

What is Philosophy?

Making Sense of the World: Cause & Explanation

Merlin CCC – 6 February 2021

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“Son of Klinias, I think that you are wondering...”
– Plato, *Alcibiades* (103a)

“Wonder is the beginning of philosophy. For once we wonder ‘that it is,’ we move on to ‘why it is,’ and **this is philosophy**: to express the causes of things –assuming that philosophy is the knowledge of beings insofar as they exist.”

– Olympiodorus, *Commentary on the Alcibiades*, Lecture 3.

Causes in Platonic Philosophy

1. Final cause (end, *telos*): *that for the sake of which*.
 2. Paradigmatic cause (paradigm): *that in relation to which*.
 3. Efficient (a.k.a., productive) cause: *that by which*.
 4. Formal cause (form): *that in which*.
 5. Material cause (matter): *that from which*.
- [Additionally: Instrumental cause.]

Some Questions & Distinctions

- Time and causality:
 - Synchronic (*at a single time*) vs. diachronic (*across time*).
 - Temporal (*within time*) vs. eternal (*outside of time*).
 - “Prior/priority” as literal time-words, or in an extended, metaphorical sense?
- Are causes things, or events?
- Necessity vs. probability.
- *Technē* vs. *epistēmē*.
 - Recall: Philosophy is “the craft of crafts and the science of sciences.”

Additional Theories from India

- Vaiśeṣika: Inherence and non-inherence causes.
- *Saṃskāras* and dispositions.
- Dharmakīrti and his (Buddhist Yogācāra) tradition.

Conclusion: Returning to Wonder

- Wonder and scientific enquiry. Are we explaining, or explaining away?

Readings & Resources

Aristotle presents his four causes in *Physics* II.3. [Two articles](#) in the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy discuss the theory, though because they're focused on Aristotle, neither of them really addresses the need to distinguish formal from paradigmatic causality. For those who prefer audio, [an episode of Peter Adamson's *History of Philosophy* podcast](#) also offers an introduction to Aristotle's version.

A clearer exposition, that includes the full set of five causes, is in the beginning of Seneca, *Letter 65*; a public-domain version is [here](#). Seneca's discussion (and critique) is probably the best way in, from any of the ancient primary texts.

Proclus gives a basic survey of Greek theorizing about causality, leading up to the five-cause model, in the first four pages of his commentary on Plato's *Timaeus*.

The quotation from Plato's *Alcibiades*—the very first phrase of the very first Platonic dialogue that students would study in late antiquity—is my own literal translation from the Greek. The entire dialogue has been translated by D.S. Hutchinson (in C.D.C. Reeve, *Plato on Love*; or in J.M. Cooper & D.S. Hutchinson, *Plato: Complete Works*, both from Hackett Publishing), or by a variety of other translators.

The quotation from Olympiodorus is from Olympiodorus, *Life of Plato and On Plato First Alcibiades 1–9*, translated by Michael Griffin (Bloomsbury, 2016), slightly modified.

Inherence and non-inherence causes play some important roles in the Nyāya and Vaiśeṣika schools of Hindu philosophy. A useful starting point is chapter 5 of Matthew Dasti and Stephen Phillips, *The Nyāya-sūtra: Selections with Early Commentaries* (Hackett, 2017), and the additional resources cited at the end of that chapter.

The notion of *saṃskāras* crops up in small places across Indian philosophical literature in various schools; unfortunately, I don't have a good single source that foregrounds it.

A good overview of Dharmakīrti's theory is in chapter 2 of John D. Dunne, *Foundations of Dharmakīrti's Philosophy* (Wisdom Publications, 2004). A much more technical account, including complexities added by later Tibetan thinkers, is in the early chapters of Georges B.J. Dreyfus, *Recognizing Reality: Dharmakīrti's Philosophy and its Tibetan Interpretations* (SUNY Press, 1997).