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ARISTOTLE'S CONCEPT OF CAUSE: A PHILOSOPHICAL STUDY

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RESEARCH ARTICLE

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Abstract

The concept of course is one of the important concepts in Aristotle's philosophy. Aristotle is his physics explicates his view on this topic in detail. But his 'Metaphysics' is also a well-known since of information about this concept. Now in this paper I shall try to focus only on Aristotle's concept of cause. Aristotle's concept of causation is understood in wider sense than what is understood by that term in modern times. The cause of a thing does not give any reason for it, and therefore does not explain it. The cause is merely the mechanism by which a reason produces its consequence. Death may be caused by accident or disease, but these causes explain nothing as to why death should be in the world at all. Now if we accept this distinction, we may say that Aristotle's conception of causation includes both what we call causes and reasons. Whatever is necessary, whether facts or principles, whether causes or reasons, fully in order to understand the existence of a thing, fully or the happening of an event, it is necessary to include both causes or reason is included in the Aristotelian notion of causation.

Keywords: *Cause, Metaphysics, Material cause*

Taking causation in this wide sense, Aristotle finds that there are four kinds of causes the material, the efficient, the formal, and the final causes. In the first book of the 'Metaphysics' Aristotle investigates the views of his predecessors, in order to see if they discussed any other kind of cause besides the four causes he has enumerated. In this way he is led to give a brief sketch of the history of Greek philosophy up to his time, but he is not concerned to catalogue all their opinions, whether relevant or irrelevant to his purpose, for he wishes to trace the evolution of the notion of the four causes, and the net result of his investigation is the conclusion, not only that no philosopher has discovered any other kind of cause, but that no philosopher before himself has enumerated the four causes in a satisfactory manner. Of course, but there is the same tendency to regard his own philosophy as a synthesis on a higher plane of the thought of his predecessors. There is certainly some truth in Aristotle's contention, yet it is by no means completely true, and he is sometimes far from just to his predecessors.

Aristotle tells us that things are called 'causes' in four different ways, but his illustration is brief and enigmatic. For example: 'bronze of the statue' Here Aristotle points out that, to ask for a cause is to seek 'the because of-which' it is to ask why something is the case. A question 'why?' requires an answer 'Because', so explanatory sentences which cite causes can always he expressed in the form 'X because Y'.

Secondly, Aristotle says that 'the because of-which' is always sought in this way Because of what does one thing belong to another? According to Aristotle, "We can, however, ask why a man is an animal of such-and-such a kind. Now we are evidently not asking why he who is a man is a man. We are asking, therefore, why something predicated of something belongs to it 'why does it thunder?' That means: 'why does noise occur in the clouds?' Thus, the question is about one thing being predicated of another. 'Why are these things - bricks and stones a house?' Obviously, we are asking the cause, i.e. (to speak abstractly) the essence. In some cases, it is what the thing is for, as perhaps with a house or a bed, in some cases it is the first mover, since this too is a cause. [A house is defined by its function, thunder by its efficient cause.]

…When one term is not predicated of another it is easy to see what is really being asked... One must articulate the question properly - other-wise it is on the borderline between being a genuine question and not being a question at all. Since the thing's existence must be taken for granted, the question is clearly why the matter is a so-and-so. 'Why are these materials a house?' 'Because the essence of a house-what being a house is - is present'... So, what we seek is the cause, i.e. the form by reason of which the matter is a so-and-so, and this is the things sub-stance" (Metaphysics z.17 1041 a 9)

Finally, Aristotle says that 'the cause is the middle term' to ask why S is P is, as it were to look for a link joining S to P, and that link will constitute a 'middle term' between S and P 'why S is P?' 'Because of M' More explicitly 'S is P, because S is M, and M is P'. Why do cows have several stomachs? Because cows are ruminants and ruminants have several stomachs. Not all explanations need actually have that specific form, but Aristotle holds that all explanations can be couched in that form, and that the form exhibits the nature of causal connections most perspicuously.

