

What is Philosophy?  
**Making Sense of the World:  
Cause & Explanation**

Merlin CCC, February 2021

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“Son of Klinias, I think that you are wondering...”

– Plato, *Alcibiades* (103a).

“Wonder is the beginning of philosophy. For once we wonder ‘that it is,’ we move on to ‘why it is,’ and **this is philosophy**: to express the causes of things —assuming that philosophy is the knowledge of beings insofar as they exist.”

– Olympiodorus, *Commentary on the Alcibiades*, Lecture 3.

# The Five Causes


**Final Cause:** that for the sake of which.

**Paradigmatic Cause:** that in relation to which.

**Efficient Cause:** that by which.

**Formal Cause:** that in which.

**Material Cause:** that from which.



Why?



**Because!**

# Five Causes... of a Statue

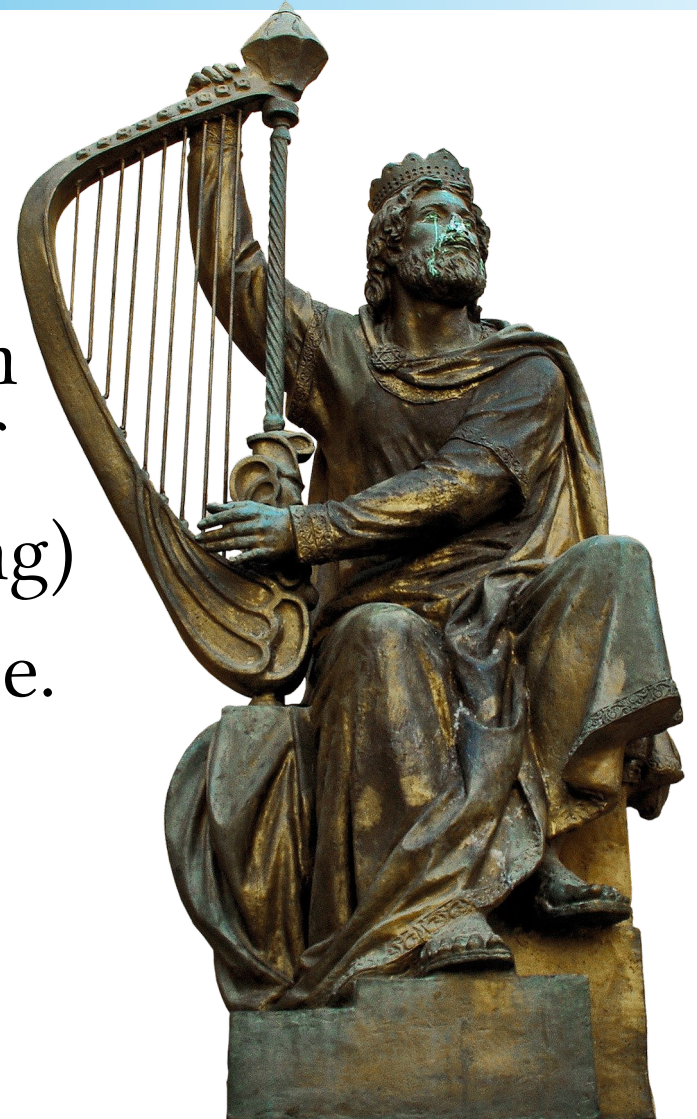
**Final Cause:** its purpose.

