

Formal Cause: A Philosophical Approach in Marshall McLuhan

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Throughout this chapter I will make an analysis of the formal cause in the media theory of Marshall McLuhan from philosophical categories; through this we will have a better understanding about the media and its impact in the society and the man.

For it, I will establish the bases of the tetra-causal theory, because this is the origin of the formal cause from the author of the same: Aristotle, whom with this theory tries to give an explanation of the reality, for him, the reality implied to understand both; man and the world in which he develops since both are totally connected by common laws which are discovered in a deep analysis, same that must be carried out from the study of the four causes.

Later, I will make an analysis of the formal cause in Marshall McLuhan since this is a key concept to give explanation of the media impact in the individual and the society. This media theory is reflected more clearly in its famous phrase: “the Media is the Message” because the greater impact on the individual is on the part of the form (as he will refer about media in some writings) or media more than of the contained matter that is to say, the message.

Thus I will begin with Aristotle who was a Greek philosopher born in Stagira towards the 384/383 b. C., their father Nicomachus, were an excellent doctor who was to the service of Amyntas king of Macedon (father of Philip of Macedon). It is known with certainty that to the eighteen years, orphan already, traveled to Athens and entered the Academy of Plato in whom it remained by twenty years. There, he matured his thought and consolidated his own philosophical vocation. At this time he caught the essence of the platonic principles and defended them through some writings. To the death of Plato, Aristotle leaves the Academy to later found his own school in Athens known as the Lyceum. Aristotle taught diverse philosophical disciplines and also he dedicated himself to the investigation around natural sciences. In the 323 b. C. leaves Athens by political reasons exiling itself in Chalcis. He passes away in the 322 b. C. after some months of exile.

Aristotle has great importance in the history of the philosophy by the wealth in the number of his texts, esoteric in his majority, the content and the deep reflection he makes in each of them. It is also important to say, that his work's unit is around key concepts which are important for the understanding of the reality; among them the theory of the four causes, since it is fundamental to analyze and to understand the relation of the man and the society and everything what surrounds them.

Aristotle worries in the first place, to make a study of everything what is perceived by the senses to understand his “being” as such. For that reason he says, that to know reality, it is necessary to know its causes, which are divided in four mainly: material, formal, efficient and final. Although for this work the cause that interests is the formal one, it is necessary to make an analysis of the rest of the causes to understand and to distinguish each of one and to be able to understand in a better way the McLuhan's media theory.

Aristotle begins the study from his work the *Physics*, because in it, he concentrates more in the explanation of the reality and in particular of those beings who have own movement in themselves¹. Since the intention of the *Physics* is to make a detailed study of the reality, Aristotle affirms that any study in this way must be done from the most evident for us to least evident, that is to say, we must begin for that which appears to us in the first place and then deep inside to get to the cause of it.

¹ Aristotle talks about to the alive beings then according to its theory, the animated beings own movement in themselves, that is to say live. However the beings who do not own movement in themselves are the inanimate beings, because these need an external force to move.

This implies that to know the cause of “something”, first we must know that “something” that is what it appears to us as more evident. This is enough in agreement with the theory of McLuhan, because his starting point is what it shows to us like more evident: the change in the society and the diversity of media after this, McLuhan realizes that the answer for both is the media itself.

Also, Aristotle affirms that the causes give the explanation of everything in the reality; the question is to determine the number and which are them, then we can distinguish them in each being. According to his theory, we can find at least four causes:

1) In a sense “cause” is called to that one from which something existing is generated, for example the bronze of the statue, silver of the glass, and to the sorts of these². This first meaning, has to do with the material, since in the definition that Aristotle gives us, mentions that it is that one “from which something is generated”, in the case of the statue, the bronze is the material cause, because is the matter which it is done. Without the bronze there would not be bronze statue, for that reason this is one of his causes. In the case of the society, the material cause would be the men because it is what constitutes it materially and without men there would not be human society.

