The role of efficient causation in Aristotle's philosophy: ensuring the continuity and coherence of the cosmos within a teleological framework

Que, Y.

Conclusion

Aristotle's philosophy provides a deeply interconnected causal framework that seeks to explain the cosmos as a coherent, unified system. This thesis has examined the roles of efficient and final causation within this framework, demonstrating their interdependence and their complementary contributions to Aristotle's understanding of the natural world. By investigating the interaction of these causal principles across diverse domains—cosmology, meteorology, the motions of elements, and biology—this study has sought to address a fundamental question: How does Aristotle reconcile the teleological primacy of the final cause with the operational significance of efficient causation to achieve a unified explanation of the cosmos? This study demonstrates that the operation of efficient causation is indispensable in guaranteeing the spatial and temporal continuity of the cosmos. This continuity ensures that the universe remains an integrated and unified whole, preserving its intelligibility and coherence within Aristotle's broader metaphysical and natural framework.

The primacy of the final cause as the ultimate explanatory principle in Aristotle's teleological framework is indisputable. The final cause, epitomized by the Unmoved Mover, serves as the ultimate end or purpose that governs the order and coherence of the universe. This notion of teleology underscores the inherent goodness and purposiveness of natural phenomena, reflecting Aristotle's belief that all aspects of the cosmos are directed toward the realization of the good. However, as this thesis has argued, the explanatory scope of final causation is not without limitations. Certain phenomena, particularly those in meteorology and the behavior of inanimate elements, resist direct alignment with the teleological framework, raising questions about the adequacy of final causation as a universal explanatory principle.

In addressing these challenges, this thesis has highlighted the role of efficient causation as an indispensable explanatory principle within Aristotle's system. Efficient causes, steering the mechanisms and processes of matter heading for form, thereby ensure the spatial and temporal continuity in the universe. Thus efficient causation also bridges gaps where teleological explanations may be less apparent, offering a mechanistic grounding for phenomena that might otherwise seem disconnected from the broader teleological order.

Through an analysis of Aristotle's texts, particularly *Meteor* I.9, IV.11, IV.12, and *PA* I.1 and II. 8–9, this study has demonstrated how efficient causation complements final causation by initiating processes and interactions between natural phenomena. For example, in meteorological processes, efficient causes such as the Sun's heat play a pivotal role in the generation and corruption of terrestrial phenomena. These processes, while mechanistically driven, remain consistent with the overarching teleological framework by contributing to the sustenance and order of the cosmos. Similarly, in biological contexts, efficient causation underpins the developmental and functional processes of living beings, operating in alignment with the teleological purposes defined by the final cause.

A key contribution of this thesis lies in its exploration of the relationship between final and efficient causation, which Aristotle does not explicitly articulate but which emerges implicitly across his works. This relationship is characterized by complementarity rather than competition. While the final cause provides the ultimate "why" of phenomena, efficient causation addresses the "how", offering a processual account of the mechanisms through which teleological purposes are realized. This interplay ensures that Aristotle's explanatory framework remains both comprehensive and adaptable, capable of addressing the diversity and complexity of natural phenomena.

This thesis has argued that efficient causation, albeit ontologically posterior, operates in harmony with final causation, ensuring the coherence and continuity of the cosmos. This dual-focus approach enriches Aristotle's teleological framework, allowing it integrate phenomena that seem to fall outside the explanatory scope of final causation.

In Section 1.1, I have shown that Aristotle's discussion in *Physics* II.7 refines his causal framework by demonstrating that while final causation remains the highest explanatory principle in nature, it does not singularly account for all natural occurrences. By distinguishing between essential and accidental causes, Aristotle acknowledges the role of contingency within an otherwise purposively ordered universe. His hierarchical model of explanation accommodates different levels of causal interaction: while the cosmos as a whole is teleologically oriented toward the good, individual natural processes often require an interplay of efficient, material, and formal causes to be adequately explained. In cases of chance and spontaneity, efficient causation takes precedence, ensuring the continuity of causal chains even when purposiveness is not immediately apparent.

Rather than undermining teleology, this model reinforces its coherence by situating contingency within a structured explanatory framework. Thus, Aristotle preserves the intelligibility of nature without reducing it to a rigid teleological determinism, demonstrating that natural philosophy must account for both order and variation within its causal schema.

