
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:
 - ❖ Subjective: satisfies a curiosity
 - ❖ Objective: provides an interest-independent account

	Good	Bad
Subject	√	?
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