Aristotle's first type of cause, is usually called ‘cause as matter’ by him and 'the material cause' by his commentators. The illustration, 'bronze of the statue', is elliptical for something of the form 'The statue is so-and-so because the statue is made of bronze and bronze things are so-and-so.' The middle terms 'made of bronze', expresses the cause of the status's being, for examples malleable, and because bronze is the constituent stuff of the statue the cause here is the 'material' cause.

Aristotle's second sort of cause, 'the form and pattern', is normally referred to as the 'formal' cause. The illustration is again obscure. Con-sider instead the following example: 'What it is and why it is are the same. What is an eclipse? - Privation of light form the moon by eclipsed? Because the light leaves it when the earth scrums it.' The moon is eclipsed because the moon is deprived of light by being screened and things deprived of light by being screened are eclipsed. Here the middle term, 'deprived of light by being screened', explains why the eclipse occurs; and it states the form or essence of an eclipse - it says what an eclipse actually is.

We ourselves tend to associate the notice of causation most readily with the action of one thing an another with pushing and pulling. Modern readers may feel most at home with Aristotle's third type of cause, which is usually called the 'efficient' cause. At least, Aristotle's illustration of the efficient cause has features which we now associate closely with the modern idea of causation. Thus the examples seem to suggest that efficient causes are distinct from the objects they operate upon (the father is distinct from the son, whereas the bronze is not distinct from the statue), and that causes precede their effects (the man who deliberates does so before he acts, whereas the screening does not occur before the eclipse) Aristotle, however, does not regard efficient causes as radically different from material and formal causes.

Aristotle refers to his fourth cause as 'that for the sake of which' and 'the goal'. It is usually known as the 'final' cause. The normal way of expressing final causes, as Aristotle's example indicates, is by using the connective 'in order to': 'He is walking in order to be healthy.'

Final causes are odd in various ways first, they are not readily expressed in terms of 'the because of-which- 'in order to' does not easily translate into 'because of'. Secondly, they seem to be appropriate only to a very small number of cases, namely, human intentional actions. Thirdly, they always appear to after their effects. Fourthly, they may be effective without even existing (health may cause the man to walk and yet never exist-he may be too dissipated ever to become healthy, or he may be run over by a bus in the course of these perambulations. The third and fourth oddities are the least troublesome. Aristotle explicitly recognises that final causes follow their effects, and he implicitly acknowledges cases in which a final cause is effective but non-existent - neither point struck him as strange. The second oddity is more important. Aristotle does not think that final causes are appropriate only to intentional behavior, on the contrary, the primary arena within which final causes exert themselves is that of nature of the animal and vegetable world.

Here it would not be out of place to point out that while Thales and the early Greek philosophers busied themselves with the material cause, trying to discover the ultimate substratum of things, the principle that is neither generated nor destroyed, but from which particular objects arise and into which they pass away. In this way arose, e.g. the philosophies of Thales, Anaximenes, Heraclitus, who posited one material cause, or Empedocles, who postulated form elements. But even if elements are generated from one material cause, why does this happen, what is the source of the movement whereby objects are generated and destroyed? There must be some cause of the becoming in the world, even the very facts themselves must in the end impel the thinker to investigate a type of cause other than the material cause.

Attempted answers to the above difficulty we find in the philosophies of Empedocles and Anaxagoras. The latter saw that no material element can be the reason why objects manifest beauty and goodness, and so he asserted the activity of Mind in the material world, standing out like a sober man in contrast with the random talk of his predecessors. (Metaphysics, 984 b 15-18) All the same, he uses Mind only as a deus ex machina to explain the formation of the world, drags it in when he is at a loss for any other explanation when another explanation is at hand, he simply leaves Mind out. (Metaphysics, 985 a 18-21)

