# Assessing Elizabeth Anscombe's Theory of Causality

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**Abstract:**

The concept of causality has been investigated for millennia. Different approaches in assessing causality, such as determining purpose or determining sensible proof, make it difficult to compare the major theories and to rank them as best or most credible. This paper addresses the theories of Aristotle, Hume, and Mill before offering Anscombe's theory of causation as the most effective one for those who believe a theory of causation should show some purpose. Anscombe's theory tracks well with Aristotle's teleological structure of causes, and her views on intention play a role in emphasizing motivation and purpose.

**Keywords:** causation, intention, Anscombe, Aristotle, Hume, Mill, teleology

The concept of causality has been pondered and disputed for millennia; thus, it is difficult to settle on any one view as the best. However, to adapt an idea from Aristotle, we can examine the final need for a theory of causality to evaluate more easily those different theories. This paper will address the issue of finding the best theory of causality by first briefly explaining the theories of Aristotle, David Hume, and John Stuart Mill before offering a more extensive description and evaluation of G.E.M. (Elizabeth) Anscombe's work on causality and intentionality. Finally, this paper will argue that Anscombe's theory can be considered the best for those who search for a more human element and interaction in cause and effect than other theories permit.

The first source to consider in established theories of causes is Aristotle, who argues that to know truth, the vocation of the philosopher, one must understand causes (Aristotle 1946, 11). He goes on to describe the four causes (12), and although Aristotle's causes are likely familiar to anyone who has completed an introductory philosophy course, I will describe them here in order to more clearly emphasize the differences between Aristotle's theory and those of Hume and Mill. The first cause is material, described as the most basic matter that makes up something, and one example is the bronze that makes up a statue. The second cause is formal, explained as the form or pattern, and he offers the example of the ratio 2:1 and number as formal causes of the musical octave. The third cause is efficient, denoting the agent by which change begins or ends, and the examples here are fairly general, e.g., the maker is the cause of that which is made. The fourth cause is the final cause, and

*final* here means the end purpose. For what reason does a thing exist or have been initiated? Aristotle says by way of illustration that health is the reason and purpose for walking. The third and fourth forms, and the first two to a lesser degree, highlight the importance of human agency in causation as a human must make a decision and then initiate action or change, and this point will be revisited below when Anscombe's theory is addressed.

In his *Physics*, where he also explains the four causes with the same examples, Aristotle pursues the line of thought further. He claims that the natural philosopher should know all four causes and be prepared to answer "how" and "why" about each one, thus gaining a deeper understanding (Aristotle 1970, 165). He notes that the material and the final causes often coincide because the purpose of a thing is so rarely separated from its make up. Such a relationship can be illustrated by borrowing an example from the *Physics* (165). In going to war, the material cause would include the mustered troops, and the final cause might be to gain an empire. The troops make up the force whose purpose is to conquer others (or to defend a state, but that reason does not appear in this section). It is the human agency, powered by the human motivation, that defines the cohesion of the clauses.

By contrast, many later thinkers do not address human agency in the same way that Aristotle does. For example, David Hume addresses causation in the eighteenth century, and his explanations rarely, if ever, touch on motivation. Those explanations concern themselves primarily with proving causation when correlation might have been a more accurate description. Hume states that there is no internal quality in any object that can convincingly explain why that object and another object appear in some relationship or never appear together (Hume 1964, 376) as if one elicited or prohibited the appearance of the other. Hume questions the assumption that everything in existence must have a cause and asserts, "Accordingly we shall find upon examination, that every demonstration, which has been produc'd for the necessity of a cause, is fallacious and sophistical." (Hume 1964, 381) He then addresses three arguments for cause and finds them all wanting (Hume 1964, 381-83). The first argument relies on the equality of time and place and contends that unless there is a cause fixed in one time and place, the effect in a subsequent one is left unmoored, unable to exist. The second argument suggests that if a thing in existence has no cause, then it must be its own cause. Hume dismisses this argument as relying on the premise that all things in existence must have a cause, so its reasoning is circular. The third argument is similar to the first: anything that is not produced by a cause is produced by nothing; therefore, *nothing* is its cause. The argument continues that because this is impossible, it actually demonstrates that *something* must have been the cause. Hume refutes this argument, beginning with this dismissive introduction, "I believe it will not be necessary to employ many words in showing the weakness of this argument, after what I have said of the foregoing." (Hume 1964, 383) Hume, essentially, uses the same refutation that he did with the second argument. He claims that the third argument also presupposes a cause-effect relationship, but such a relationship cannot be intuitively or demonstrably proven.