In Section 1.2, I have established the importance of clarifying Aristotle's final causation to ensure a nuanced understanding of its scope and application. This chapter has laid the groundwork for subsequent analyses by identifying the central role of final causation in Aristotle's system and the necessity of efficient causation to realize the diversity of ends in the different regions of nature.

Section 1.2.1 has analyzed Aristotle's notion of the final cause, with particular attention to its role as both a principle of orientation and an explanatory framework. Through an examination of key passages from *Phys* and *PA*, I have demonstrated how the final cause—expressed as "that for the sake of which"—provides teleological explanations for both natural and artificial phenomena. This section has shown how the final cause unifies processes and structures by attributing purposiveness to natural phenomena, particularly in biological contexts. The final cause explains the orientation and functionality of living beings, illustrating how their parts work together to achieve their natural ends.

Section 1.2.2 has explored the implications of the principle "nature does nothing in vain," which encapsulates Aristotle's teleological worldview. This principle underscores the intrinsic purposefulness of natural phenomena and reinforces the primacy of the final cause. However, this section also addressed the limitations of final causation in certain contexts, such as meteorological events or the behavior of inanimate elements, where teleological explanations may be less immediately apparent. This discussion has set the stage for the subsequent analysis of how efficient causation complements the final cause in Aristotle's system.

In Section 1.3, I have provided an in-depth examination of Aristotle's concept of efficient causation, focusing on its role as the source of motion and change. By analyzing examples from *Metaphysics* and *Physics*, I have shown how efficient causation provides the mechanisms through which potentiality is actualized, linking disparate phenomena through continuous causal chains. This section emphasized the dynamic nature of efficient causation, which operates across various domains to ensure the continuity and coherence of processes within the cosmos.

This chapter has established the foundation for understanding how final and efficient causation, as two complementary explanatory principles, sustain the intelligibility of Aristotle's goal-directed cosmos. While efficient causes account for the mechanisms of change, final causes provide the explanatory framework that makes these processes intelligible by revealing their orientation toward an end. Rather than acting as co-equal forces, final and efficient causes function as two aspects of the same explanatory structure—one answering "why" and the other answering "how." By articulating the distinct roles of these two causes and their interdependence, I have demonstrated that Aristotle's causal framework is not fragmented but integrated, addressing both the purposive and mechanistic dimensions of natural phenomena. While the final cause provides the *why* of natural processes, the efficient cause ensures the *how*, linking diverse phenomena through continuous chains of causation.

In chapter 2, I have examined limitations of final causation in Aristotle's explanation of natural phenomena. This investigation has highlighted the challenges of applying final causation universally across different domains of Aristotle's natural philosophy.

In Section 2.1, I analyzed the role of final causation in Aristotle's cosmology, focusing on its application in *Meta Lambda*. Aristotle conceptualizes the final cause as a teleological principle that unifies the cosmos by directing all motion and processes toward an ultimate purpose. However, while the final cause provides a broad teleological framework, its explanatory reach in cosmology appears to be not without limitations, particularly in addressing the dynamic interconnections among celestial bodies.

Section 2.1.1 has demonstrated that Aristotle's *Meta Lambda* presents the final cause as the foundational principle of the cosmos. By focusing on the Unmoved Mover as the ultimate final cause, Aristotle provides a teleological framework where all motions and processes in the universe are directed toward an ultimate purpose. My analysis of *Lambda* 5–10 has shown that the final cause, epitomized by the Unmoved Mover, functions as a unifying principle not only for celestial motions but also for the hierarchical ordering of all entities within the universe. However, while the Unmoved Mover operates as an overarching teleological principle, the orientation towards its ends requires the initiation and control of processes in the different regions of the cosmos.

Section 2.1.2 has addressed the limitations of final causation in Aristotle's

cosmology, particularly as discussed in *DC*. While final causation functions as an explanatory principle for the natural motions of celestial bodies, its role appears constrained when providing a comprehensive account of their continuous, unchanging movement. Aristotle's framework suggests that mathematical calculations and geometric principles serve as primary tools for explaining celestial motions, while final causation is appealed to where direct observation and computation fall short. Here the Unmoved Mover functions as a final cause, evoking celestial motion as an object of desire. The permanence of celestial motion thus highlights the role of efficient causation as a complementary factor, ensuring cosmic continuity where final causation alone proves insufficient. This sets the stage for exploring efficient causation's role in sustaining Aristotle's unified explanation of the universe.

