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# “Intrinsic” and “Extrinsic” Teleology: Their Irrelevance to Aquinas’s Fifth Way and to Paley’s Argument from Design

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**Abstract:** Edward Feser (along with many other Thomists) maintains that the distinction between having an intrinsic tendency to an end as opposed to a tendency to an end imposed from without is crucial to understanding Aquinas’s Fifth Way. (Feser calls the former “immanent teleology” and the latter “extrinsic teleology.”) I argue that this position is incorrect by examining the two syllogisms that compose the Fifth Way. I then briefly consider whether “extrinsic teleology” is essential to Paley’s argument from design, by examining this argument stated in its strongest form. I conclude that it is counterproductive to read “extrinsic teleology” into what would otherwise be an argument for God’s existence worthy of further consideration.

Edward Feser points out that natural things have inherent tendencies to achieve certain goals, whereas artificial things achieve certain goals because they are ordered to do so by something outside themselves, and he illustrates this using a simple example: “The parts of the liana vine have an inherent tendency to function together to allow the liana to exhibit the growth patterns it does, to take in water and nutrients, and so forth. By contrast, the parts of the hammock—the liana vines themselves—have no inherent tendency to function together as a hammock. Rather, they must be arranged by Tarzan to do so.”<sup>1</sup> Feser then goes on to claim that the distinction between “immanent teleology” and “extrinsic teleology” (his terminology, not Aquinas’s<sup>2</sup>) is “vital to

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<sup>1</sup> Edward Feser, “Between Aristotle and William Paley: Aquinas’s Fifth Way,” *Nova et Vetera*, 11:3 (Summer 2013), 709.

<sup>2</sup> Although Aquinas is well aware of the distinction Feser refers to between natural and artificial things, he never uses the expressions “immanent teleology” and “extrinsic teleology.” The expression “immanent teleology” lends itself to misinterpretation, as one might think that “immanent” is meant to indicate that the end the thing aims at is inherent in it; however, the ends of natural things are sometimes extrinsic to them, as is plainly the case of animals and their offspring. Indeed, according to Aquinas, in some sense the ultimate end of all natural

an understanding of the Fifth Way,”<sup>3</sup> and he is far from being the only Thomist who holds this position.<sup>4</sup> Elsewhere, Feser more specifically claims in regard to the conclusion of the first of the two syllogisms constituting the Fifth Way that “designedly...must be read in an Aristotelian way, as connoting final causality or immanent end-directedness as opposed to chance.”<sup>5</sup> I maintain that both his specific thesis and his more general thesis are incorrect.<sup>6</sup> In order to show this, I will first present the Fifth Way:

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things is outside them: “all creatures obtain perfect goodness from an extrinsic end [ex fine extrinseco]. For the perfection of goodness consists in the obtainment of the ultimate end. The ultimate end, however, of every creature is outside it [extra ipsam], which is divine goodness...” (*Compendium theologiae*, c. 109). Whence, my original, if unwieldy, title for this article was: “Is the Distinction Between Having an Intrinsic Tendency to an End as Opposed to a Tendency to an End Solely as Imposed From Without Crucial to Understanding Aquinas’s Fifth Way and/or Paley’s Argument from Design?”

<sup>3</sup> Feser, “Between Aristotle and William Paley,” 714.

<sup>4</sup> Thomist Leszek Figurski maintains that the first part of the Fifth Way “concludes that the only sufficient explanation for the regular activity of non-cognitive natural bodies is some built-in intrinsic orientation of their natures, as agents, toward their proper ends” (*Finality and Intelligence* [Wydawnictwo Bezkresy Wiedzy, 2014], 123). Most of the Thomists whom I’ve spoken to hold the same basic position.

<sup>5</sup> Edward Feser, “Teleology: A Shopper’s Guide,” *Philosophia Christi*, 12:1 (2010), 156.

