

The Four Causes

to appear in the *Journal of Philosophy*

BORIS HENNIG

HU Berlin / University of Pittsburgh

Abstract

I will argue that Aristotle's fourfold division of four causes naturally arises from a combination of two distinctions (a) between things and changes, and (b) between that which potentially is something and what it potentially is. Within this scheme, what is usually called the "efficient cause" is something that potentially is a certain natural change, and the "final cause" is, at least in a basic sense, what the efficient cause potentially is. I will further argue that the essences of things and changes are not features or attributes of them, but paradigms that set the standards according to which these things and changes may be judged to be natural or typical. The "formal cause" of a natural thing will be shown to be its essence in this sense: it sets the standards of typicality that apply to instances of its kind. The final cause will be shown to set the standard of typicality for natural changes. When we understand Aristotle's doctrine of the four causes in this way, it becomes clear on what basis he could convincingly argue that final causality is operative in the whole of nature.