Aquinas’s argument is a metaphysical demonstration; that they are not grounded in a metaphysics of immanent final causality, as Aquinas’s argument is; and that they cannot in principle get us outside the natural order to a divine intelligence of pure actuality but at most to an anthropomorphic demiurge. All of these points are rooted in considerations about the radical differences between A-T metaphysics and the metaphysical assumptions underlying the design arguments of Paley and other modern writers. Clearly the burden of proof is on George to show that Aquinas’s argument and Paley’s can be assimilated in a way that I and so many A-T writers say they cannot be. It is a burden she has not met.⁴⁰

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³⁹ Christopher F. J. Martin, *Thomas Aquinas: God and Explanations* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1997), pp. 180-82.

⁴⁰ I thank Lydia McGrew for comments on an earlier version of this paper.