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Is Teleology a Philosophical Dead-End?

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Aristotle argued for the theory of teleology through various works, he gives an account of the “highest good”, which is applicable to humans, in his book on ethics, titled *Nicomachean Ethics*. Aristotle also goes over this “highest good” calling it the final cause or end of everything. The final cause is the last cause of Aristotle's four causes. Aristotle goes over the four causes in his work titled *Physics*, “The final cause is something's goal, purpose, or end. It answers the question 'what is it for'”¹. Basically, when something reaches that specific end, it has achieved its goal or purpose. Was teleology a dead end for Aristotle, did he just say “I am done” and quit doing philosophy after he established that all things have an end and purpose? I argue no. A question arises asking if teleology is a philosophical dead end or not? I argue that teleology is not a philosophical dead end, because following Aristotle's reasoning it is a valid theory that is supported by many people throughout history and today. However, understanding of Aristotle and his work of teleology must first be understood.

One must understand what teleology is, as stated above in reference to Aristotle, it is the doctrine that final causes exist among everything, specifically living things and inanimate objects; natural things. In his ethics, Aristotle states that “...the good has rightly been declared to be that at which all things aim.”² It has been established that according to Aristotle all things have an end or goal whatever that may be, and he defined that end as the good however the term good here is relative because everything is not going to have the same ultimate end. This is one reason for why teleology is not a philosophical dead end, even though the theory of the “end” has been established, it has to be further studied to conclude what the ends are according to what. This will be further studied to specify an end for all natural things and of course the question “why?” behind the thing that has the end and ultimate happiness. The “why?” needs to be figured out because one must have a purpose and a reason to fulfill said end. David Roochnik furthers this thought in his book titled *Retrieving the Ancients*.

To fully understand Aristotle's final cause, one must understand his four causes. Roochnik explains a cause to be “...an explanation or an answer to the question 'why?'”³, Roochnik eventually states Aristotle's reasoning for the causes is that, “Aristotle's 'causes' correspond to different kinds of explanation, different ways of fully knowing an object, particularly a natural one. A cause for him is not

1Roochnik, David. *Retrieving the Ancients*. Pg. 177.

2 [Http://classics.mit.edu/Aristotle/nicomachaen.html](http://classics.mit.edu/Aristotle/nicomachaen.html). *Nicomachean Ethics*. Book 1, chapter 1.

3Roochnik, David. *Retrieving the Ancients*. Pg. 177.

a thing; it is a way of answering a question and hence understanding a thing.”⁴ Aristotle's theory “is a deductive theory – it starts with basic principles, and from these the right course of action in a particular situation can be deduced. It is deontological, looking at the intent behind an action and the nature of the act itself, not its outcomes.”⁵ This is an important statement, I argue because it states what exactly Aristotle's theory is. To continue with his causes, Aristotle's four causes are: the material cause, the formal cause, the efficient cause, and the final cause. From this information one can know that Aristotle's causes are specifically there to put reason, purpose, and understanding behind a natural object. I would first like to argue that teleology is not a philosophical dead end, because there are different theories about the causes that support or of reference to Aristotle's work.

Aristotle's four causes are not the say-all, do-all of the universe. Aristotle, a student of Plato critiqued his work. Plato has a fifth cause, “the pattern...which is not subject to change”⁶, then according to Plato there are five causes, “...material, agent, form, pattern, and purpose.”⁷ Plato's causes are one of the examples of a different theory about the causes. Next, the Stoics criticize both Aristotle and Plato, claiming that “The crowd of causes posited by Aristotle and Plato includes either too many or too few.”⁸ The Stoics claim that Aristotle and Plato should reckon time, place, and motion. Plato's fifth cause and the Stoics critique are examples of how teleology is not a philosophical dead end because; they are examples of how different theorists and philosophers may always be able to critique someone's work. The Stoics argued that there are two general causes which are matter and cause; they entail fire, nature, Zeus, breath, and reason. The Stoic theory of causes is just another example of philosophical critiques, giving evidence of teleology not being a dead end because of the differences. To continue, there is also an obvious, I argue, argument for Aristotle's final cause/end as well.

