

Aristotle III

PHIL301

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Physics: Book II, Chapters 3-9, 194b17-200b8, *Parts of Animals*: 639b12-645a38,
Meteorologica IV.12: 389b23-390b24

In General

- To know, says Aristotle at 194b19, is to know the reasons why. He identifies four basic classes of *reason why* or *cause (aition)*.
- Note that his concept of cause is thus broader than our contemporary one. His includes the end or goal that a thing may satisfy, the stuff of which it is constituted, the idea defining it, as well as its immediate producer or source. Only this last do we now usually call *cause*. Where Aristotle speaks of cause, we might rather speak of *explanation*.
- *Aition* (pl., *aitia*) is “spoken of in many ways.” As usual, Aristotle’s account is comprehensive and systematic. He includes in his account luck and chance, generic v. specific causes, potential causes, coincidence, and a discussion of necessity.

The Four Causes

- Aristotle’s four causes are:
 - o Material: the stuff of which a thing is constituted, such as the bronze of a statue, or the boards, bricks, nails, etc. of a house
 - o Formal: the idea defining a thing, such as the shape of a statue (i.e., both in the mind of the sculptor and in the statue itself) or that of a house (as both in the mind of the architect and in the finished house); also sometimes referred to by Aristotle as a thing’s *essence* and definable in terms of the differentiae of the categories in which the thing falls – see *Categories*.
 - o Efficient: the producer of a thing, such as the sculptor or the builders of the house; sometimes referred to by Aristotle as the *mover*
 - o Final: the end or goal satisfied by the existence of a thing, such as aesthetic gratification in the case of a sculpture, or protection from the elements in the case of a house
- Everything has these four causes, on Aristotle’s view, although formal, efficient, and final cause “often amount to one” (198a25).
 - o Formal, efficient, and final cause come together in natural objects such as plants and animals. Here, “what something is” (its essence or form) is “what it is for” (its goal or end), and this is identical to its “first source of motion” (its efficient cause).
 - o In order to understand this, we need to understand Aristotle’s view of the end (*telos*) of living things.
 - ♣ The goal of a natural object is to function in a certain way and thereby to be a being of a certain sort. Thus, the goal of a horse is to function as a horse and, thus, to be a horse. (This notion will include Aristotle’s concept of virtue (*arete*): the virtues of a horse are those qualities enabling it to function *well* – i.e., enabling it to be a “good horse.” See **Aristotle IV** notes.)

- We may contrast the final cause of natural objects with that of artifacts: in natural objects, the final cause is “internal” whereas in artifacts, the final cause is “external” to the object in question. The pleasure we receive from a sculpture is something independent of the sculpture *per se*. On the other hand, horse-life is not distinct from the essence of a horse – rather these are identical.
- Aristotle argues that “nature” does have “ends” and is thus properly “a cause” (Book II, Chapter 8). He acknowledges that we might think everything in nature to occur by necessity or by coincidence – in fact, he does so in terms strikingly similar to the evolutionary account. But he insists that animals and plants must have a proper goal defining them, for we cannot otherwise explain the high degree of regularity with which individual members of species instantiate their respective forms.
- In a sense, then, there are two causes where natural things are concerned: the matter of which they are composed, and their form, which includes efficient, formal, and final cause.
 - ♣ Where the unity of efficient and formal cause is concerned, Aristotle refers to the parent of a given organism. On his account, it is the male of the species that carries the “seed” – i.e., the form – of the offspring; this seed gestates in the womb of the female, who makes no contribution to its nature but supplies the matter to be informed. In this sense, the “first source” of a horse (or man, etc.) is its sire, itself a thing of that form.
- Note that Aristotle is not here attributing to “nature” any *conscious* pursuit of a goal. I.e., natural ends are not like human ends, which are consciously chosen. Rather, natural ends are for Aristotle “principles” which define how nature operates or towards which the natural world tends.
- Note again the epistemological and ontological unity of Greek thought. As we have seen in the Pre-Socratics and in Plato, Aristotle employs a concept of “form” which serves both noetic and metaphysical roles.
 - ♣ As defining the essence of a thing, the form (*eidos*) or concept of a thing is something we can understand.
 - ♣ As its essence and goal, however, the form or concept of a thing is also literally “what it is,” for Aristotle.
 - ♣ This dualism is also apparent in the Greek concept of principle (*arche*) and account (*logos*), as we have seen.
- (See further discussion of these concepts in the *Metaphysics*.)

Luck and Chance

- Luck and Chance can both also be “spoken of” as causes, for Aristotle. Chance is associated with natural ends, for Aristotle, while luck is associated with human (chosen) ends. See *Physics* Book II, Chapters 4-6.
- Events caused by luck, as defined by Aristotle, are those which satisfy some human, chosen end by mere coincidence. Aristotle gives two kinds of illustration:
 - A musical man is the efficient cause of a house (i.e., it is only accidental to the house being built that its builder also happens to be musically trained)
 - A man encounters a debtor in a place where he did not intend to encounter him, thus achieving a goal – the repayment of the debt.
- Aristotle distinguishes Chance from Luck by reference to human intent. Luck is the term he reserves for unplanned or unintended states or events satisfying some human intent. ‘Chance’ refers to all other coincidences pertaining to some end.
 - Here, too, chance involves satisfaction of some goal or end by accident.

- Animals find food by chance, according to Aristotle, because they do not make deliberate choices.