<sup>6</sup> I am thus responding primarily to Feser’s sixth criticism of positions I set out in “An Aristotelian-Thomist Responds to Edward Feser’s ‘Teleology’” *Philosophia Christi*, 12:2 (2010), 441-449 [<http://www.epsociety.org/library/articles.asp?pid=82&mode=detail>] which he articulates in: “On Aristotle, Aquinas, and Paley: A Reply to Marie George” (<http://www.epsociety.org/library/articles.asp?pid=83>, 2011), 4. Space does not allow me to address all of his criticisms, but I will briefly address here a couple of them. Feser, in his second criticism, maintains that Aristotle’s God could be perfecting the universe by moving it to an end that was set not by God, but by another. Aquinas would beg to differ. Aristotle’s God is the prime mover (see *Physics*, Bk. 8, e.g., 259a15) and is the one whose end is the ultimate end of all other things in the universe (see *Metaphysics*, 1075a12-17). Aquinas sees these two things as necessarily related and I see no reason to think that Aristotle would disagree with him: “If many agents have an order, it is necessary that the actions and motions of every agent are ordered to the good of the first agent, as to an ultimate end. For since the lower agents are moved by the higher agent, and every mover moves to his own end, it is necessary that the actions and motions of the lower agents tend to the end of the higher agent: just as in an army, the actions of all orders are ordered to victory as ultimate, which is the end of the leader. It has been shown above, however, that the first mover and agent is God...” (*Compendium Theologiae*, chap. 103). On this point, see also my article, “Would Aristotle Agree with St. John that ‘God is Love?’”, *Aquinas Review*, 17 (2010), 1-43. As for Feser’s third criticism, Aquinas, contrary to what Feser says, maintains that non-living natural bodies act for their own good: “in all things it is evidently apparent that they naturally desire to be; whence if they are able to be corrupted by something, they naturally resist what can corrupt them, and they tend to that place where they are preserved, as fire upwards and earth downwards”

- Everything that always or frequently operates in the same mode such that what is obtained is the best is something that tends to an end (“operatur ad finem”), and does not arrive at it by chance.
  - Some things lacking knowledge, namely, all natural bodies (*corpora naturalia*), are things that operate always or frequently in the same mode such that what is obtained is the best.
  - Some things lacking knowledge, namely, all natural bodies, are things that tend to an end (*ex intentione perveniunt ad finem*), and do not arrive at it by chance.
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- Everything which tends to an end (*tendunt in finem*), lacking knowledge, is a thing that is directed [to an end] by some knowing and intelligent being, as an arrow by an archer.
  - All natural bodies are things lacking knowledge that tend to an end.
  - All natural bodies (*omnes res naturales*) are things directed to an end by some knowing and intelligent being.<sup>7</sup>

Aquinas takes “acts for an end” (*operatur ad finem*) to be equivalent to “arrives at an end due to tendency” (*ex intentione perveniunt ad finem*) to be equivalent to “tends to an end” (*tendunt in finem*). He also uses “directed” and “ordered” interchangeably in the second syllogism. In addition, he substitutes “all natural things” for “all natural bodies” in the conclusion of the second syllogism. Accordingly, I have adjusted the translations to make clear that a fourth term has not been introduced. I have slightly modified the translation in the first

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(*Summa contra Gentiles*, Bk. III, c. 19). See also, *Compendium Theologiae*, c. 171: “they [the elements] tend by their natural motion to their proper place, one suitable to them, where it is better for them to be.” As for the more general point that concerns the difference between living and non-living natural things, I argue that Feser’s understanding of “immanent activity” is not that of Aquinas’s in my article “On the Meaning of ‘Immanent Activity’ according to Aquinas,” *The Thomist*, 78, 3 (October 2014), 537-55.

<sup>7</sup> *Summa Theologiae*, ed. Instituti Studiorum Medievalium Ottaviensis (Ottawa: Commissio Piana, 1953), I, q. 2, a. 3: “Quinta via sumitur ex gubernatione rerum. Videmus enim quod aliqua quae cognitionem carent, scilicet corpora naturalia, operantur propter finem; quod apparet ex hoc quod semper aut frequentius eodem modo operantur, ut consequantur id quod est optimum; unde patet quod non a casu, sed ex intentione perveniunt ad finem. Ea autem quae non habent cognitionem, non tendunt in finem nisi directa ab aliquo cognoscente et intelligente, sicut sagitta a sagittante. Ergo est aliquid intelligens, a quo omnes res naturales ordinantur ad finem, et hoc dicimus Deum.” (Hereafter cited as *ST*. All translations of Aquinas are my own.)

syllogism to make the copula clear, and have also added in “all” to modify natural bodies.