Hume next addresses the impressions of memory or senses and the idea of the resulting existence of that "which produces the object of impression or is produc'd by it" (Hume 1964, 385). As he works through the role of impressions through either memory or the senses, he resists labeling any consistent conjunction between actions or objects as cause and effect because there is still no way to prove that one caused the other (Hume 1964, 389). By way of a modern illustration, when runners train for an event, they take into consideration the efficacy of previous preparations. They research what other runners eat before the event and how those runners train in the months leading up to the event in order to have a successful result. They look at their own experiences to see how they felt after eating particular foods at particular times and even wearing particular gear for particular weather. Perhaps resting the day before an event makes most runners feel stronger during the event, or perhaps taking nutrition every five miles helps alleviate cramping. Runners would take the rest and the nutrition as causes of the stronger, cramp-free results. Even though this example focuses on preparations that most people agree matter – unlike, say, wearing the same pair of socks for every race that one wore years ago in winning a race – Hume would be skeptical and insist on finding a *necessary* connection. Hume's approach certainly differs from that of Aristotle, who valorizes the final cause and, likely, would label those preparations as causes to serve the final one of having a successful race.

John Stuart Mill takes a similar tack in questioning the certainty of causation in his *A System of Logic*, taking issue with the generally accepted assumption that events have causes, even though such relationships cannot be identified beyond doubt. Mill's protest is worth quoting here: "To say that belief suffices for its own justification is making opinion the test of opinion; it is denying the existence of any outward standard, the conformity of an opinion to which constitutes its truth." (Mill 2009, 399) In pursuing this line of thought, Mill remarks that the Ancient Greeks, including Aristotle, understood the related concepts of "Chance and Spontaneity" (Mill 2009, 400), so that the physical laws cannot always assure that certain events will consistently bring about other certain events or be consistently produced by still other, earlier events. Mill speaks of the unconditional relationships between apparent causes and effects to include necessary stimuli that are not observed. In the example of the runners above, Mill's theory would account for other factors not readily seen as connections: amount of sleep or airborne allergens and so on. Interestingly, for the purposes of this paper, in critiquing cause and effect, and, in the process, inductive reasoning, Mill practices causation as defined by Aristotle when he says, "[I]f, therefore, we can substitute for the more fallible forms of the process, an operation grounded on the same process in a less fallible form, we shall have effected a very material improvement" (Mill 2009, 401). By investigating the problems with causation based on, and limited by, sensory observation and experience, Mill invokes Aristotle's final cause when he explains *how* and *why* he will perform act A: to bring about result B. It is just this turn which best illustrates the difference between, on the one hand, Hume's and Mill's theories of causation and, on the other, those of Aristotle and, as described below, Anscombe.

Anscombe's landmark essay "Modern Moral Philosophy" serves as a critique of modern moral philosophy because that philosophy lacks an adequate approach to psychology, because the moral sense of "ought" regarding moral obligation no longer fits, and because there are no discernible differences among English moral philosophers since Henry Sidgwick (Anscombe 1958, 1). Although her argument is a wide-ranging one, the second point above is germane to this paper. The moral sense of "ought" illustrates a theory of causation that hearkens back to Aristotle's, even as Anscombe claims that Aristotle is little help in clarifying the current modern English moralists because they all neglect to factor in the quality of immorality as defined by Hebrew-Christian ethic (Anscombe 1958, 10), thereby losing an integral anchor, one that Aristotle cannot explicitly provide. Anscombe evaluates the arguments of consequentialists who define morality as that which would lead to positive consequences, and the criteria for what is positive is that which their contemporary society has deemed so. Thus, the consequentialists learn the standard of morality through observation and experience, and they view causation as the move from one action that can produce positive consequences, even if those positive consequences are positive only to the individual or in some underground society. In my own work, I research studies on academic plagiarism, including studies concerned with why students plagiarize. Students often admit to feeling desperation in completing a difficult writing assignment, or they invoke the standard complaint of a crushing workload at particular points in the academic term. The students who plagiarize under those conditions see the consequence of having completed an assignment and earning course credit toward a degree as sufficient motivation to dismiss their moral sense of doing honest work. Pressure becomes the cause of the dishonest act of cheating.

