Aristotle: The Four Causes

One of the most famous of Aristotelian doctrines is that of the "four causes." In their most common terminology, they are: material, formal, final, and efficient. For the Greeks, "cause" (= *aition;* cf our medical term *aitiology*, the study of causes) meant that which is responsible for something. Thus the four causes are four ways of talking about what is responsible for something, or more precisely, four ways of explaining the changes by which something came to be the way it is.

The most developed discussion of the four causes is in *Physics* 2.3, but before we consider the details, let's first consider what Aristotle says about change in general (*Physics* 5.1-2; *Categories* 14; *Metaphysics* 12.2). Change (*metabolé*) is the genus for three specific types of change: generation, destruction, and motion (*kinésis*). Generation and destruction are change with regard to substance; in them, a thing either comes to be or ceases to be (we'll talk about substance a little later). Motion has four kinds: alteration (quality); increase and decrease (quantity); locomotion (place).

Physical (or better, natural) change is that in which the *arché* of change (the commanding originary principle) is internal to the changing thing: the natural thing changes as a development to its fulfillment or perfection (*telos*).

Artificial change is that in which the *arché* of change is outside the changing thing: it is directed by *techné* (= art or skill).

Now the important thing to remember about Aristotle's doctrine of the four causes, the four ways of explaining the changes by which something came to be the way it is, is that although he applies them to natural changes, the model of change he uses is drawn from the common Greek way of understanding artificial change. This model is hylomorphic, that is, it understands change as the imposition of form on chaotic matter. Now it is absolutely crucial to understand that this hylomorphic model is drawn from the architect's experience in directing craft production, NOT from the experience of the hand workers. As we saw in our discussions of Creon's ideas on ruling in the *Antigone* and of Socrates attempt to distinguish himself from the sophist in the *Apology*, hylomorphism is a **commanding** of matter.

Now this commanding hylomorphism is also an idealism is the strictest and most literal sense, and is behind the Western privilege of mental over physical labor. As we will see, the efficient cause for Aristotle is the idea in the mind of the architect, not the actual impact of chisel on stone, which is how a modern person would understand "cause." The architect dreams up an idea of what the temple is to look like, then commands the masons to realize this idea by imposing its form on the matter of the marble. Now what's fascinating is that the masons (or any other craftworker: carpenter, brickmaker, leatherworker, or even horsetrainer or educator for that matter) don't impose a form on matter, but coax forth potentials inherent in the marble by tracking the grain of the stone, the way minerals were deposited in the geological production of the stone. (Recall what Michaelangelo said about liberating the David from the marble.)

The four causes are well-explicated in Robinson's book. Briefly, let's say that:

1. Material cause = "that out of which" = marble, wood, etc. Now "matter" (= *hyle*) is only an analytic concept, that is, a way of talking. You never see simple "matter"; it is only a way of talking about a thing that must go along with its partner, "form." You only ever see real things, that is, things that are, for Aristotle, matter that has already been formed, by natural or artificial means. For instance, the wood of the table was naturally formed as a tree, then artificially formed by the succession of workers who worked on it, under the direction of the "architect" who made the blueprint of the table.

2. Formal cause = the "look" (= *eidos*) of the thing as it is meant to be. When realized in matter, this form will be the same as the idea in the mind of the architect.

3. Efficient cause = "that from which" = the mental vision of the architect prior to any actual work.

4. Final cause = "that for the sake of which" (= *telos*), the final, finished product in its complete and perfect state. Only because it is the completed state is this the "goal" of the process in any sense of subjective aim.