

Matter and Form

First, formal and final causes are really identical. Formal cause means what a thing is in its essence, it is what it is, or, what Plato called a real Idea. The final cause is the becoming of what it is, or, the end of what it is after the essence of the thing has been actualised or realised. For example, what a chair is in its essence is the formal cause of the dining chair, and, when it has been actually made, then this was the very end towards which the wood was being shaped. Again, the efficient cause means movement, or, becoming by means of the skill and energy put into it. But why is the wood cut and chiselled in a skilful way? Because the final end of a dining chair has to be realised. Hence, it is the final cause or end which guides and regulates the efficient cause. Hence, it is the end or final cause which is the real cause behind the efficient cause. Hence, the final cause is the real cause of becoming and movement in the world. Therefore, we can say that final cause is really the efficient and formal cause too. Thus, the end is the real beginning. The first act in a play is really the beginning of the drama and last scene is the real cause towards which all Acts are driven. Thus, the real cause is the end or teleology for which mechanism is used. This point is clearly seen in the human production of an art, as in painting or sculpture or carpentry. But this is also seen in the functioning of an organism or Nature. An egg has to become a chick. Hence chick is the end towards which the egg-movement is directed. In the same way, there is the end of becoming an oak by virtue of which all the movement in an acorn is directed. Of course in an organism the end is in the organism and this teleology is unconscious. However, the end in the production of a work of art is more or less conscious. Again, this teleology is also found in Nature. Both Plato and Aristotle hold that the perfection of Nature is directed. The Final End is the Idea of the Good for Plato and Actus Purus or the Prime Mover for Aristotle. Hence in the final analysis both Plato and Aristotle agree that the world is guided by some Supreme End, and, this is the real message of Idealism. But what is the final upshot of reducing efficient, formal causes into final causes?

The conclusion of Aristotle is that all the three causes, efficient, formal and final, are really one, and, Aristotle calls this as the Form of the thing. But the material cause cannot be reduced to any kind of cause. So ultimately there are only two things, namely, Form and matter which can explain all movements, becoming and development in the whole world in man, organism and Nature.

By 'matter' is understood ordinarily physical matter like iron, gold, bronze, earth etc. But Aristotle's meaning of matter is much deeper than that. By 'matter, Aristotle understands, that which has no shape, no quality of any type and kind. It is neither red nor green, neither heavy nor light, neither rough nor smooth. Then what is it? It appears to be as good as Nothing. But it cannot be nothing nor 'non-Being, for after all it is something which has to be moulded by the form into Nature, organism and man, i.e., physical matter, life and Conscious Being. Ordinarily we think that a lump of clay in the hands of a potter is without any form. But it is not so. All that one can say, of this lump of clay is that it has no definite form. But because it has no definite form, so it can be formed into a plate or a goblet or a cooking pot. Similarly, primal matter has no form, but it gives way to all things by the form. All that we can say here is that matter without form does not exist, even when it is not non-Being. But it has the potentiality of becoming

anything. Similarly, form is the most important aspect of any existing thing. For example, we value a chair not because it has wood, but because it has the form either of a dining chair or of an office-chair. Hence, the form is the real thing about anything in the world. But form by itself is nothing or we can say that it does not exist. Hence neither matter nor form by itself exists. What exists is formed matter, ie, matter and form together inseparably. A form is the universal. For example, redness or is a universal. But by itself it does not exist, what exists is a green leaf or green grass or green book. But greenness apart from the green things does not greenness exist. Hence neither matter by itself without the form exists, nor the form without matter exists. What exists is an individual thing e.g., a green book or green grass. Greenness is no doubt a universal because it is a common quality in green grass or green things like a green book, or green leaf or green flag. A universal is the "Idea" of Plato. But Plato failed to see that a universal or an Idea by itself does not exist. Only individuals exist, like green grass or green leaves in which universal greenness resides. Hence, matter and form are inseparable. No doubt we can distinguish them in our thought, but we cannot separate them in any actual state of affairs. This is a very important truth one has to grasp, according to Aristotle.

The second reason why 'matter' cannot mean physical matter is that matter is relative to form. A physical matter remains the same e.g., iron remains iron no matter in whichever, shape or size into which it is put. The same thing is true of gold, silver or bronze. Again, by 'form' is not meant mere physical shape. For example, a rectangle remains the same shape, no matter in how many things it is found. But form means much more than shape or size. The reason is that form and matter are relative terms. What is matter in one relation becomes form in another relation. For instance, wood is matter in relation to a chair which may be said to be its form. But the same chair becomes matter, in relation to furniture. Thus the terms 'matter' and 'form' are fluid, just as illustrated in the case of chair. What changes or operates is the form, and, that which is made to change is matter. Matter is what becomes, and, that towards which the movement is made is its form. In the language of W.T. Stace,