Anscombe continues her investigation of causation by offering an example of exchanging money for goods (Anscombe 1958, 3-4). In critiquing Hume's philosophy, she begins by suggesting that truth is made up of either relations of ideas or of matters of fact. Relations of ideas can be illustrated with currency exchange rates, and her example is that 20s=£1. Her example of matters of fact describes a service rendered: *A* orders potatoes, and *B* supplies them and sends a bill. But Anscombe then points out that truth, as those two descriptions limit it, does not include the *owing* of money for the potatoes. She says that the owing is "brute relative to" the above descriptions, which also spawn other brute relations, such as the potatoes were delivered in a certain manner and the buyer has the money to pay for them. For the delivery of potatoes to be considered a cause of paying the money depends on the concept of owing and, further, on the idea of *ought*. While Hume's and Mill's theories of causation neglect this moral aspect in favor of a more physical, natural approach, Anscombe sees the need to factor in this human agency. We can surmise, then, that if *A* wants groceries delivered and wants to avoid the censure of the local merchants, *A* will pay *B* the socially agreed upon price for the produce. Such would be morality rooted in social norms but connected on a deeper level with an absolute sense of morality, which is what Anscombe wants to feature. Her view is similar to Aristotle's because it does focus on the importance of the final cause, although

Aristotle did not base his causation on moral reasons. Such a base is made possible, according to Anscombe, through the influence of Christianity (Anscombe 1958, 5).

Anscombe's theory of causation can be seen, to some extent, in her book *Intention*. In differentiating between acts that are intentional and those that are not, Anscombe says that we can ask why such an action was initiated, and the response should, by design, reveal the reason for acting (Anscombe 1963, 9). Such a question, once again, leads back to Aristotle's final cause as the motivation for actions, once more highlighting the human agency and reasoning. In fact, in her careful examination of the various shades of meaning of the word *intention*, Anscombe offers examples of cause and effect that do not reflect completely human interaction – such as predicting an eclipse based on evidence – but she dismisses that kind of intention for more interesting work: "[A]n answer to the question 'Why?' which does not give reason for thinking the thing true does not, *therefore*, give a reason for acting. It may mention a cause, and this is far from what we want [emphasis in the original]" (Anscombe 1963, 15). She continues with deeper analysis of causation that requires human agency, even when there is some misunderstanding. In this regard, Anscombe describes mental causes, and these can trigger actions, but also feelings and thoughts (Anscombe 1963, 16). Her example of the former is that certain music can excite a person and cause that person to walk about. Her example of the latter is more detailed. A child sees something red just barely in sight and is afraid because he is told it is a bit of Satan. He quite likely misheard the word *satin*, but his mishearing and his knowledge of Satan combine into a mental cause, the source of the consequent fear. Immediately after the example, Anscombe recognizes that her theory of causation differs from Hume's, so much so that it might not be considered as an example of causality. However, Anscombe has a different end in mind, so her theory of causality will branch down a different path than did Hume's.

Moreover, Anscombe distinguishes between motives and intentions, and this distinction is important to her theory of causality (Anscombe 1963, 18-19). She says, "A man's intention is *what* he aims at or chooses; his motive is what determines the aim or choice; and I suppose that 'determines' is another work for 'causes.' [emphasis in the original]." (Anscombe 1963, 19) In looking again at the idea of plagiarism as described above, it is the combined pressures of time and responsibility that cause, or motivate, some students to plagiarize in order to meet their deadline obligations and academic obligations. Students in this scenario would engage in what most or all universities consider an unethical act in order to avoid negative consequences to their academic record. What determines the aim or choice, of course, answers the question *why*. This idea of causality reflects Aristotle's in reaching the final cause because of highest import in determining cause is finding the reason for a stimulus.

Deciding which theory of causation is the best is a difficult task because the purpose of determining the best theory defines the criteria. One might dismiss such a claim as begging the question: This paper whose purpose is to show which theory of causation is best has determined that a theory which shows purpose is best. However, such a reason resonates with Aristotle's teleological

theory of causation because it requires one to ask why, pointing to the final cause. Aristotle's theory also involves human choice and activity, and Anscombe's theory extends his by working through the intricacies of motive and intention before pointing to the final purpose – the why – as the primary aspect of a theory of causation. There being no objective standard for assessing which theory is best, we can only return, then, to the claim made in the opening paragraph: Anscombe's theory can be considered the best for those who search for a more human element and interaction in cause and effect than other theories permit.

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