In Section 2.2, I explored the limitations of final causation in explaining the motion of elements. While Aristotle uses the notion of final causation to describe the natural tendencies of elements—that is, their movement toward their determinate places—the processes through which the natural world is realized are initiated by efficient causation. This section also demonstrated that the explanatory scope of final causation is constrained when addressing the interactions between sublunary and celestial elements, particularly in terms of the continuous transformations and interdependencies observed in the natural world.

Section 2.2.1 has analyzed the limitations of final causation in explaining the motion of sublunary elements. While Aristotle's teleological framework attributes purpose and order to the natural tendencies of the four sublunary elements—earth, water, air, and fire—final causation struggles to account for the dynamic interactions and transformations among these elements. By examining Aristotle's discussions in *Physics* and *Meteorology* I have demonstrated that while final causation offers insights into the end-directed nature of elemental motions, it fails to provide a comprehensive account of the mechanisms underlying these processes. This limitation points to the necessity of efficient causation in explaining the continuous and interconnected transformations that sustain the natural order in the sublunary world.

Section 2.2.2 extended the analysis to the role of final causation in explaining the motion of the celestial element, aether. Aristotle posits aether as the eternal and unchanging substance that constitutes the heavenly spheres, moving in perfect circular motion. However, the application of final causation to aether is

constrained by its unique nature. While the Unmoved Mover serves as the final cause for the motion of the heavens, the explanatory gap lies in detailing how the interactions between aether and the sublunary elements are sustained. My examination has shown that the continuous motion of aether requires efficient causation to account for its interaction with the sublunary elements, particularly in generating heat and influencing meteorological and terrestrial phenomena.

In Section 2.3, I have examined the limitations of final causation in Aristotle's explanation of meteorology. While Aristotle's teleological framework imparts purpose to natural phenomena, its application to meteorological events proves problematic. Meteorological phenomena, such as rainfall, evaporation, and condensation, are primarily explained through material and efficient causes, the role of the final cause being either minimal or entirely absent. This analysis highlights the challenges of integrating phenomena that are seemingly devoid of intrinsic purpose or end into a teleological framework. Through the investigation of Aristotle's *Meteorology* and related treatises, I have argued that the explanation of meteorological events relies heavily on the interplay between celestial motions and the sublunary elements. Aristotle attributes these phenomena to the motion and influence of the heavenly bodies, which act as efficient causes, transferring motion and energy to the sublunary realm. While Aristotle occasionally uses teleological language—such as when discussing rainfall in *Phys* II.8—this does not establish a consistent application of the final cause in meteorological explanations. The analysis in this chapter has further demonstrated that efficient causation plays a critical role in bridging the explanatory gap left by final causation in this domain. For example, the heat generated by the Sun, as an efficient cause, drives the cycles of evaporation and precipitation that sustain meteorological processes. These efficient causal chains connect the celestial and sublunary realms, providing a coherent explanation of how these regions interact dynamically.

In Section 2.4, I turned to Aristotle's biological works, where final causation finds its most effective application. The soul, as the organizing principle of living beings, operates as a final cause, directing the development and functioning of biological entities. However, even in this domain, there are exceptional cases—such as certain processes within reproduction and growth—that resist explanation in terms of final causation.

Section 2.4.1 has shown that Aristotle identifies the soul as the final cause in

his biological framework, emphasizing its role as the organizing principle of living beings. The soul not only provides purpose and direction to biological processes but also serves as the unifying factor that connects the diverse aspects of life. Through an analysis of Aristotle's discussions in *DA* and *PA*, I demonstrated that the soul functions as the ultimate explanatory principle in the biological domain, guiding the growth, reproduction, and activities of living beings. This section established the foundational role of final causation in Aristotle's biology.

Section 2.4.2 explored how the soul, as a final cause, contributes to the unified explanation of living beings and their functions in Aristotle's biology. The analysis focused on the ways in which the soul integrates various faculties and parts of living organisms into a cohesive whole. By examining Aristotle's detailed descriptions of anatomical structures and physiological functions, I argued that the soul ensures the harmonious operation of these components in service of the organism's ultimate purpose: survival and reproduction. This section highlighted Aristotle's successful application of final causation to explain the unity underlying the variety of the natural world.