2) Later, Aristotle refers a second type of cause in objects: “In another sense “cause” is called to the form or species (*εἶδος*) and to the paradigm (*παράδειγμα*), that is to say, to the definition of the essence and its sorts (like in the eighth relation of two to one, and the number generally) and to the parts of the definition³”. Here Aristotle speaks of a second cause related with two different aspects; one is the form, that is to say the essence (what it causes that the things are what they are) of the object of which is spoken and that is expressed with the definition, in our example, must be the definition of the statue; and the other aspect is the paradigm or the figure of the statue. We could say then, that its formal cause is to be a sculpture representing something as imitation of the natural, since this definition takes what is necessary in it to be what it is. This is something extremely important in the *Aristotelian* theory of the causes, since the formal cause has to do with, what it causes that the things are what they are, for that reason if the formal cause is lost, the being will stop being what it is to become another thing. In this sense, for the tetra-causal theory, the formal cause is the most important of all, because it shows the essence of the things.

Finally, about this cause, it is important to indicate its intrinsic relation with the matter that composes the being, since the formal cause to show the essence of the things, supposes the existence of the matter in them. Thus when we refer to the statue, the same name refers us a substrate, in the example that we have used would be the bronze, without him we could not have statue or essence or formal cause.

3) Following of cause indicated by Aristotle, it is the efficient cause, this is, that one of where the first beginning comes from the change or the rest, for example: the advisor is cause of something, the father of the son, and generally and generally what makes of what is made and what causes change of what is changed⁴. This type of cause has to do with something external of the subject that takes it to move or to change somehow. In addition, he does not belong of own way to the being, because by his own nature one does not move towards it, but is modified externally. The example of the statue, the bronze naturally is not transformed into statue, but it needs a sculptor that moves it towards this certain form. In order to give a more detailed explanation around this type of cause, I will talk about Thomas Aquinas commentary to the Aristotelian Physics. Marshall McLuhan is nearer to this Thomas Aquinas theory due to his contact with different *neothomistic* authors from his time. If we understand this, we can comprehend his theory about the media.

For Thomas of Aquinas, the efficient cause has to do with four main senses⁵:

a) Perfecting cause. It is that which gives fulfillment to motion or mutation, as that which introduces the substantial form in generation (the moment of birth). This means, that although the subject or being about which ,we speak, exists already; the movement of its nature (matter and forms) takes it to be what it is, the external agent moves it to that nature by “generating” a modified substance artificially .

²*Physics*, 194b 24-26

³*Physics*, 194b 26-29

⁴*Physics*, 194b 29-32

⁵ AQUINO Tomás, *Comentario a la Física de Aristóteles*, EUNSA, Madrid 2001, p. 150

And it is a “modified substance” because its nature would have never led to such transformation. Nevertheless, for Aquinas it is perfective because by modifying the being, a type of artificial perfection is given to itself, different from -that is to say, the natural one, either accidental or substantial. The accidental perfection refers to a modification in some of the qualities of the subject, for example, if we say that “Socrates is a musician”, the quality making Socrates perfect is the musical quality. The other type of perfection about which Aquinas speaks is the substantial one, here he does not talk about accidental characteristics in the subject, but to its same substance, for example, “the bronze statue”, the bronze is perfected here by the “form” of the statue and from it, it has a different definition from the fact from being only bronze.

b) Preparative or disposing. It's what prepares or subject matter⁶ for the add last. According to this definition, matter, ie change the substrate is passive with respect to changes or modifications will be made of it, the efficient cause is the reason that updates active passivity of matter or moves to action. This implies two things mentioned by Aquinas, on the one hand or the subject matter are prepared for the change that made the efficient cause and on the other, are disposed towards certain purposes according to their nature, ie, according to its form.

c) Assisting. It is that which does not operate for its own proper end, but for the end of another. The efficient cause moves to be not necessarily to its natural end, as this is typical of the manner determined to matter and makes being possesses a particular essence, but rather, it moves to a different purpose. While the nature of being is willing to an end "necessarily" also "it has" around a multiplicity of purposes, for example, wood is naturally wood but also the nature of the wood being willing to be moved by the carpenter to be a chair or a table, etc.. Thus Aquinas says that the efficient cause does not operate to its own end (naturally) but the end of another (the carpenter in this example).