**Paradigmatic Cause:** the model.

**Efficient Cause:** the craftsman  
(or, the act of  
bronze-casting)

**Formal Cause:** its form/shape.

**Material Cause:** (the) bronze.



# Five Causes... of a House

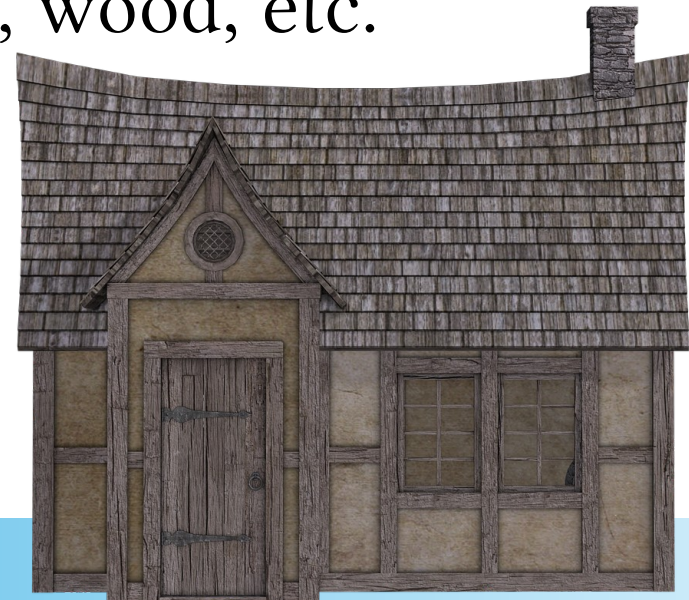
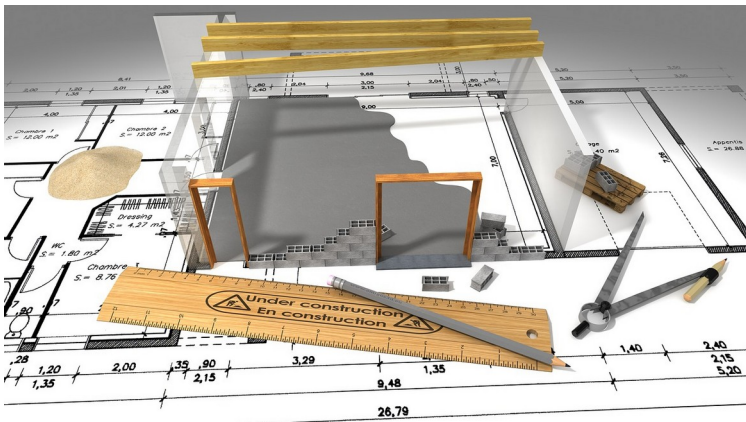
**Final Cause:** shelter, etc.

**Paradigmatic Cause:** the (mental) “blueprint.”

**Efficient Cause:** the carpenter  
(or, the act of building)

**Formal Cause:** the arrangement of parts.

**Material Cause:** the bricks, wood, etc.



Not (yet) a house...

# Still a House?

Sometimes, the form falls short of the paradigm...



# Five Causes... of a Heart

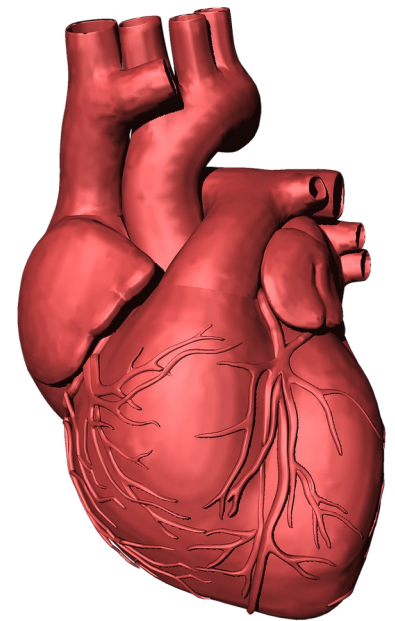
**Final Cause:** circulating blood.

