Chapter Eight
Aristotle on Sleep, Dreams, and Final Causes
by David Gallop

'It only shows what Nature is, sir,' said Mr. Squeers. 'She's a rum 'un is Natur.'
Charles Dickens
Nicholas Nickleby, ch. 45

I: Sleep, Dreams, and Final Causes
In this paper I approach an old subject from a new direction. As is well known, Aristotle gives great prominence, in both his biological and his philosophical writings, to the sort of explanatory factor traditionally called a 'final cause.' This is the factor

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1. I shall use this expression only for brevity and when there is no risk of misunderstanding. I share the many discontents that have been voiced over using 'cause' to render aitia. In particular, it seems to be part of our concept of a cause (a) that it should not come about after that which it is said to cause; and (b) that it should be something that actually does come about or exist in rerum natura. We do not happily countenance what Annas (1982, p. 319) has called 'ghostly causal tugs from the future.' Nor do we readily allow still ghostlier tugs exerted by goals that remain unrealized, because the relevant actions fail to achieve them: as, for example, when a man takes a walk so that his bowels may move, yet in vain (Phys. 197b23-28; and—for failures in nature of a different sort, Phys. 199a32-b26).

Barnes (1982, p. 55) says that 'Aristotle explicitly recognises that final causes follow their effects, and he implicitly acknowledges cases in which a final cause is effective but non-existent—neither point struck him as strange.' But if so, then his concept of an aitia was not 'our' concept of a cause. The closest we ever come to using 'cause' in a 'final' sense is when we speak of a human agent acting for (or in) a good cause, e.g. peace. In this use the action can quite naturally be thought of as preceding the 'cause,' and it is not implied that the 'cause' is actually attained. But this faint relic in English of Latin idiom (pacis causa) would not justify our saying that peace was a cause of (or caused) the action. We would certainly not say such things, whether or not peace was actually attained. (Cont.)
invoked in explanations of the form 'X is for the sake of Y', or 'X occurs in order that Y may occur', where Y is represented as the end or goal or purpose of X. When Y serves as an explanans and X as an explanandum, the relationship between them is often expressed in Greek by the preposition ἐνέκα. The explanans is referred to as the οὗ ἐνέκα, the 'that for the sake of which.' And it is sometimes said that the οὗ ἐνέκα necessitates that which it explains. That is, given the end or goal specified in the words governed by the preposition, there must be an object or event or process of the sort specified in the explanandum.2 Accordingly, we understand the explanandum, once we understand what end or goal necessitates it, what purpose it serves, what function it performs, or (as we simply say in English) what it is for.

Such explanations are, of course, extremely common, and range over a vast field of objects and happenings. They are in order when we seek to understand intentional human actions, or man-made objects such as furniture, tools, or weapons. We explain an action, typically, by saying what the agent intended to achieve, i.e. by specifying the end or goal to which the action was conceived as a means. The agent slimmed or took a walk for the sake of his health. And man-made objects are typically understood, defined, sometimes even named, by reference to what they are for. We say what a gun, a saw, a lawn-mower, or a pencil-sharpener is, by saying what job it was designed and made to do.

But in Aristotle, human conduct and artefacts are not the only things admitting explanations of that sort. Final causes are also found in nature, especially in the animal and vegetable world, and still more especially in explaining the parts of an animal or a plant. These are explained by showing, often in impressive detail,

The trouble with 'explanation' or 'reason' as translations of aitia is that they can often be construed linguistically, as something 'given' by a particular human speaker, rather than as an existent item or factor in rerum natura that actually accounts for the event or state of affairs in question; whereas Aristotle's aitia is something of the latter sort rather than the former. Perhaps the best suggestion is 'explanatory factor,' used by e.g. Ackrill 1981, p. 36. See also Charlton 1970, pp. 98-104; Gallop 1975, pp. 170-171; Hocutt 1974, and the excellent remarks of Fine 1987, pp. 69-76.

2. Phys. 2.9; PA 639b21-640a10; 642a1-13; DS 455b25-28; GC 337b14-33.