

ARISTOTLE ON THE FOUR CAUSES

Aristotle was Plato's student and did not *openly* deny his teacher's basic premise that this physical world is an imperfect reflection of an ideal world beyond. In many ways, though, Aristotle held beliefs that were diametrically opposed to Plato's. Where the latter was an idealist, Aristotle displayed a remarkably materialist and down to earth, as opposed to otherworldly, sensibility in many respects, contending that the here and now is best understood in its own terms rather than in terms of spurious ideal forms. To this end, he argued, humans needed a methodology that would allow us to comprehend the nature of physical objects per se without seeking to relate them to non-physical essences or forms which our earthly minds can grasp only in the abstract.

To understand anything in the here and now, Aristotle argues, we must seek to understand its cause, its *raison d'être*:

We do not think that we know a thing until we grasp the 'why' of it, that is the primary cause of it. It is plain that we must grasp the 'why' of coming into existence, of ceasing to exist, and every natural change, so that knowing the origin of such things, we may try to refer each thing we investigate to its origin. (118)

Each natural or humanly-made phenomenon has four conditions (causes) necessary to its existence:

- the **material cause**: "that out of which something comes into existence and which continues to exist in the result, for example, the bronze of a statue" (118) (in other words, the material it is made of);
- the **efficient or moving cause**: the "primary source of the change or coming to rest" (118) by which matter in one form is turned into another, for example, a "father [is] the cause of the child, and in general the maker is the cause of what is made and one who changes is the cause of a thing being changed" (118) (in other words, the agent responsible for something coming into existence);
- the **final cause**: the "end or that for the sake of which" (118) something is done, for example, "health is the end of taking a walk" (118) (i.e. to what end it exists, its ultimate purpose, its characteristic function or effect; for example, the characteristic function of an axe is to cut while that of an eye is to see).
- the **formal cause**: the "form and model of a thing. This is the essence and definition of a thing" (118) which makes it different from something else. The matter of which a ball consists, for example, takes a certain form which differentiates it from other forms of matter, such as a chicken or a stick or an eye. The characteristic function of an object (e.g. an eye sees) is a product of the form peculiar to the eye (as opposed to the form taken by an axe).

Aristotle's 'formal cause' is evidently not to be confused with Plato's *ideal forms* of which physical objects are imperfect imitations.