

Describe Aristotle's teachings about the difference between the Final cause and other sorts of cause

Aristotle argued that we gain knowledge of universal truth by observing particular things and reasoning from our experience of them to a general (universal) truth. For example, pure water boils at 100°C. Here the emphasis is on experience – Aristotle was keen on gaining understanding from scientific, empirical evidence.

For Aristotle to understand something, there were four key questions to answer – The Four Causes (or explanations) :

- 1) What is its efficient cause ? (i.e. what *made* the object/thing)
- 2) What is its formal cause ? (i.e. the *form* a thing has i.e. its dimensions)
- 3) What is its material cause ? (i.e. What it's made of i.e. substance)
- 4) What is its final cause ? (i.e. What is it for ?! ...This is also known as Telos, which is the Greek word for purpose.)

Aristotle believed that the universe is eternal and exists in a constant state of change, so motion is eternal. He thought that the planets were a prime example of perfect motion ; they were perfect spheres rotating in perfect sequence. He then argued that there must be a cause of change in all the universe, and this cause must be :

- 1) Eternal, and
- 2) A necessary being.

Therefore it could not fail to exist ! The cause is eternal because the change in the universe is eternal, and it is a necessary being because it is the cause of all change in the universe, but it is not changed by anything else. Or, as Aristotle put it,

‘There is something which moves without being moved, being eternal substance and actuality’.

The ‘something’ is G-d. By ‘eternal’ he means that G-d has always existed, by ‘substance’ he means substance without form ; it is invisible, it does not have parts or a body. By ‘actuality’ he refers to pure actuality – the best there is. All change is from potential to actual, but G-d does not change because he is already pure actually.

The cause of all the change in the universe is the unmoved mover, but the unmoved mover is not the efficient cause of the change (as this suggests the unmoved mover *does* something !) The unmoved mover is the cause of all change because it is the final cause of all things (and all things move towards their goal).

The unmoved mover is also known as the Prime Mover. It is *the* Final Cause for Aristotle, meaning that the Prime Mover is the ultimate explanation of why things exist.

In Aristotle's teachings, the first three causes (material, efficient and formal) are all in a sense considered in the past, and must be thought through previous to an object's existence. An object cannot be created without having substance (material), it must have a progenitor (efficient – if there is no one to make it, it can't be made !), and it must have a plan (formal cause – an object is what it is because of the dimensions specific to itself). However, the final cause – the aim for which an object is created, may be considered before an object's existence (for example, someone wants to write a song whose cause is to make people sad, so they already know its purpose before they've written it) *or* the final cause may be considered *after* the object is already in existence ! This is what separates the final cause from the other

three causes ! For example, even though humans have been around for a long time, people are *still* asking the questions : ‘What is the meaning of life ?’, and ‘Why are we here ?’. Even though Aristotle may claim to have answered those questions, the point is that we can exist even without knowing our purpose, even though all the other three purposes are actualised. In fact, many people probably go through life never pondering their personal final cause and not even pursuing its fulfillment !

Aristotle also suggests that the Final Cause leads to movement like the action of being loved ; love is not just about your actions but also about attraction. The Prime Mover is the ultimate reason and final goal of movement. An analogy to understand this may be of a magnet that will attract iron objects towards it. Aristotle says that all action is ultimately aimed at the Prime Mover and this is like attraction because the Prime Mover is the cause of all motion. It causes motion as the object of desire and love. The way that this may link to the other sorts of cause as described by Aristotle is that the Prime Mover being *the* Final Cause is inextricably linked with motion. Aristotle is saying that everything strives to move closer towards the Prime Mover (i.e. G-d), from potentiality to actuality. Therefore, everything is in a constant state of change, a constant forward motion towards actuality. This is only with the Final Cause, though. In the case of the other causes (material, efficient and formal), once the object is in existence their purpose, in effect, has been fulfilled. In the case of humans, once a baby is created, its material cause (skin, bones etc.), efficient cause (its parents, childbirth) and formal cause (e.g. the head goes on the neck) have all been actualised ! In this way, they have fulfilled their purpose and any other connections are now obsolete. For example, once a baby is born, the mother’s womb will never serve any purpose to the child ever again. Also, one does not need to wonder where its body parts go (formal cause) as its body parts are already assembled and are not going to change position. This is where the final cause differentiates. The final cause continues to be important long after the creation of the object, as it is the driving force which pushes the object from potentiality to actuality, in permanent motion towards the Prime Mover.

Discuss the strength and weaknesses of Aristotle’s views on causality

There is merit in saying that everything can be attributed to its four causes, as it can, and in this way Aristotle’s views make sense. However, Aristotle very much likes to prove things empirically, and there is no concrete evidence for believing that this material world is the source of true knowledge. Knowledge could be gained in other ways, apart from through experience of the senses or reason – religious believers may argue that faith and revelation from G-d are a source of true knowledge.

It also makes sense to say that everything has a final cause ; a purpose, and for many things the purpose seems straightforward – for example, the purpose of a brick is to build a house. However, many would say that this assumption that everything has a fixed purpose is at fault. For example, that same brick could also be used to smash a shop window, so various things have different purposes. Even if you try to argue for Aristotle by saying that he liked to prove things scientifically, so by looking at a brick’s weight and dimensions it is clear that it’s *primary* purpose is for building, you could just as easily argue that a brick is ideal for smashing the shop window.

There is many who would say that there is no reason, and that things happen purely by chance. With regard to Aristotle’s view on the planets being the perfect example of perfect motion, many people believe that the universe came about by an

(albeit infinitesimally small) chance. They think that it is ridiculous to suppose that the universe has any meaning or purpose beyond the simple fact of its existence.

Aristotle views G-d as the Prime Mover, or uncaused causer. Some criticise this view, arguing that his views depend on the idea that nothing can cause itself, but then contradicts itself by saying that G-d does exactly what it just claimed was impossible.

Aristotle further teaches that as G-d is the Prime Mover he only needs contemplate himself ; in fact he has to. However he does not successfully explain how his concept of G-d as 'thinking about thinking' could be responsible for causing movement. He stressed that real knowledge begins with experience via the senses, and yet none of us have ever experienced something being moved just through the agency of thought, outside the world of fiction.