One could argue against Aristotle's claim, stating that there are lots of goals and ends which result in good, that there is not just one. To respond to this type of argument, I would quote directly from Aristotle's ethics, “Since there are evidently more than one end, and we choose some of these (e.g wealth, flutes and in general instruments) for the sake of something else, clearly not all ends are

4 Roochnik, David. *Retrieving the Ancients*. Pg. 177.

5 http://www.rsrevision.com/Alevel/ethics/natural_law/index.htm. *Theory in Detail*.

6 Hadas, Moses. *The Stoic Philosophy of Seneca*. Letter 65, pg 197.

7 Hadas, Moses. *The Stoic Philosophy of Seneca*. Letter 65, pg 197.

8 Ibid.

final ends; but the chief good is evidently something final.”⁹ Here, Aristotle is claiming that, yes there may be many ends however they are only short-term/temporary and there is but one ultimate chief good that will be attained with that final end. It is of my opinion that Aristotle's claim is also relevant to how people view life/nature today.

Today, it is highly debated that everything has a purpose. For humans, it is debated in the realm of religion that everything has its own purpose according to god because that is of course what god made humans for. The author of a book titled, *The Purpose Driven Life*, claims that “You wouldn't know what its purpose is. The only way you'd know the purpose is to either ask the inventor, who made it, the creator, or you read an owner's manual. And I think the same thing's true with us.”¹⁰, us referring to human beings. I argue that another perspective, supporting Aristotle, is coming from a religious standpoint because of how the author is stating that one would have to ask its maker of its purpose, relating to Aristotle's final cause. One more example supporting Aristotle's theory would be a statement from an article about natural law,

Natural Law says that everything has a purpose, and that mankind was made by God with a specific design or objective in mind (although it doesn't require belief in God). It says that this purpose can be known through reason. As a result, fulfilling the purpose of our design is the only 'good' for humans.¹¹ This statement directly supports Aristotle's causes and theory about ends. With these two statements/supporters of Aristotle's theory, I argue that it shows merit in his theory, a theory to be considered as exceptional work. Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274) also supported Aristotle's work, during his time as a saint, again providing merit to Aristotle's theory.

Saint Thomas Aquinas was greatly influenced by Aristotle's work, in the second part of his work titled, *Summa Theologica*, Thomas Aquinas shows a great similarity to Aristotle's theory about everything having a final cause, “Its theme is man's striving after the highest end, which is the blessedness of the *visio beata*. Here Thomas develops his system of ethics, which has its root in Aristotle. In a chain of acts of will man strives for the highest end.”¹² This is another example of Aristotle's work being supported and used, even though St. Aquinas' work isn't as

9 [Http://classics.mit.edu/Aristotle/nicomachaen.html](http://classics.mit.edu/Aristotle/nicomachaen.html). *Nicomachean Ethics*. Book 1, chapter 7.

10 http://articles.cnn.com/2005-03-15/entertainment/cnna.warren_1_reading-purpose-warren?s=PM:SHOWBIZ. Author: *Everything on this Earth has a Purpose*. 2005.

11 http://www.rsrevision.com/Alevel/ethics/natural_law/index.htm. *Theory in Detail*.

12 http://www.rsrevision.com/Alevel/ethics/natural_law/index.htm. *Theory in Detail*.

present in time when compared to the other two examples provided above.

Aristotle's theory of teleology was a dead-end for Saint Thomas Aquinas even though Aquinas still produced many works and believed in Aristotle's theory. Teleology is still supported today, though through different respects, otherwise it would not be taught in institutions among the great works of philosophy. Even if one would challenge Aristotle's theory, following his reasoning it is a valid theory which is worthy of merit throughout the academic realm.

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