What becomes is matter, and, what it becomes is form

What is form in one aspect is matter in a changed situation. For example, wood is matter in relation to the chair, which is its form. But 'wood' is again form in relation to a growing tree. From another stand one can say that matter is bare possibility of becoming its 'various form. For example, 'wood' is the possibility which can be actualised into chair, table, doors or windows. In the same manner, "form" may mean physical shape c.g., shaping the wood into planks. Again, it may mean thought, or, even an object of thought as distinct from sense. It also may mean the plan of the structure of a thing which can be put in the form of a mathematical formula. "Form" also may mean the inner holistic organization e.g., the tendency within a fertilized egg to become a chick. It also may mean the function for which a thing is made e.g., the form of a knife means the function of cutting a thing. also at times means merely the efficient and fine causes together, e.g., the final cause in the production of an art. Thus the concepts of 'matter and form' are fluid and relative.

Potentiality and Actuality

Matter by itself has no form. It is absolutely formless, lawless and purposeless. But it is not non-Being for it becomes anything by the generating principle of form. For example, clay by itself is nothing. But it has the potentiality of becoming either a brick or a goblet or a cooking utensil and so on. Hence, it is something. Aristotle calls it 'potentiality' for it has the capacity of becoming something actual. What makes matter actual? It is the form. The potter by his skill with the idea of a brick and shaping it, forms the indeterminate clay into actual bricks. The illustration of clay and bricks has described the form (as the efficient, formal and final cause) Hence, the form is the principle of actualisation.

Take another example. Greenness is certainly an idea as objective as any quality is, but greenness does not exist. It can be, however, actualized in a green leaf, green books and other green things. What is greenness? Greenness is a universal which is also a form. So a form is the principle of actualisation. Now one can mention the view of Aristotle's predecessors with regard to the explanation of becoming or change or movement.

According to Democritus, change is brought about by mechanical impact of atoms on one another. Plato too held that the Idea of the Good draws all things towards itself and that all things strive after the Ideas which they long to become. This Platonic explanation of striving or becoming is teleological. But the whole Platonic explanation is mythological and unclear. Against his predecessors, Aristotle advances the doctrine of unfoldment. All things are caught up in development, from less developed form to higher developed form. It is the form which leads to unfoldment. Aristotle supported his doctrine of unfoldment by the presence of form in organisms and the working of a man in an artistic or even ordinary production.

In the case of an organism, matter and form potentiality and actuality, work together inseparably. They can be distinguished only in thought but not in actuality. For example, the end of becoming a chick is in a fertilized egg. The fertilized egg has a potentiality of becoming a chick, but it is actualized only when the form a chick actualizes itself in the egg. Here matter is being shaped into an actual chick. The unfoldment is wholly teleological.

In human production the matter and the actualizing form can be seen by somewhat distinguishing and separating them. For example, a potter has the end of making a brick, which impels him to turn potential clay into the actual brick. But it is always the form which is prior to actualization of implicit potentiality. Actuality is prior to potentiality even in time. For example, an actual member

of a species precedes any potential member. This is seen in begetting of one man by another man; in training a musician by another musician. An actual man as an actualized individual man begets another man who previously to his birth was only an individual man. An individual Dasarath alone could produce Rama. Similarly, only an actual musician can train a man to become a musician who before potentially a starting his career as a pupil was at first only potentially a musician. In both cases an actual man or an accomplished musician is prior to a potential man or potential musician as a learner. Again, everything that comes to be, moves towards a principle, eg, an end.

Now actuality is the end. Therefore, actuality is prior to potency. All things in this world, which exist can be arranged in a hierarchical order. For example, individual men come under the species 'man'. Again, the species man comes under the higher class 'animal'. This again is further subsumed under "creature". Let us put the order thus:

Creature

Animal

Man

Individual men

In this graded order, one class may be called matter in relation to the higher order which is its form. But, this higher order itself becomes matter in relation to a still higher order. For example, species 'man' is the form in relation to individual men, and, species 'man' becomes matter in relation to 'animal'. Of course, the existing things in graded classes are all materialised forms, or, formed matter. But they are called higher or lower according to the principle of all-pervasiveness. 'Animal' is said to be higher than 'man', because 'animal' includes not only man, but also cow, horse etc. If we arrange all the classes in a hierarchical order, then we find that at the top is matterless form, Actus purus (pure activity) without any matter or potentiality. At times, Aristotle calls this actus purus God. Now God is all perfect and has nothing which He wishes to realize or desire. It is said to be its own end. It is also called Prime Mover in the sense that it moves everything, but Itself remains unmoved. But at the bottom there is pure potentiality; for it is nothing definite. It is simply wholly indeterminate. It is called primordial matter, formless matter. It is pure potentiality which under the influence of Prime Mover progressively gets actualized from the lower order to higher order, till it reaches the highest order.