In other words, Anaxagoras was accused by Aristotle of using Mind simply as a clock for ignorance. Empedocles, indeed, postulated two active principles, Friendship and strife, but he used them neither sufficiently nor consistently. (Metaphysics, 985 a 21-3). These philosophers, therefore, had succeeded in distinguishing two of Aristotle's four causes, the material cause and the source of movements but they had not worked out their conceptions systematically or elaborated any consistent and scientific philosophy. After the philosophy of the Pythagoreans, who cannot be said to have contributed very much, came the philosophy of Plato, who evolved the doctrine of the Forms, but placed the forms, which are the causes of the essence of things, apart from the things of which they are the essence. Thus Plato, according to Aristotle, used only two causes, 'that of the essence and the material cause.' (Metaphysics, 988 b 8-10). As to the final cause, this was not explicitly, or at least not satisfactorily, treated by previous philosophers, but only by the way or incidentally. (Metaphysics, 988 b 6-16). As a matter of fact, Aristotle is not altogether just to Plato, since the latter, in the Timaeus, introduces the concept of the Demiurge who serves as an efficient cause, and also makes use of the sarods, besides maintaining a doctrine of finality, for the final cause of becoming is the realisation of

the Good. Nevertheless, it is true that Plato, through the Chrisoms, was debarred from making the realisation of its immanent form or essence the final cause of the concrete substance.

Conclusion

Aristotle finds that all four causes have bene recognized in greater or lesser degrees by his predecessors, and this, in his opinion, greatly reinforces his own doctrine. But whereas material and efficient causes have been clearly understood, his predecessors had only vaguely foreshadowed and dimly perceived the value of formal and final causes. We can see now much wider this conception of causation is than the modern conception. If we take Mill's definition of a cause as the best expression of modern scientific ideas, we find that he defines a cause as the "invariable and unconditional antecedent of a phenomenon " This cuts out final causes at once. For the final cause is the end, and is not an antecedent in time. It also does not include formal causes. For we don't now think of the concept of a thing as a being part of its because This leaves us with only material and efficient causes, and these correspond roughly to the modern notions of matter and energy. Even the efficient causes of Aristotle, however appear on further consideration, to be excluded from the modern idea of causation For, though the efficient cause is the energy which produces motion, modern science regards it as purely mechanical energy, whereas Aristotle thinks of it, as we shall see, as an ideal force, operating not from the beginning but from the end. But it must not be supposed that, in saying that the modern idea of causation excludes formal and final causes, we mean that Aristotle is wrong in adding them, or that the modern idea is better than Aristotle's. It is not a question of better and worse at all. Modern science does not in any way deny the reality of formal and final causes. It merely considers them to be outside its sphere. It is no business of science whether they exist or not. As knowledge advances, differentiation and division of labor occur. Science takes as its province mechanical causes, and leaves formal and final causes to the philosopher to explicate.

Thus, for example, formal causes are not considered by since because they are not, in the modern sense, causes at all. They are what we have called reasons. If we are to explain the existence of an object in the universe it may be necessary to introduce formal causes, i.e. concepts, to show why the thing exists, to show in fact its reasons. But science makes no attempt to explain the existence of objects. It takes their existence for granted, and seeks to trace their history and their relations to each other. Therefore, it does not require formal causes. It seeks to work out the mechanical view of the universe, and therefore considers only mechanical causes. But Aristotle's theory, as being philosophy rather than science, includes both the principles of mechanism and teleology.

It was not Aristotle's habit to propound his theories as if they were something absolutely new, sprung for the first time out of his own brain. In attacking any problem, his custom was to begin by enumerating current and past opinions, to criticise them, to reject what was value-less in them, to retain the residue of truth, and to add to it his own suggestions and original ideas. The resultant of this process was his own theory, which he thus represented, not as absolutely new, but as a development of the views of his predecessors. This course he follows also in the present instance.

The first book of the "Metaphysics" is a history of all previous philosophy, from Thales to Plato, undertaken with the object of investigating how for the four causes had been recognized by his predecessors. The material cause, he says, had been recognized from the first. The logics believed in this and no other cause. They sought to explain everything by matter, though they differed among themselves as to the nature of the material cause, Thales describing it as water, Anaximenes as air. Later philosophers also gave different accounts of it, Heraclitus thinking it was fire, Empedocles the four elements, Anaxagoras an indefinite number of kinds of matter. But the point is that they all recognized the necessity for a material cause of some sort the explain the universe.

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