Aristotelian Explanation The Four Causes

A Simple Claim

'Every human being, by nature, desires to know.'

—Aristotle, Metaphysics 998a

. . .with a Complex Pedigree

- * Every human being has a definite and identifiable nature.
- * That nature is to be knowledge-seeking.
- Humans seek knowledge by seeking explanations.
- * Some explanations satisfy without being good; explanations divide into the good and the bad, as well as the subjective and the objective.
- * Good explanations cite causes.

Explanations Good and Bad

* Two notions of explanation:

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- * Subjective: satisfies a curiosity
- * Objective: provides an interest-independent account Good Bad Subject $\sqrt{}$?

Objecti √ √

Objectively Good Explanations

- * E is an objectively good explanation of phenomenon P if, and only if, E captures and displays the cause(s) of P
- * When do we know the cause of some phenomenon?
 - * What *is* a cause?

The Kinds of Causes: Four

Material: what *x* is made of or comes from, for example, the *bronze* in a bronze statue of Hermes.

Formal: the *shape* or *structure* of *x*, what *x* is essentially, for example, the *Hermes-shape* of a bronze statue of Hermes.

Efficient: what puts the form into the matter, for example, the *sculpting* of the sculptor Praxiteles as he enforms the bronze with a Hermes-shape.

Final: the purpose or end of *x*, for example, the bronze statue of Hermes is *for honouring Hermes*.

Two Claims about the Four Causes

- Citing all four causes is necessary for a complete explanation (w/ some exceptions, including, e.g. coincidence).
- * Citing all four causes is sufficient for a complete explanation.

On Behalf of Matter and Form

- 1. There is change in the universe.
- 2. A necessary condition of there being change is the existence of matter and form.
- 3. So, there are matter and form.

Matter and Form: First Characterization

- x is matter =_{df} x underlies change in the acquisition or loss of a form.
- x is form =_{df} x is a positive attribute gained or lost by matter in the process of change.

Soul and Body

soul : body : : form : matter

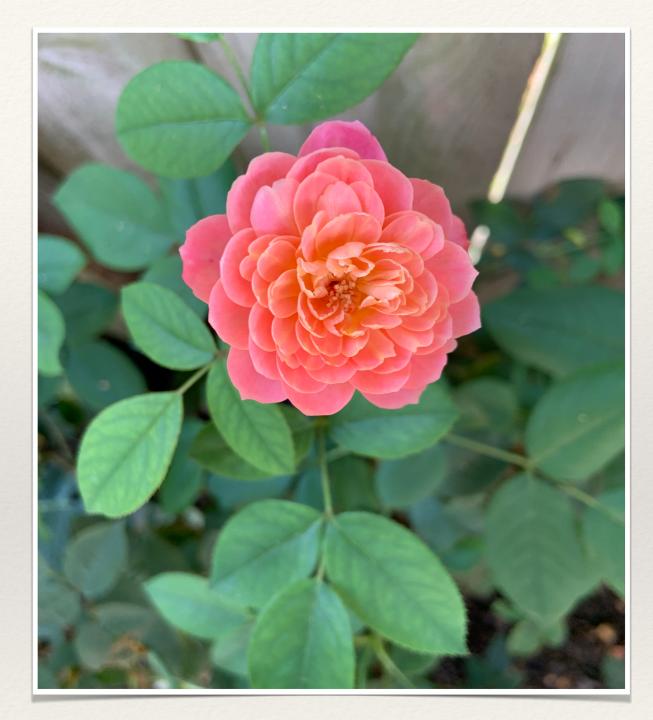
The Breadth of Life

- * Crucially, the application of the form/matter distinction to the relation of soul to body is quite general: *all* living things have souls.
- * This provides a kind of hierarchy:
 - * Nutritive souls belong to all living things (so, e.g., my floribunda rosebush as a soul)
 - Perceptual souls belong to all animals, human and non-human alike (so, e.g., my dog Wotan has a soul)
 - * Rational souls belong to human animals alone
 - Humans alone have the power to know and explain, systemically and scientifically

Nutritive Souls

The Four Causes:

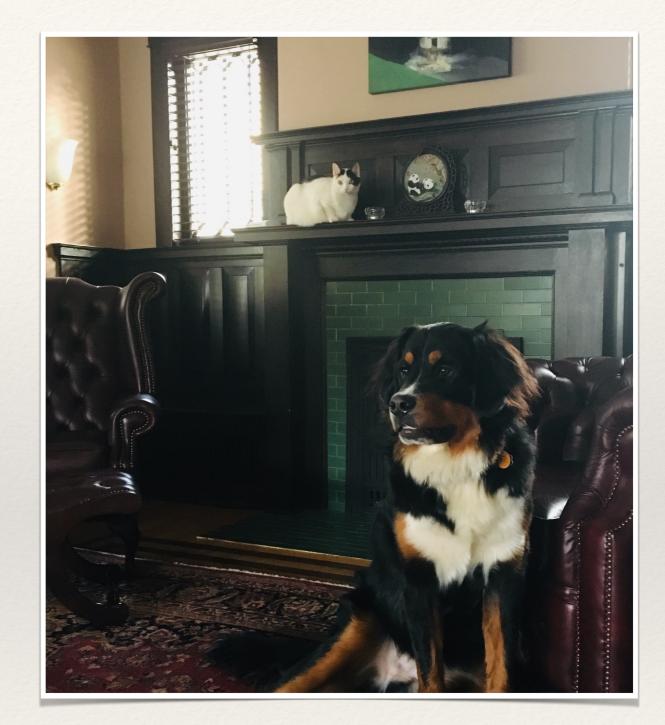
- Material: Plant stuff
- * Formal: Rosaceae
- Efficient: Nursery worker germinating seed
- * Final: Flourishing in the nutritive way



Perceptual Souls

The Four Causes:

- * Material: Flesh and bone
- * Formal: *Canis familiaris*
- * Efficient: Mom and Dad dogs
- Final: Flourishing in the nutritive and perceptual way



Rational Souls

The Four Causes:

- * Material: Flesh and Bone
- * Formal: *Homo sapiens*
- Efficient: Mom and Dad
- Final: Flourishing in the nutritive, perceptual, and rational way