Aquinas’s Fifth Way consists of two first figure syllogisms, each of which has three terms. However, two of the terms in the second syllogism are identical with terms in the first, so all told there are four terms. The terms are: 1) natural bodies; 2) things that operate always or frequently in the same mode such that what is obtained is the best; 3) things lacking knowledge that tend to an end; 4) things directed to an end by some knowing and intelligent being. One can see that none of these terms includes in it “immanent teleology,” i.e., the notion that things *in virtue of their intrinsic principles tend to an end*.

Even if one substitutes the definition of natural in the case of natural body, i.e., “a body that has an intrinsic principle of motion and rest” this is not equivalent to saying “a body that is ordered to an end in virtue of its intrinsic principles.”<sup>8</sup> Indeed, if one substituted the latter in the minor premise of the first syllogism, the argument would become question-begging, i.e., if the minor was “all bodies tend an end in virtue of an intrinsic principle (or principles) are things that operate in the same mode such that what is obtained is the best” one would have already assumed that natural bodies tend to an end; yet this is what the first argument is supposed to be concluding.

In addition, we can see that the conclusion of the first syllogism need not be read as connoting “immanent end-directedness” by considering that what we need to know about natural things in order for the conclusion of the second argument to follow is *that* natural things are unknowing things that act for an end.<sup>9</sup> It is irrelevant to the conclusion to be drawn whether or not they act for an end due to intrinsic principles. Accordingly, nowhere does the first argument specify that natural things are unknowing things that act for an end *due to intrinsic principles*.

To put it another way, even if it were the case that natural bodies acted for an end due to extrinsic principles, the ultimate conclusion of the Fifth Way would hold true, as the major premise of its second syllogism applies to all blind things that act for an end. Indeed both of the middle terms in each of the two syllogisms (namely, “things that operate always or frequently in the same mode

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<sup>8</sup> The lack of equivalence between “a body that has an intrinsic principle of motion and rest” and “a body that tends to an end in virtue of its intrinsic principles” is what allows Aquinas in his opening *lectio* on Bk. II of the *Physics* to comment on Aristotle’s definition of nature without making any reference to final causality, and only later to discuss whether nature acts for an end (*lectiones* 12-14).

<sup>9</sup> Every natural thing, at least in the sense of substance as opposed to accident, is a natural body. Although animals are natural bodies possessing knowledge, their vegetative activities go on apart from their knowledge, as is also true of their tendency to fall downward.

such that what is obtained is the best”<sup>10</sup> and “things lacking knowledge that tend to an end”<sup>11</sup>) apply to both natural and artificial things irrespective of the difference between how the two tend to their ends. The latter difference is thus irrelevant.<sup>12</sup> This shows the inaccuracy of Feser’s general claim that the notion of immanent teleology is “vital to the Fifth Way.” It also shows the inaccuracy of the specific claim he makes in regard to the conclusion of the first syllogism (which he translates as: “Hence it is plain that not fortuitously, but designedly, do they achieve their end”) that “designedly... must be read in an Aristotelian way, as connoting final causality<sup>13</sup> or immanent end-directedness as opposed to chance.”<sup>14</sup>

One might insist that how a natural body accomplishes its end is the same as what it means for a natural body to accomplish its end, and therefore, the notion of tending to an end in virtue of an intrinsic principle is part of the argument, at least in the sense of being assumed by the argument. If this were so, then the statement that God orders things to an end would be equivalent to the statement that he orders them to an end by endowing them with intrinsic principles. Yet Aquinas often distinguishes the two when describing *how* God orders things: “all things are ordered and directed by God to the good, and *in this manner* that there is present in each a principle through which it itself tends to

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<sup>10</sup> A dishwasher “operates generally in the same mode such that what is obtained is the best;” it goes through a determinate sequence of cycles so as to produce clean dishes. The same is true of other machines, and of simpler tools as well, so long as they are not misused, e.g., screwdrivers loosen and tighten screws and hammers drive nails.

