

Aristotle's Four Causes

a) Describe Aristotle's teaching about the difference between the final cause and the other sorts of cause. (25 marks)

Unlike Plato and Socrates before him, Aristotle did not believe in the World Of Forms and therefore the idea that everything could be measured using it's 'Perfect Form'. He was an empiricist, and believed that everything in this world has four reasons for being rather than just it's purpose. He said that each thing had four reasons which explained what, why and how they were, these reasons were what he called The Four Causes. The Four Causes are: **1)** The Material Cause – what a thing is made of i.e. metal, wood etc., **2)** The Efficient Cause – how it came into being, i.e. what/who made it, **3)** The Formal Cause – what characteristics does it have that makes it what it is, i.e. What makes a table fall into the category of furniture, and finally **4)** The Final Cause – what it's for, what is it's purpose or why was it made? This is the cause which Aristotle believed to be the most important.

The Final Cause of something is could also be called it's purpose, it's aim or goal and it is essentially simply 'What it's made for'. Aristotle also wrote about god, The Unmoved (or Prime) Mover. The Unmoved Mover is like a the Efficient Cause of everything as well as their Final Cause.

“The series must start with something, since nothing can come from nothing.”

This quote by Aristotle from *Metaphysics*, means that the Prime Mover is the Efficient Cause of the world. However, he also said that a human beings Final Cause was to be perfect and thus be as close as possible to The Prime Mover, so it is also like a Final Cause.

The reason for Aristotle believing The Final Cause to be the most important one makes a lot of sense. The first question that springs to mind when seeing something is usually “What does it do?” or “What is it for?”, it is occasionally “Where did it come from?” or “What is it made from?” and very rarely “What makes this fit into (category i.e. furniture)?”. So, from our (and Aristotle's) point of view, The Final Cause is very important or most important.

The difference between Aristotle's Final Cause and his other three is that Final Cause is the only one concerned with the purpose of something rather than what makes/made it what it is. For instance a baby: a baby's Material Cause is organs, blood, bone and tissue, it's Efficient would be it's parents who created it, it's Formal Cause is that it is human and it's Final Cause would be that it will inevitably turn into an adult human or rather that it has the potential to become an adult.

However, the Final Cause is impossible without the other causes and vice versa. According to Aristotle, if for instance the Material Cause is altered (i.e. A table and the legs are removed) then this will also change the Final Cause. However, if the Final Cause was changed, then that would affect what the Material Cause was, i.e. If the Final Cause of a baby was *not* to become an adult then the Material Cause would not need to have for example any organs, the baby would not need them. So, the Final Cause is the most important because it affects all of the other causes.

b) Discuss the strengths and weaknesses of Aristotle's ideas about cause. (10 marks)

While Aristotle's Four Cause idea has plenty of valid points, it also has gaps. For instance, the Final Cause of a table is to put things on to but the Final Cause is not for instance so that you can sit on it, but we can sit on a table without changing what it is. It is still a table whether we put plates or something on it or if we are sitting on it. So, it does not allow for things which are made

for one reason but can be used for another. According to Aristotle's theory using an object for anything other than what it was made for should turn it into something else.

Another problem with Aristotle's theory is similar to those posed by Plato's Perfect Form theory. This is that according to Aristotle, if anything reaches its full potential (does what it is supposed to do, its Final Cause), then it has reached perfection. However, this does not work with our idea of 'perfection', if Aristotle's idea is right then when a disease for example, whose Final Cause is to be fatal and to cause pain achieves its Final purpose then it is perfect, but how can it be perfect if it kills or harms someone?

On the other hand, the Four Causes theory does seem more valid than for instance Plato's World Of Forms. Aristotle's theory accounts for us being able to categorize objects, define what they are made from and how they came into existence without having to say "They just are.". According to Aristotle the only thing which 'just is' is the Prime Mover.