



The benefits of walking

Description

Walking cuts risk of stroke in men. Scarcely a day passes without official confirmation of the [health benefits of walking](#).

Why does one walk? we say; that one may be healthy; and in speaking thus we think we have given the cause.

This is a direct quote from Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, Book 5, Section 2. Interestingly, he provides walking as an illustration of the most advanced type of causal relationship, the *efficient* or *teleological* cause. We might say walking with *intention*, in this case to remain healthy.

As every researcher knows the causes of any beneficial effect are difficult to identify. Is it the walking, the exercise, the psychological effect, or does it happen that people who walk a lot also eat well, or have healthy genes?

Aristotle knew about the multifaceted nature of causes. For Aristotle, causes are explanations of change. Whenever we ask why we are appealing to a cause.

- Why does the ball bounce? Because it's made of rubber. That's its **material** cause.
- Why does it roll across the floor? Because it's round, the **formal** cause.
- Why is it rolling now? Because I pushed it, the **functional** cause.
- Why is it moving at all? Because it's been kicked into the net to score a goal. That's the **efficient** or **teleological** cause.

Aristotle doesn't talk about rubber balls. Nor does he elaborate on walking; but we can.

- Why does a person walk? Because it's a property of nerves and muscles. That's its **material** cause.
- Why does the body progress along the path? Because the body tilts to the incline of the path. The body falls momentarily and instantly extends a leg out to stop the fall repeatedly and with alternate legs. This is the **formal** cause.
- Why is the body walking now? Because it needs to get to the office, the **functional** cause.

- Why is it moving at all? To keep fit, healthy, sociable, and enjoy its environment. That's the **efficient** or **teleological** cause.

To elaborate on the mechanics of walking as a cybernetic process – every step not only advances locomotion, but also provides feedback about surface, gradient, stability, and various resistances that contribute to the way the foot falls at the next step. So walking on a pavement requires a different pattern of movement to walking on a hot sandy beach.

Without a cause

I don't think the philosopher Martin Heidegger spoke directly about walking, but he elaborated on causality, in particular Aristotle's four causes. Heidegger thinks all causes coalesce on the same point, which is – to occasion. Heidegger thinks of this as the true meaning of "cause." To cause is *to occasion*, to bring forth, to reveal.

The four ways of being responsible bring something into appearance. They let it come forth into presencing. (The Question Concerning Technology, p.9)

This causal effect is well illustrated by the skilled craftsperson in architecture, art, design, and music, as she brings something into being.

Whatever is accomplished by asking "why," such inquiry misses out on the insights of simply *letting be*. Heidegger is fond of quoting the mystery poet Angelus Silesius (c. 1624 – 1677): "The rose is without a why"; it blooms, because it blooms; It pays no attention to itself and doesn't ask if anyone sees it." (See post [What buildings want.](#)) Meditating thus before nature sounds something like the [soft fascination](#) enjoyed by nature walkers, who focus their attention on the richness of the environment – without cognitive demand. Environmental psychologists think that such meditative states provide "restorative benefits."

One step at a time

To bring this reflection down to earth, we don't have to have a reason to walk. It's sufficient just to walk. Jean-François Augoyard, author of *Step by Step*, concurs.



Sometimes pedestrians want to get from A to B, by the quickest and safest route, to attend a meeting, to cover ground, to see everything they want to see as in a museum, or to deliver or receive goods or information. But walking need not always be thought of as self-consciously *intentional*. In fact it is helpful to think that walking inheres in what it is to be human.

Occasionally, walking is deflected to some purpose or other. For those who are able, they are simply impelled by ambulatory practices, which connect them to their primordial grounding. For Augoyard walking is a lot like talking. He says walking is "fluid, prone to digressions, capable of forgetting what is apparently essential and of lingering over details." As with language, the ordinariness of walking becomes a means of asserting one's presence, a "tactic of everyday life," a "mode of being."

These reflections are *apropos* our recent study into walking in urban environments and parkland, and of course questions of mobility amongst the young and old alike.

See [The brain in the city](#), [Soft fascination](#), [Are you aware of your brain?](#) and [Mobility, mood and place](#).



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Notes

- Here's Aristotle's full statement about causes: "Cause" means (1) that from which, as immanent material, a thing comes into being, e.g. the bronze is the cause of the statue and the silver of the saucer, and so are the classes which include these. (2) The form or pattern, i.e. the definition of the essence, and the classes which include this (e.g. the ratio 2:1 and number in general are causes of the octave), and the parts included in the definition. (3) That from which the change or the resting from change first begins; e.g. the adviser is a cause of the action, and the father a cause of the child, and in general the maker a cause of the thing made and the change-producing of the changing. (4) The end, i.e. that for the sake of which a thing is; e.g. health is the cause of walking. For "Why does one walk?" we say; "that one may be healthy"; and in speaking thus we think we have given the cause." (Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, Book 5, Section 2)
- Everything has to have a cause, according to Gottfried Wilhelm von Leibniz (1646-1716). His proposition is often called "The Principle of a Sufficient Reason": "The great foundation of mathematics is the principle of contradiction, or identity, that is, that a proposition cannot be true and false at the same time; and that therefore A is A, and cannot be not A. This single principle is sufficient to demonstrate every part of arithmetic and geometry, that is, all mathematical principles. But in order to proceed from mathematics to natural philosophy, another principle is requisite, as I have observed in my *Theodicy*: I mean, the principle of a sufficient reason, viz. that nothing happens without a reason why it should be so, rather than otherwise." (Leibniz-Clarke Correspondence)
- For Heidegger: "For centuries philosophy has taught that there are four causes: (1) the *causa materialis*, the material, the matter out of which, for example, a silver chalice is made; (2) the *causa formalis*, the form, the shape into which the material enters; (3) the *causa finalis*, the end, for example, the sacrificial rite in relation to which the chalice required is determined as to its form and matter; (4) the *causa efficiens*, which brings about the effect that is the finished, actual chalice, in this instance, the silversmith. What technology is, when represented as a means, discloses itself when we trace instrumentality back to fourfold causality." (Heidegger, 6)
- Phenomenologist Erwin W. Straus (1891-1975) provides a compelling description of the mechanics of walking: "Human gait, is in fact, a continuously arrested falling" (148). [added 24 July 2014]
- For an account of walking and other mobile practices see Coyne, Richard. 2010. *The Tuning of Place: Sociable Spaces and Pervasive Digital Media*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

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