<sup>11</sup> Aquinas elsewhere makes it plain that the notion of tending to an end [“intendere finem”] is not restricted to natural things: “to tend [intendere] to is to tend to something [in aliud tendere], which certainly belongs to the mover and to the thing moved. Therefore, according as to tend to an end [intendere finem] is said of that which is moved by another, in this manner nature is said tend to an end, as moved to its end by God, as an arrow by an archer” (*ST I-II*, q. 12, a. 5).

<sup>12</sup> Another way of seeing the irrelevance of specifying that the tendency of natural bodies to an end is from an intrinsic principle (or principles) is by looking at what serves as middle term in the second syllogism, namely, “everything which tends to an end, lacking knowledge.” If one were to add in the minor premise that natural bodies are “things, lacking knowledge, tending to an end *due to an intrinsic principle*,” one would be adding a fourth term, and would no longer have a syllogism.

<sup>13</sup> Note that final causality is not equivalent to “immanent end-directedness” as artificial things with their “extrinsic teleology” also have a final cause (something Feser generally acknowledges).

<sup>14</sup> Feser, “Teleology,” 156.

the good” (emphasis added).<sup>15</sup> To affirm that natural things are ordered to an end is not the same as to affirm how they are ordered to an end.<sup>16</sup>

Confusion about this matter stems from it being both true that natural things have an intrinsic principle of motion and rest and that they are ordered to the end immediately in virtue of their intrinsic principles, and the connection between the two is easily seen. If we look at Aquinas’s commentary on the part of Aristotle’s *Physics* where argumentation is given in support of the thesis that nature acts for an end, at one point Aquinas reasons:

The one who speaks thus, namely, saying that nature does not act for the sake of something destroys nature and those things that are according to nature. For those things are said to be according to nature whenever moved continuously from some intrinsic principle they arrive at some end; not happening in any manner whatsoever nor from any principle whatsoever to any end whatsoever, but from a determinate principle to a determinate end: for always it [i.e., what is according to nature] advances from the same principle to the same end, unless something impedes it.<sup>17</sup>

Simply by reflecting more carefully on what is meant by nature and what is according to nature, it becomes plain that nature is a *determinate intrinsic principle of motion* from which things move *to some determinate end*. When one plants a pea

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<sup>15</sup> *Quaestiones Disputatae de Veritate*, in *Quaestiones Disputatae*, vol. 1, ed. Raymundi M. Spiazzi, O.P. (Turin: Marietti, 1964), q. 22, a. 1.

<sup>16</sup> Aquinas fairly frequently uses the expression “God disposes all things sweetly” which is to say more than simply “God disposes all things.” See *Scriptum super Sententiis* (online *Corpus Thomisticum*, ed. Enrique Alarcón, University of Navarre), Bk. 4, d. 49, q. 1, a. 3, qc. 1: “In every order of mobiles and movers it is necessary that the secondary movers are ordered to the end by the first mover through the disposition impressed on them by the first mover; as is manifest when the soul moves the hand, and the hand a staff, and the staff strikes, which is the end intended by the soul; staff and hand tend to the end intended by the soul through this that the soul makes an impression on them either mediately or immediately. But this differs in natural and violent motions; for in violent motions the impression from the first mover that remains in the secondary movers is outside their nature; and therefore the consequent operation from such an impression is difficult and laborious: but in natural motions the impression that remains from the first mover in the secondary movers is for them a natural cause; and therefore the operation following this impression is suitable and sweet; and therefore it is said in Wis. 8 that God disposes all things sweetly: for each thing from the nature divinely placed in it tends to that to which it is ordered by divine providence through the thrust of the impression received.”

<sup>17</sup> *In Octo Libros de Physico Auditu Commentaria*, ed. Angeli M. Pirotta, O.P. (Naples: M. D'Auria Pontificus Editor, 1953), Bk. II, lec. 14, #515. Aquinas is commenting on *Physics*, 199b13-19.