**Paradigmatic Cause:** an ideal configuration.

**Efficient Cause:**

**Formal Cause:** its form/shape.

**Material Cause:** the cells, tissues, etc.



# Five Causes... of a Human Being

**Final Cause:** the human good.

**Paradigmatic Cause:** an ideal paradigm.

**Efficient Cause:** human parents.

**Formal Cause:** a soul (principle of self-motion & self-organization).

**Material Cause:** various constituent parts.



# Five Causes... of the Cosmos

**Final Cause:** Goodness/“the Good.”

**Paradigmatic Cause:** divine ideas.

**Efficient Cause:** the Demiurge (“craftsman”)  
(whose activity is inseparable  
from himself)

**Formal Cause:** the World-Soul (principle of  
self-motion & self-organization)

**Material Cause:** matter.

(on a basic reading of Plato’s *Timaeus*)

# Six Causes... of a Platonic Dialogue

- Final Cause:** the good.  
**Paradigmatic Cause:** the problem.  
**Efficient Cause:** the soul.  
**Instrumental Cause:** the arguments.  
**Formal Cause:** its style.  
**Material Cause:** characters  
and setting.



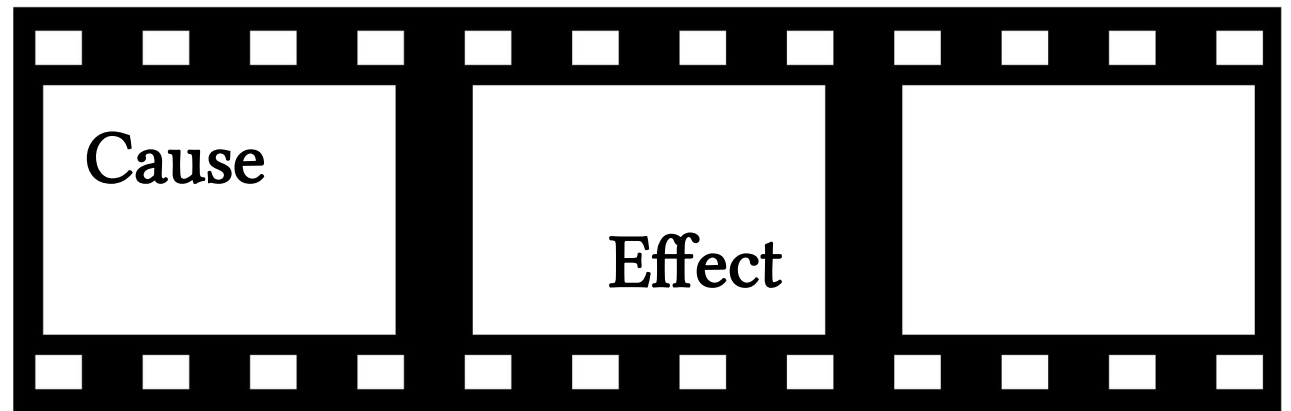
(according to the Anonymous *Prolegomena to Platonic Philosophy*)

# Synchronic vs. Diachronic

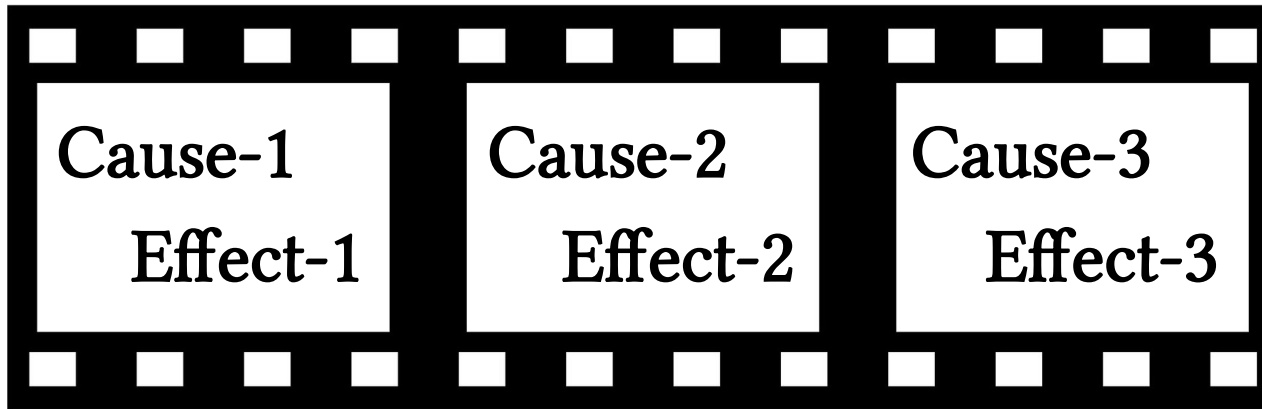


Synchronic: at the same time

Diachronic: across time(s)