Section 2.4.3 addressed the limitations of final causation in Aristotle's biological framework. While the soul provides a robust explanatory model for many aspects of life, certain phenomena—such as spontaneous generation and reproductive anomalies—pose challenges to teleological explanations. Some reproductive anomalies, including cases of sterility or malformation, do not easily fit within Aristotle's universal tendency towards the good, as they seem to deviate from nature's goal of producing fully functional and flourishing organisms. My analysis showed that in these cases, Aristotle relies on material and efficient causation to supplement the gaps in the explanatory power of the final cause.

This chapter has demonstrated that while final causation is integral to Aristotle's teleological framework, there are exceptions to its explanatory capacity. The analysis revealed that final causation excels in providing purpose and direction but faces limitations in addressing the mechanisms and dynamics underlying certain natural phenomena.

By exposing the constraints of final causation in cosmology, the motion of elements, meteorology, and biology, this chapter has laid the groundwork for the subsequent investigation into the role of efficient causation. The continuity and coherence of Aristotle's universe cannot be accounted for by final causation as such. Instead, efficient causation, with its focus on the how of motion and change,

constitutes a necessary component of Aristotle's unified explanatory framework. Together, these causes offer a holistic understanding of the cosmos, balancing teleological purpose with dynamic processes working on matter to be actualized in form. This conclusion prepares the way for the analysis in Chapter 3, which will explore the role of efficient causation in ensuring the continuity and coherence of the universe, thereby addressing the gaps identified in the explanatory power of final causation.

In Chapter 3, I have established that efficient causation is indispensable for sustaining the continuity and coherence of Aristotle's cosmos. Across the fields of cosmology, the motion of elements, meteorology, and biology, efficient causation complements final causation by addressing the mechanisms through which motion and change occur.

In Section 3.1, I examined the role of efficient causation in Aristotle's cosmology, focusing on the Unmoved Mover as the primary efficient cause. Through an analysis of *Phys* VIII, I demonstrated how the Unmoved Mover initiates motion without itself being moved, serving as the starting point for continuous efficient causal chains that unify the celestial realm. This investigation revealed that efficient causation ensures the coherence and continuity of celestial motions, providing a dynamic mechanism that complements the teleological order established by the final cause.

Section 3.1.1 has examined the role of the Unmoved Mover as an efficient cause within Aristotle's *Physics*. This analysis demonstrated that the Unmoved Mover serves as the primary source of motion, initiating all movements in the universe without itself being moved. By doing so, the Unmoved Mover provides a foundational basis for continuous efficient causal chains that ensure the interconnectedness of all physical processes in the cosmos. Aristotle's argument in *Phys* VIII emphasizes the necessity of an unmoved, eternal, and actual cause to sustain the coherence of the universe, highlighting the indispensable role of efficient causation in achieving a unified explanation of celestial and terrestrial phenomena.

Section 3.1.2 expanded this investigation to explore the continuous efficient causal chains that originate from the Unmoved Mover and extend through the heavenly bodies. These chains demonstrate the cascading interactions that transmit motion from the outermost celestial sphere to neighboring spheres, eventually influencing the sublunary world. This section illustrated how these

efficient causal chains operate seamlessly, creating a cohesive and interconnected system across different regions of the cosmos. The orderly transmission of motion from the Unmoved Mover through the celestial spheres not only sustains physical processes but also reinforces the unity of Aristotle's cosmological framework.

In Section 3.2, I explored the role of efficient causation in the motion of elements, highlighting the interaction between the celestial element, aether, and the four sublunary elements—earth, water, air, and fire. This analysis underscored the necessity of efficient causation in explaining the movement and interaction of the elements, demonstrating how the heat and motion generated by celestial bodies serve as efficient causes for terrestrial transformations. By connecting celestial and sublunary processes, efficient causation sustains the coherence of the natural world.