(seed), it spontaneously produces a plant with the dissected leaves typical of peas, and not palm leaves or some other leaves, and as the plant continues to grow, it eventually, on its own, produces tendrils and not just any sort of projection; similarly, the mating of a male and female snake result in the development of offspring with a single head. If a pea plant were to fail to produce tendrils, we would recognize this to be contrary to nature; its internal principle must have been frustrated in some way for it not to arrive at this determinate end. And the same is true, if the mating of two snakes were to result in offspring that had two heads. Motion, then, is according to nature when starting from a determinate intrinsic principle it achieves a determinate end. By recognizing this, we acknowledge that nature acts for an end.

This is not the only way, however, of seeing that nature acts for an end. And, indeed, the first argument that Aristotle gives in the *Physics* in order to show that nature acts for an end proceeds without reference to nature as an intrinsic principle of motion. The argument is based on the claims that things come about either by chance or for the sake of an end, and those that come about by chance are rare; yet what happens by nature happens always or for the most part.<sup>18</sup> Though the conclusion of both this and the argument above is the same, the notions essential to each argument are not. The argument that Aquinas uses in the Fifth Way to establish that natural bodies act for an end, like Aristotle's first argument in the *Physics*, does not involve making explicit what is implied in saying that nature is an intrinsic principle of motion; it looks rather to the regularity with which natural bodies acting in a determinate manner achieve what is good. Once again, we see that "immanent teleology" (tending to an end in virtue of intrinsic principles) is not vital to an understanding the Fifth Way.

That being said, there is no doubt that once one concludes that "all natural bodies are things directed to an end by some knowing and intelligent being," one can readily see, by following the same line of reasoning that Aristotle employs when he concludes that nature acts for an end starting from an examination of what is meant by saying that a motion is according to nature, that the manner in which the intelligent being directs natural things to their ends must be by endowing them with the intrinsic principles by which they tend to their determinate ends. The fact remains, however, that the conclusion of the Fifth Way is not: "All natural bodies are things directed to their end in virtue of intrinsic principles that are ordered by some knowing and intelligent being."

We have seen then that every which way we look at the two syllogisms that compose the Fifth Way "immanent teleology" is not part of it. None of the four individual terms contained in it includes this notion. Substituting the

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<sup>18</sup> See Aristotle, *Physics*, 198b33-199a8.



definition of nature to give a clearer understanding of “natural body” does not require us to bring it in. Substituting “immanent teleology” in the first argument results in question begging. Examining what the middle terms (and major premises) extend to reveal that whether or not the tendency to an end is immanent has no bearing on either syllogism.

Feser sees his position that intrinsic teleology is vital to the Fifth Way to provide good grounds for Thomists to distance themselves from Paley’s argument from design, which according to Feser presupposes extrinsic teleology.<sup>19</sup> Now that we have seen that whether or not things act for an end due to intrinsic or extrinsic principles is irrelevant to the Fifth Way, we have reason to question this view of Feser as well.

If we look at Paley’s argument, which can be arguably paraphrased as below, we see that it contains no reference to ordering to an end *that is imposed solely from without*:

- All things that have a multiplicity of parts ordered to achieve a goal are things that have an intelligent being as cause of their order.
- The parts of organisms, such as the eye, are things that have a multiplicity of parts ordered to achieve a goal.
- The parts of organisms, such as the eye, are things that have an intelligent being as cause of their order.

The middle term is “things that have a multiplicity of parts order to achieve a goal.” Whether things have their parts so ordered in virtue of intrinsic principles or solely due to an extrinsic cause is not stated in the argument, and appears to be irrelevant to it, as the argument stands without it.

One might insist that in light of Paley’s frequent references to “mechanisms” in both artificial and natural things one needs to read in the latter qualification.<sup>20</sup> My interest, and indeed the interest of any A-T philosopher, is

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<sup>19</sup> See Feser, “Between Aristotle and William Paley,” 740, [section] VII “Thomism versus the ‘Design Argument:’” “As we have emphasized, Paley’s argument supposes that teleology is extrinsic; Aquinas follows Aristotle in holding that it is immanent to the natural order.” At the end of the previous section Feser concluded: “...natural objects have immanent teleology, even if it derives ultimately from God as ordering intelligent. This last point puts us in a position to understand why Thomists have often been so keen to distance Aquinas’s arguments from Paley’s. For the argument are not merely different. Given their divergent metaphysical assumptions, they are arguably fundamentally incompatible....”