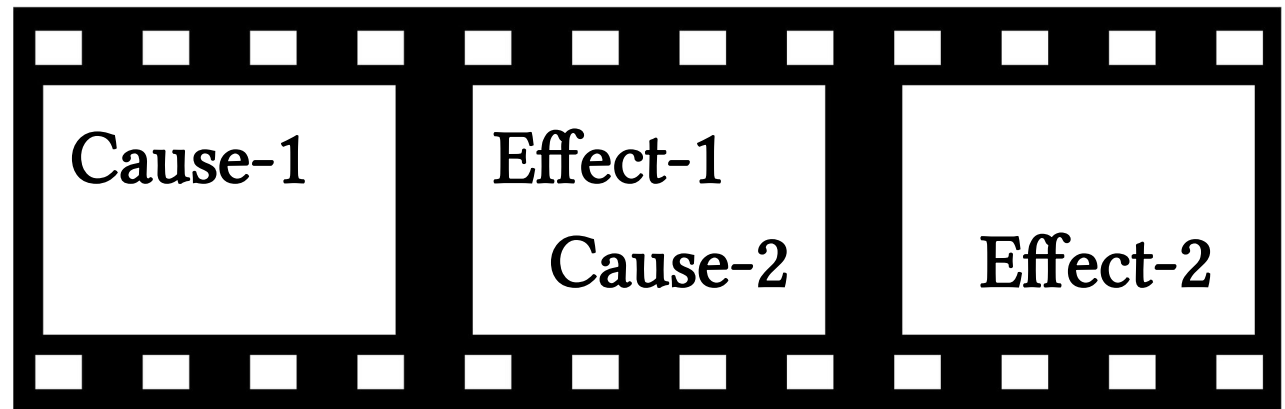


# Synchronic vs. Diachronic



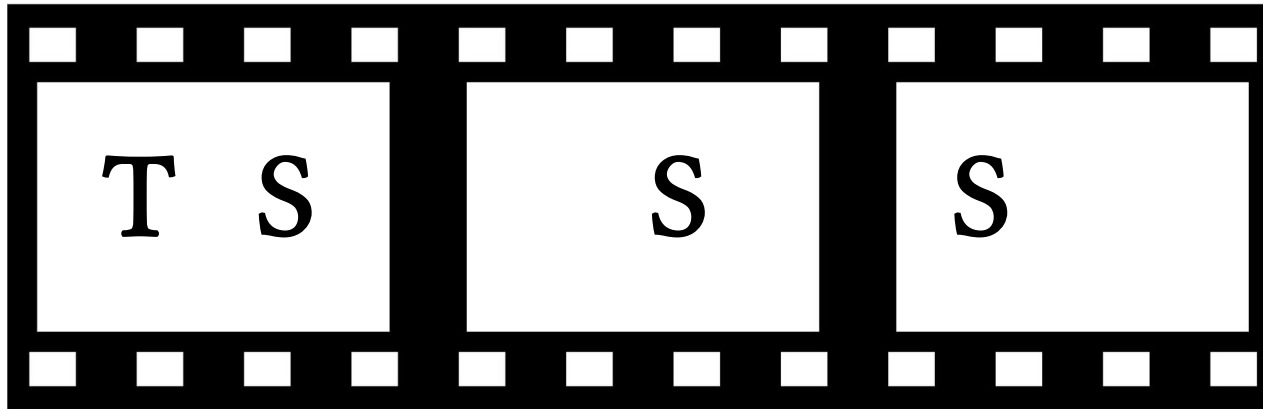
Synchronic: at the same time

Diachronic: across time(s)