d) Advising causes. In that they build by intention, it is what it gives the agent the form by which builds. Then the voluntary agent work by its knowledge, which is provided to him by the advisor; in the natural things he also says themselves that who he generates moves the heavy or light bodies, as soon as gives the form by which they move. In this sense, Aquinas sample that the efficient cause moves according to the form that the agent conceives. In the example of the wood and the carpenter; this one conceives the form (of chair) that it will give to the matter (wood). This in the case of the things that do not have knowledge. In the case of the beings who know, they move by the advice of whom it generated this knowledge, that is to say, the efficient cause of the carpenter would be that one who showed to him what is the carpentry, because from his advice it moved towards this office. This way, “the matter of the subject with the form of the agent conciliates”. The last sense of cause according to Aristotle, is the final cause, that is to say, the intention, as for example the intention of the stroll is the health; why take a walk does somebody? We affirm: “to be healthy”, and thus speaking we create to have indicated the cause⁷.

This type of aim, implies the essence, because he is from her that we can know what the being is and towards where goes. In the case of the man, the fact of “being man”, it implies that its final cause is the happiness, according to Aristotle. In the case of the artificial beings, the man is the one that it gives its purpose them with base in its essence; in the case of the example of the chair, since the carpenter decided that the wood would have a chair form, the purpose of this being is that people feel in her. Also the craftsman could also modify his essence doing it with his aim. For Thomas of Aquinas, the explanation of this sense is evident because it responds to the question of why: when we asked why it walks, tenth: in order to heal; and saying this we considered to have given the cause. Thus test better than the aim is so cause as the other, because it seemed less to be it, since the aim is last of the generation⁸. With respect to this last sense it is necessary to even clarify, that the final cause not only talks about to the “last aim”, but to the intermediate aims; then all aim is the latest not in absolute terms, but with respect to something⁹. Once described each one of the causes, Aristotle indicates a reduction of the same and affirms that the essence (formal cause) and the intention (final cause) is a single, and the first source of the change is equal to these in the species¹⁰.

⁶With this term I talk about to the matter compound and forms in this case.

⁷*Physics*, 194b 32-35

⁸ AQUINO Tomás, *Comentario a la Física de Aristóteles*, EUNSA, Madrid 2001, p. 150

⁹ AQUINO Tomás, *Comentario a la Física de Aristóteles*, EUNSA, Madrid 2001, p. 150

¹⁰*Physics*, 198a 25-27

This is evident since the form of the being “determines” what that being is, and such determination indicates the purpose towards which it is directed. If we thought about a man and we identified at least these two causes we can say that, its essence or formal cause is “to be man” therefore, its purpose is to arrive at the happiness (in Aristotelian terms) and it comes dice by the nature that is in him. On the other hand Thomas of Aquinas indicates that the three last causes can be reduced to one: the formal cause, since they are act; however the material cause, is not of the same species nor of the same sort that the other causes because the matter, as soon as so, is being in power; since it needs the form to somehow arrive “to be”, meanwhile, is a certain one not to be¹¹.

To which there is to say, that although is certain can have certain reduction by similarity in some aspect of each one of the causes, this does not imply that one is just like the other, because the classification given by Aristotle sample that each of them has an intention in the being of a way different being each one of the four causes from the same. Now I will talk about to the concept of formal cause in Marshall McLuhan, one of the most important theoreticians of the communication of century XX by the influence that has exerted in the science of the communication, not only by the depth of its analyses but by the genius in the treatment of the same. Thanks to him, the investigations have returned their eyes in means, because McLuhan showed how the means are more important that the message that is sent, with its famous phrase: “the means are message” and in this way occurs part-waters in the studies of communication, sociology, philosophy and any branch to which it interests the development to him of the man.