<sup>20</sup> Aquinas himself uses the word “machine” when speaking about natural things: “Its [i.e., the universe’s] essential parts, however, are the heavenly bodies and the elements, inasmuch as from out of them the whole machine of the world (*tota mundi machina*) is made up...” (*Compendium Theologiae*, c. 170).

not primarily what Paley had in mind, but whether we can discern in what Paley said an argument for God's existence worthy of consideration. Thus, my first question is whether the argument I have presented above seems, at least *prima facie*, to be sound.

The first premise arguably speaks about what is a subset of things the Fifth Way refers to, namely, things that are blind that tend to an end. Paley's argument is restricted to complex parts of natural things, whereas Aquinas's argument applies to simple natural bodies as well.

The second premise also seems to be true (granted objections based on evolution can be raised against it); in the human hand, the fingers are articulated in a manner allowing them to flex and the thumb is opposed so that we can grasp things with it. Aquinas, of course, agrees that parts of organisms are things whose features have a multiplicity of parts ordered to achieve a goal: "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>21</sup> We see then that regardless of what Paley has in mind, his argument, stated in its strongest form, is worthy of further consideration.

Let us now consider where the notion of "extrinsic teleology" would have to be inserted in the argument from design. One way would be to introduce it into the middle term: "all things that have a multiplicity of parts ordered to achieve a goal *by an outside agent alone and not immediately in virtue of intrinsic principles.*" Another would be to introduce it into the major term: "things that have an intelligent being as cause of their order *by imposing it solely from without rather than by instilling intrinsic principles in them by which they are ordered to an end.*"

In both cases, changing the terms in these ways render the premises in which the terms appear false. Not all things that have a multiplicity of parts ordered to achieve a goal have this ordering solely due to it being imposed by an outside agent. Not all things that have an intelligent being as the cause of their order have their ordering to an end because the intelligent being imposes it from without. Why then introduce a qualification that vitiates what would otherwise appear to be sound argument?

And looking not from the point of view of truth, but of what Paley himself thought, it should be noted that Paley never asks whether or not the ordering to an end in the organic features and processes that he considers is due to intrinsic principles or is only there as imposed upon them by an extrinsic agent. I think that a careful look at *Natural Theology* would allow us to see more clearly that "extrinsic teleology" is not at all what Paley has in mind in

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<sup>21</sup> *In Octo Libros de Physico Auditu Commentaria*, Bk. 2, lec. 12, #491 (Pirota edition).

formulating his argument; however, it would be long to do so, and again my main interest is in his argument stated in its strongest form, something I'm trying by means of this paper to get other philosophers to reconsider. I do suggest here that the crucial notion in Paley is not "extrinsic teleology," but rather the ordering of means to ends,<sup>22</sup> something that Aquinas would agree is characteristic of intelligence.<sup>23</sup>

A final note: If one of the terms of Paley's argument included the qualification that ordering of the parts to their end is imposed solely from without, then there would be reason to say that the intelligent being concluded to is to be understood in a univocal way, i.e., as acting in entirely the same manner that a human artificer acts. Accordingly, Feser maintains: "his [Paley's] implicitly anthropomorphic construal of divine 'intelligence'...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."<sup>24</sup> However, if there is no need to include the aforesaid qualification, then there is no reason to understand the intelligence of the intelligent being concluded to in Paley's argument in a univocal way, any more than there is reason to understand the intelligent being concluded to in Aquinas's argument in this manner. Paley's reference to a watchmaker no more commits him to a univocal understanding of intelligence than Aquinas's reference to an archer or clock<sup>25</sup> does.

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<sup>22</sup> See Paley, *Natural Theology*, p. 9: "Arrangement, disposition of parts, subserviency of means to end, relation of instruments to an [sic] use, imply the presence of intelligence and mind."

<sup>23</sup> See Aquinas, *Quaestiones Disputatae de Potentia*, q. 1, a. 5: "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>24</sup> Edward Feser, "On Aristotle, Aquinas, and Paley," 4.

<sup>25</sup> See *ST I-II* 13.2 ad 3.