

Aristotle

Cause and purpose

Aristotle (384–322 BCE) disagreed with his teacher, Plato. He argued that knowledge of the Form was **a posteriori** – we only develop knowledge of the Form of a horse after contact with lots of horses. The Form exists within the object itself. Where Plato thought that the natural world was a reflection of the world of ideas, Aristotle thought that what was in the human soul was simply a reflection of the real world. Reality is made up of several things, comprising Form and matter. The matter of a thing can exist after the thing itself has ceased to exist.



Form A thing's specific characteristics

Matter The 'stuff' that a thing is made of

The Form is the range of characteristics that combine to define the object for what it is. The matter can come together to make a range of different objects without changing – it is the Form that changes. Matter contains the **potential** to become a specific Form.

For example:

A chicken is made of a variety of materials – cells of different sorts. Its characteristics – clucking, laying eggs and so on – make it a chicken. When it dies, it becomes a dead chicken – the matter is maintained, but the Form has changed.

From this idea of Form and matter, Aristotle went on to define his idea of **causality**. He believed that there are four **aitiai** (causes)

Material Cause

The matter from which the thing is made.



For example:

The bronze that the statue is made of

Efficient Cause

The agent that brings something about.



The sculptor and his chisel

Formal Cause

The kind of thing that something is (i.e. its Form).



The shape or design that the bronze is being sculpted into

Final Cause

The goal or purpose that a thing moves towards.



The purpose of the sculpture

This idea is important for two significant philosophical theories:

The cosmological argument for the existence of God

This theory argues that God is the 'First Cause' of the universe.

The Natural Law theory of ethics

This theory tries to define good in terms of the Final Cause, or purpose, of a thing.

Aristotle argued for a **teleological** explanation of natural things – he defined objects in terms of what they are for. Some goals are **extrinsic** – they are achieved by an action external to the object. A knife's goal is to cut, and its success is determined by the way it cuts. Other goals are **intrinsic**. A person's goal is to live a rational life – the whole make-up of a person is to achieve this. The essence of each biological kind is determined by its goal or purpose.

τελος (**telos**)
Goal, the final
purpose, or aim,
of a thing

So each object or being has two aspects to its existence:

1. There is one fundamental feature of a thing that causes its other features to be organised in the way that they are. *For example, its horseness.*
2. This feature is based on the purpose of that thing.
Horseness is defined by the purpose of a horse – its final goal.

Mind and body

ψυχη (**psyche**)

This is the word the Greeks gave to the **animator**, the living force in a living being. Aristotle counted nutrition, reproduction, movement and perception as powers of the psyche.

νοϋς (**nous**)

This is how Aristotle referred to **reason**. This is the highest form of rationality. Aristotle believed that the 'unmoved mover' of the universe was a cosmic **nous**.

Aristotle believed that the soul is the **Form** of the body. The soul is simply the sum total of the operations of a human being.

As such, the soul is not immortal – it is simply the Form of the body, and not capable of existing without the body.