It is important to stand out, some influences that took to him to relate their theory of means to the Aristotelian causal theory, and in this way I talk about to its stay in the University of St Louis in 1937 when it began to work as professor in the department of English and directed the thesis of masters of Walter Ong and began to become familiar with the philosophy of Thomas of Aquinas in such a way that later *thomist* would be considered to itself. Thus, between their more important influences around this philosophy are some *neothomist* like J. Owens, Etienne Gilson, Jacques Maritain among others. This will be seen from the reference that makes of them in diverse writings as well as personal letters between both:

“Only yesterday I was reading a chapter on “Judgment and Truth in Aquinas” by my friend, Fr. Owens, here at the Medieval Institute. He concludes: “They involve the traditional Aristotelian view that the cognitive agent is and becomes the thing known (...) Its structure comes from the thing known, and not from any apriori in the intellect”. (...) It turns out then, that my communication theory is *Thomistic* to the core. It has the further advantage of being able to explain Aquinas and Aristotle in modern terms. We are the content of anything we use, if only because these things are extensions of ourselves. The meaning of the pencil, or the chair I use is the interplay between me and these things. Again, the message of these things is the sum of the changes that result from their social use. Thus, I have added two features to “the medium is the message”, namely the content and the meaning¹²”.

These references show the deep reflections to us that McLuhan around the society and average as well as the interest in the old philosophy did, especially Aristotelian and its relation with the medieval philosophy, in strict sense, the one of Thomas of Aquinas.

Later Marshall McLuhan worked in the Assumption College in Windsor, Ontario and finally he worked in the faculty of St. Michael's College, in the University of Toronto the rest of his academic race with the exception of a year (1967-1968) that was in Fordham University. The decade of 1950, when it worked like educational in the University of Toronto, it made contact with Harold Innis, a political economist who later directed his efforts to subjects of communication in his race and that influenced in McLuhan to focus in means.

¹¹ To understand what is the matter in Aristotelian theory, which we must do is to remove each one of the attributes of a thing; like the size, the form, the amount, etc. That which is left us after the removal it is the matter, the substrate that maintains to each one of the attributes. But, without attributes, what is the matter?, a “pure” indetermination, so, it seems that this cannot persist, since there is anything to determines it. For Aristotle, which “remains”, if there is the matter, is pure indetermination, or, a certain not being which cannot not-being because this will be nothingness and it would not be arranged to receive the form, because is indeterminate, is pure potentiality. Some other problems around this idea are indicated by David Bostock in *Metaphysics* books Z and H, p. 77.

¹²Cfr. McLUHAN Marshall, McLUHAN Eric, *Media and Formal Cause*, NeoPoiesis Press, Texas 2011, p. 6

Although he is certain Marshall McLuhan had influence of great thinkers of its time, he is also opportune to say that it knew separated what it did not consider coherent in the theory, as we see in the previous appointment. Also, it knew to synthesize the acquired knowledge of his predecessors to develop one new theory that would take it to be an Average Guru or Oracle of the Electronic Age, according to its near and expert disciples the more in communication subjects¹³.

With their theory, M. McLuhan shows the importance media have in society, for the development and behavior of man who composes it. They go inside everything what we do, are in the world and are part of our lives, for this reason, she has a very clear interest around the way of being of the mass media and mainly of the influence that cause in the man. McLuhan, sees means not like tools that are used of different ways, but like part of our environment then, in each situation in which we are we were with the influence of means. Although often they vanish in the atmosphere, because frequently they are invisible to our eyes and in spite of it they influence what we do in such a way that they shape our being.

This way for M. McLuhan, the media diversity conforms our being, because somehow they have to do with our essence, this is evident because the man of the twenty century is not the same that fifth and this, show us the technological influence which, sometimes causes rational progress or changes in the essence of men. In this sense, it seems that “we are other men” with a same essence, but different in terms of individuals and more specifically of people. It is in this sense that stops McLuhan the mass media are formal cause of the society of its time and all the history, because they modify to the being in a very important part, condition to us. According to Eric McLuhan:

Formal cause is the causality of emergent properties, the causality that media ecologist often have in mind when we consider the impact of technological change on the individuals and societies, on communication, consciousness, and culture¹⁴.