Section 3.2.1 examined the interactions between the celestial element (aether) and the four sublunary elements in Aristotle's framework, focusing on the continuity of efficient causal chains. Despite criticisms that aether creates a disconnection between the celestial and sublunary realms, my analysis demonstrated that Aristotle explicitly describes interactions between these realms, particularly through the role of the circular motion of aether. This motion generates heat, which influences the sublunary elements and establishes efficient causal chains that connect the two regions. Through this analysis, I argued that efficient causation bridges the celestial and sublunary spheres, unifying them into a coherent system.

Section 3.2.2 turned to the sublunary realm itself, exploring the efficient causal chains among the four sublunary elements: earth, water, air, and fire. Aristotle's *De Generatione et Corruptione* provided the foundation for understanding how these elements interact in processes of mutual transformation and compound formation. I demonstrated that efficient causation accounts for the dynamic processes through which these elements interact, ensuring the continuity and coherence of the sublunary world. By emphasizing the role of efficient causal chains, this section highlighted how Aristotle's framework integrates the interactions of the sublunary elements into a unified explanatory model.

In Section 3.3, I turned to Aristotle's *Meteorology*, examining how efficient causation accounts for meteorological phenomena. The Sun's heat, as an efficient cause, drives processes such as evaporation, condensation, and precipitation, creating causal chains that link celestial motions with terrestrial weather patterns.

This section emphasized the importance of efficient causation in bridging the explanatory gap between the celestial and sublunary realms, ensuring a unified understanding of meteorological phenomena.

Section 3.3.1 examined the Sun's role as an efficient cause in Aristotle's meteorology, focusing on its contributions to the processes of generation and corruption in the sublunary world. Through the heat it produces, the Sun drives essential transformations such as evaporation, condensation, and precipitation. These processes illustrate how efficient causation bridges celestial and terrestrial phenomena, creating continuous causal chains that sustain the coherence of the sublunary realm. This section highlighted the Sun's pivotal role in maintaining the dynamic continuity of natural processes within Aristotle's framework.

Section 3.3.2 expanded the discussion to explore the continuous efficient causal chains linking the celestial world and the sublunary world in meteorology. By analyzing Aristotle's description of meteorological phenomena, I demonstrated how the motions of the heavenly bodies generate causal chains that directly influence the sublunary elements. This analysis reinforced the view that efficient causation ensures the interconnection and unity of the cosmos by providing mechanistic explanations for natural phenomena that somehow make up for the limitations of final causation in this field.

In Section 3.4, I investigated the role of efficient causation in Aristotle's biology, focusing on the vital heat produced by the Sun. By examining the efficient causal chains from the celestial to the sublunary realms, I demonstrated how efficient causation operates as a unifying principle in Aristotle's biological framework.

Section 3.4.1 analyzed the role of efficient causation in the continuous causal chains linking the celestial world to the generation of living beings in the sublunary realm. This section focused on Aristotle's description of vital heat produced by the Sun, which acts as an efficient cause in the reproduction and sustenance of life. By examining passages where Aristotle posits the Sun as an efficient cause, I demonstrated how celestial influences, such as heat and motion, initiate and sustain life on Earth. This analysis reinforced the idea that efficient causation bridges the celestial and sublunary realms, creating a coherent and interconnected biological framework.

In Section 3.4.2 I expanded on this theme by investigating the role of vital heat within living organisms. Vital heat, as transported by pneuma, ensures the proper

functioning of biological processes, and facilitates reproduction. This section demonstrated how efficient causation operates at a micro level, from the transmission of vital heat through the blood vessels to its generative function in reproduction. By elucidating these mechanisms, I showed that efficient causation ensures the coherence of biological processes, supporting the teleological aims of life and reproduction.

This chapter has also shown how Aristotle's interconnection of efficient causation into his explanatory framework resolves challenges posed by the limitations of final causation. Efficient causation does not compete with final causation but instead complements it, offering a comprehensive understanding of the cosmos that balances purpose and process. The findings of this chapter pave the way for Chapter 4, where the interplay between final and efficient causation will be examined in greater depth. By exploring their commensurability and non-competition, the next chapter will highlight how these two forms of causation collectively contribute to Aristotle's unified explanation of the universe, reinforcing the coherence of his philosophical system.

In Chapter 4, I have explored the intricate relationship between final and efficient causation in Aristotle's philosophy, with the aim of understanding how their interplay establishes a unified explanation of the universe. The chapter was structured into four key sections to address different dimensions of this relationship comprehensively.

