

Aristotle was an ancient Greek philosopher and polymath. His writings span the natural sciences, philosophy, linguistics, economics, politics, psychology, and the arts. Aristotle's doctrine of the four causes is a framework of four fundamental types of answers to the question "why?" used to explain why things exist or change.

Matter

The material cause of a change or movement. Aristotle defines matter as, "...the primary substratum of each thing, from which it comes to be *per se*, [substantially], and that persists in the result." - *Physics I.9*. Matter is what allows a thing to change, either accidentally, such as a change in shape, or substantially, such as the death of a living thing, or a compound returning to its elemental parts. Aristotle gives the examples of a table's matter being wood, or a statue's matter being bronze or marble.

Form

The formal cause of a change or movement. Aristotle defines form as, "...the terminus of the process of [change]." - *Metaphysics V.4*. It is what something changes into, i.e. what makes a thing what it is. Form is often confused with the whole substance, whereas it is a thing's essential difference, for example, man is a rational animal, what makes man a man, is his rationality, i.e. what makes him different from other animals.

Efficient, or agent

The efficient or moving cause of a change or movement. This consists of things apart from the thing being changed or moved, which interact so as to be an agency of the change or movement. For example, the efficient cause of a table is a carpenter, or a person working as one, and according to Aristotle the efficient cause of a child is a parent.

Final cause, or end

The final cause of a change or movement. This is a change or movement for the sake of a thing to be what it is. For a seed, it might be an adult plant; for a sailboat, it might be sailing; for a ball at the top of a ramp, it might be coming to rest at the bottom. Often the final cause is confused with a purpose, or intention, but this is not the case, since a purpose is the

effect wanted for a thing by a person, whereas Aristotle thought of ends as always present, ungiven, and always good.

Example:

A Wooden Chair

- **Material Cause:** The wood.
- **Formal Cause:** The four legs and seat.
- **Efficient Cause:** The carpenter.
- **Final Cause:** To provide a place for a person to sit.