If we analyzed this affirmation from an *Aristotelian* point of view, it does not seem clear that the formal cause is an emergent cause, since for Aristotle the formal cause determines the essence of the thing whereas “it is what is”. This formal cause does not change easily, “does not emerge”, but rather, it is what remains throughout the movement of the being, is what assures that the being throughout the change continues being “what he is”. What it changes, rather, is the accidental thing in him more than the substantial thing that is to say, what it is incumbent on to the form.

For McLuhan, means are “forms” of change, since they determine the information that is transmitted and modify to the emitter and the receiver of essential way, that is to say, are formal cause of the society. Apparently, the election of this type of causality was a restlessness that was solved in a chat with Jacques Maritain. Thus, in a letter between both it comments:

“I am quite aware that nobody has attempted to understand metamorphosis and causality in social institutions through a minute inspection of the sensory and perceptual changes resulting from the new environments. Surely the history of philosophy can never be written without a complete awareness of these matters”.

¹³I’m talking about Lance Strate who has a Communication major as an undergraduate at Cornell University, he earned an MA in Communication at Queens College, and a PhD in Media Ecology from New York University. As a Professor of Communication and Media Studies at Fordham University, he is internationally recognized for his intellectual leadership in the discipline of communication. His scholarship has focused on the development of media ecology as a field of inquiry, with special attention to the work of Marshall McLuhan, Walter Ong, and Neil Postman; on the historical relationship between modes of communication and sociocultural phenomena such as heroes, religion, nationalism, the city, the self, and consciousness; on the impact of new technologies and digital media including online communications and mobile telephony; on media history and futurism; on language and symbolic communication as it relates to media and technology; on communication and autism; on popular culture phenomena including television, film, baseball, masculinity and alcohol, the sense of smell, and science fiction and fantasy. He has served as editor of the Speech Communication Annual, and Explorations in Media Ecology, and is supervisory editor of the media ecology book series published by Hampton Press. Cfr. <http://faculty.fordham.edu/strate/, 7/mayo/2013>

¹⁴Cfr. Lance Strate en McLuhan Marshall, McLuhan Eric, *Media and Formal Cause*, NeoPoiesis Press, LLC., Texas 2011, p. x

To which Maritain responds:

“I am overall agreement with what you have written to me... This, in its way, plays an essential role, which you insist on with good reason. But it does not account for everything. For, there is also formal causality, and I fear that you have not taken sufficient account of its role¹⁵”.

This suggestion, gives answer to the changes that the mass media cause in the society; this because the one is the “form” that forms the matter to constitute a thing; thanks to the form there is a determination of the content, this one only can be communicated insofar as it has means, a form from which can be spread. By the previous thing, M. McLuhan affirms that the mass media must be studied as “forms”, like ways that create new ideas and point at new objectives¹⁶.

However, analyzing the Aristotelian and McLuhanism theories we could say that in principle the objective of both is different, since Aristotle wishes to give an explanation of the reality in itself and for that reason he reveals the theory of the causes then with this one can give an explanation of the different beings and their behavior. This implies that the four Aristotelian causes allow an intrinsic knowledge of the being; we could say that the question that tries to solve Aristotle with its theory is what has in the nature of the being who moves it to act of a certain way? , the answer in this sense is in each one of the causes, but of fundamental way in the formal cause, as we mentioned it previously, since each being owns something in his nature that moves it towards certain aims and it is its essence. McLuhan on the other hand, has interest in giving an explanation to the way to act of a specific being who is the man but not from an intrinsic knowledge of the same, but of the extrinsic causes that move it to conduct any battle or like *póiesis* or *praxis*. Its investigation could respond to the question, what has outside the society that moves it to act of such way? The answer is the means, that are not part essential of the accidental man but that simultaneously, is necessary condition of his “acting” in the world.

In spite of these differences, both agree in that the way to arrive at its objective is with the causal theory. For Aristotle, the fundamental cause that it gives reason of acting of the being, in this case of the man, is the formal cause, because it is the essence of the man, which makes be what is. And as much the material cause, as efficient and the final one, can be reduced to this one. For McLuhan, the explanation around the man, also has to do with the formal cause, but that it is right to justify the importance of this sense can be opposite to the original theory of Aristotle.