In Section 4.1, I investigated the relation between final and efficient causation in Aristotle's *Meteorology* and *De Partibus Animalium*. Through an analysis of *Meteor* I.9, IV.11, IV.12, and *PA* I.1 and *Phys* II.9, I demonstrated how Aristotle's final and efficient causes operate in tandem to account for the mechanisms and purposes of natural phenomena. The analysis revealed that while final causation provides the overarching teleological rationale, efficient causation initiates the various processes through which these aims are realized. This complementarity ensures a cohesive explanatory framework that spans various domains of nature.

Section 4.1.1 examined the relation between final and efficient causation as presented in Aristotle's *Meteorology*. This section focused on natural phenomena such as meteorological events and the formation of minerals, where efficient causation predominantly explains the observable mechanisms, while final causation remains present but implicit. Through the analysis of processes like rainfall, evaporation, and mineral formation, I demonstrated that while efficient

causation provides a mechanistic account of these phenomena, Aristotle's teleological framework subtly persists, linking these processes to broader cosmic purposes. However, I also highlighted the limits of teleology in this domain, especially when natural events like excessive rainfall challenge the sustenance of life.

Section 4.1.2 turned to Aristotle's *De Partibus Animalium*, where final causation assumes a central role in explaining the purposive structures and processes of living organisms, complemented by efficient causes. Here, I analyzed how final causation provides the teleological framework for understanding the function and organization of biological entities, while efficient causation explains the processes through which these purposes are realized.

In Section 4.2, I examined the fundamental role of final causation in Aristotle's unified explanation of the cosmos. Two critical aspects were explored: first, the primacy of final causation as the primary and essential explanatory principle, and second, the way continuous efficient causal chains are directed toward the final cause. This analysis underscored the centrality of the final cause in providing the ultimate purpose toward which all processes in the universe converge, while highlighting its interconnection with efficient causation in maintaining the cosmos's intelligibility and order.

Section 4.2.1 explored Aristotle's view that final causation is the primary and foundational explanatory principle in his philosophy. This section highlighted how the final cause serves as the ultimate rationale for natural processes, establishing their purpose or goal. Through analysis of Aristotle's texts, such as *PA* I.1 and *Phys* II.9, I demonstrated that the final cause is prioritized over efficient causation due to its essential role in defining the end toward which all processes are directed. This priority of the final cause underscores its centrality in Aristotle's teleological framework, forming the cornerstone of his unified explanation of the universe.

Section 4.2.2 examined how efficient causation is directed toward the final cause within Aristotle's explanatory system. By analyzing examples from his biological and cosmological treatises, I demonstrated that continuous efficient causal chains consistently aim at realizing the purposes defined by the final cause. These chains provide the dynamic mechanisms that actualize the teleological ends, ensuring the coherence of Aristotle's universe. This analysis reinforced the complementarity between final and efficient causation, with efficient causes

functioning as instruments to fulfill the purposes outlined by the final cause.

Section 4.3 focused on the role of efficient causation in complementing the teleological framework of the final cause. By bridging gaps in explanation left by final causation, efficient causation sustains the interconnectedness of celestial and sublunary phenomena, reinforcing the unity of Aristotle's cosmos.

In Section 4.4, I explored the commensurability and non-competition between final and efficient causation. The discussion revealed that these two causes are distinct yet mutually reinforcing, operating at different explanatory levels. While final causation provides the ultimate purpose, efficient causation explains the means by which this purpose is achieved. Their interplay exemplifies a harmonious interconnection of teleology and mechanistic approaches, avoiding explanatory conflicts while preserving the coherence of Aristotle's philosophical system.

Hereby we have demonstrated that the relationship between final and efficient causation is pivotal to Aristotle's unified explanation of the universe. Final causation offers the teleological framework that directs natural processes toward their ultimate purposes, while efficient causation ensures their realization by addressing the mechanisms of motion and change. Together, they form a complementary system that integrates purpose and process, ensuring the intelligibility and coherence of Aristotle's cosmos.

By highlighting the vital role of efficient causation within this framework, this thesis provides a new perspective on Aristotle's natural philosophy, reaffirming its relevance to contemporary discussions of causality, unity, and the philosophy of nature.