# Temporal vs. Eternal

E



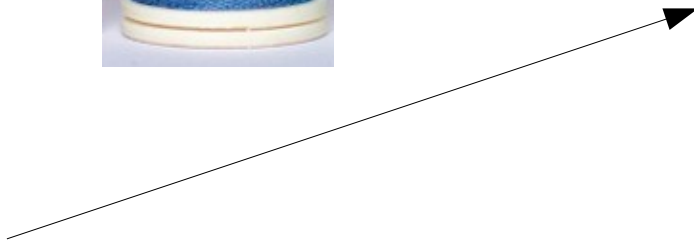
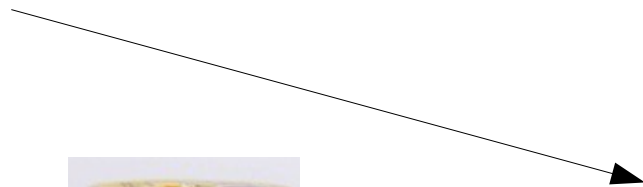
- Temporal: within the flow of time; in some/all frames.
- Sempiternal: at all times; in every frame.
- Eternal (in the strict sense): outside of time; not in the frames.

# The Five Causes: Time & Eternity

Final Cause: }  
Paradigmatic Cause: } eternal (*outside of time*).  
Efficient Cause: – pivot between time & eternity.  
Formal Cause: }  
Material Cause: } temporal & synchronic.

# Inherence Causes

- The parts are the causes of the whole.



# Inherence Causes

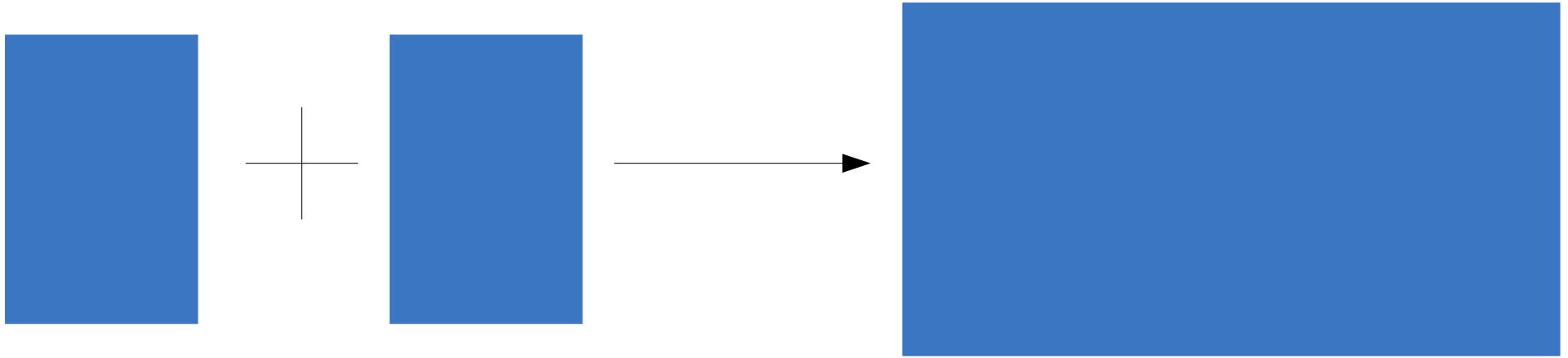
- The substance is the cause of its properties.  
(It needs to be there “first!”)





# Non-Inherence Causes

- Properties of the parts cause the properties of the whole.



# Credits

- The quotation from Olympiodorus is from *Olympiodorus, Life of Plato and On Plato First Alcibiades 1–9*, translated by Michael Griffin (Bloomsbury, 2016), slightly modified.

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