However, it would be important to know with foundation in the Aristotelian theory what causal entity type is the mass media in front of the society? In order to respond this questioning, I will make use of the four causes to determine the place, in Aristotelian terms of mass media. In order to make this analysis it is needed a concrete model so that there is more clarity, for that reason I will use like example the language since according to McLuhan all means are in fact a new language. The material cause of this one will be that one of which it is done, then they would be the words and the grammar order that allows that they articulate to form complete ideas. The formal cause of the same will be the system of symbols that is the essence of the same. Without the internal order that owns nor the symbolism, it would not be language. We can see in this case, how the material cause and the formal cause are closely united, since without the matter, the essence would be lost, in the case of this example. On the other hand, the efficient cause that is that one that moves to something towards another thing, will be the individual that articulates the symbols so that they form words and thus the language. In terminology of Aquinas, it can be helping and conciliante, because both have to do in order the agent who goes of the hand with the natural aim.

If we asked ourselves, what is most important in the language? , which of the four causes? , we would say that cause formal it is, since is the one that gives the essence to the being, determines to the matter or it forms it for being what is, more important that what the language, that is to say, the words is contained in, the symbols; it is the form of the same.

¹⁵ Letter directed to Jacques Maritain in May 28 of 1969, which is without publishing. Cfr. McLuhan Marshall, McLuhan Eric, *Media and Formal Cause*, NeoPoiesis Press, Texas 2011, P. 4. Jacques Maritain along with Etienne Gilson, was realising by some time stays of investigation and teaching in the Pontifical for Institute Medieval Studies, that was to little distance of the office of Marshall McLuhan in the campus of St. Michael's College. Their conversations were frequent according to relates it their son Erik McLuhan.

¹⁶McLUHAN Erick, ZINGRONE Frank, *Essential McLuhan*, Anansi, Toronto 1995, p. 187

If we retook now postulate of M. McLuhan of that “means are message”, we could to say that time is Aristotelian of means in contemporary, because indeed the means, the form, are what determines the matter, which is transmitted from the same. Without a container, without a symbol, the language could not occur nor the knowledge could be transmitted, for that reason it is that really it is necessary to put attention to means, the form, more than to the content of the same.

Finally, the final cause of the society would be the common good, because this way the society could only satisfy the incessant search with the man towards its last aim.

Marshall McLuhan has been a revolutionary of its time, what a lot of people did not ever imagine; the development and the importance of the means, the affection that these cause of neuronal way and the impact that they generate in the society. But in addition, like rebel of its time and intellectual; it takes from classic a term fundamental to clarify and to develop his theory, this is, the formal cause. Since according to their theory, the means are those that determine the message that is sent, the one is not the message that concerns but the means that send it, “the medium is the message” and in this way it agrees upon the use of the formal cause like essence of the reality, because she is, to the way of the means, that determine what contains. Thus, according to Strate, the approach of McLuhan to means is partly a class of materialism founded on the physical environmental analysis which includes devices and technologies, besides the analysis of the human body and their extensions. But unlike the dialectic materialism of Marx; McLuhan gives to a grammatical and rhetorical materialism¹⁷, since it gives account of the importance of these effects produced by the means and that they affect thus of “essential” way to the individual and to the society. Although the message is certain comes from means, the configuration of means determines the way in which the message will arrive until us, because this one gives “form” to the information that is sent; to the matter contained in the same, in such a way that the form determines to the matter and there am the relation with Aristotle and his tetra-causal theory here.

“McLuhan explained media, and his explanation, his media ecology, also explained McLuhan¹⁸”

¹⁷Cfr. STRATE L., Wachtel E., *The Legacy of McLuhan*, Hampton Press, Inc. New Jersey, 2005, pp. 28

¹⁸ STRATE L., Wachtel E., *The Legacy of McLuhan*, Hampton Press, Inc. New Jersey, 2005, p. 27