

UNITED WISDOM

Cause, Grounds, and Justification: Different Answers to Why

World and Consciousness

Andrey Zarinsh & Maria Evilkut

W-02-N01 · EN

@andrey.zarinsh @ilkutki

Cause, Grounds, and Justification: Different Answers to Why

Epigraph

> *Knowledge is the object of our inquiry.*

Aristotle, Physics II.3, opening clause of the second sentence, fragment of the translation by R. P. Hardie and R. K. Gaye. The passage investigates natural change; ethical justification does not follow from this sentence alone.

What this article is about

“Why?” seems straightforward until one person answers with circumstances, another with an argument, and a third with a request to stop assigning blame. We can argue for a long time while answering different questions. How did an event arise? What supports accepting a claim? What makes an action permissible? These questions are connected, but answering one does not settle the others. This article distinguishes cause, grounds, and justification while retaining room both to explain human conduct and to address its consequences. We will consider three particular texts: Aristotle’s account of causes, his discussion of voluntary actions, and Hume’s investigation of motives and necessity. Their vocabularies do not form a single ready-made modern theory. Through a hypothetical meeting that has to be rescheduled, we will examine when explanation becomes an excuse, when biography replaces an argument, and why acknowledging causes requires neither immediate forgiveness nor abandoning a fair assessment.

I. A question that quietly changes its object

Different answers to why first differ in what they are supposed to explain. Imagine a hypothetical situation: an organiser reschedules a meeting an hour before it begins. One participant asks why this happened and hears that a fault was discovered in the room. Another wants to know why the new time was chosen without consultation. A third asks why the notice arrived so late. The same fault may matter greatly to the first question while leaving the other two unanswered. There is no need to begin by declaring anyone dishonest. It is more useful to establish which question an answer addresses and which part of the event still needs an explanation.

We will call a cause something involved in an event’s occurrence: a technical failure, an action, a sequence of decisions, or surrounding conditions. Grounds will mean evidence or an

@andrey.zarinsh @ilkutki

argument supporting a particular claim. Justification will mean a consideration supporting an action's permissibility or reducing the blame attached to it. This is the article's working distinction, rather than a claim that every philosopher uses the words identically. In ordinary conversation, reason can refer to a motive, evidence, or a rule. Function therefore matters more than the noun. Clarifying vocabulary is useful when it clarifies what must actually be examined.

The organiser has a record of the fault, supporting the claim that the room could not be used. There is also correspondence showing when the information arrived. That supports a different assessment: how unavoidable the late notice was. Even if both facts are established, the method of choosing the replacement time remains a question. A participant can accept the explanation for rescheduling, dispute the chosen hour, and expect an apology for the lack of consultation. That position is coherent. It becomes incoherent only after different objects are quietly bundled into one broad why. A useful clarification preserves partial agreement and identifies the real disagreement instead of reopening the whole event at once.

II. A cause need not be a push

In Physics II.3, Aristotle distinguishes several ways of answering a causal question: material, form, the source of change, and the end for which something happens. Bronze and the sculptor's activity explain a statue differently. Treating them as rival pushes would miss the point: one concerns its composition and another its production. The passage actually read matters here as a historical philosophical account of explanatory variety. It cannot, without another argument, be presented as the framework of modern physics or a psychological description of every human decision. It nevertheless helps us notice how broad a question about something's origin can be.

For our hypothetical meeting, we can ask what conditions produced the problem, how the notification procedure worked, who acted, and what the change was intended to achieve. Those answers connect without being interchangeable. The aim of preserving the meeting does not establish who first heard about the fault. A list of participants does not describe the procedure. Understanding the procedure does not reveal everybody's intention. If we search only for someone to blame, we may overlook an organisational defect. If we discuss only the system, we may overlook a particular decision. This application to an everyday situation is the article's own, rather than an example supplied by Aristotle.

The word because therefore does not guarantee a completed explanation. "We moved it because we wanted to preserve the meeting" names an aim without showing why another method was unavailable. "We moved it because the room closed" identifies an obstacle without explaining the selected response. Distinguishing the kind of answer does not require an exhaustive history of the world. It requires identifying the relationship relevant to the

present task. If notification reliability is at issue, the account must reach information and procedure. If the replacement time is being assessed, participants and available alternatives require further consideration. Explanatory scope follows the question, rather than the opportunity to introduce another philosophical term.

III. Grounds test a claim

Grounds differ from causes in the direction of the inquiry. A causal question concerns how something happened; a question about grounds concerns why a description should be accepted as true or adequately supported. A fault may have caused the rescheduling, yet a story about that fault does not establish that it existed. Evidence may support the story or leave important uncertainty. The cause of our trust in a speaker also differs from the grounds of the speaker’s claim. Respect for someone we know explains our willingness to listen. It does not turn every technical guess they make into an established fact about a room.

Suppose the organiser believes there is a fault because another employee reported it. The confidence is understandable, but the information came through an intermediary. Participants may need confirmation if an expensive journey or later commitment depends on it. Elsewhere, identifying what is currently known and taking a reversible step may suffice. The required check depends on the consequences of error. This does not mean turning every everyday exchange into an investigation. It supports a narrower rule: do not present a stronger degree of confirmation than the evidence provides. “I was told about a fault” differs from “the fault was checked,” even when both statements are sincere and eventually prove compatible.

The distinction also protects the speaker. They can revise the description without denying the entire experience: “I did receive that message, but I am now unsure it was accurate.” The listener can recognise sincerity while continuing to investigate the fact. The historical texts considered here supply no complete protocol for a modern organisation; this procedure is the article’s proposal. Its purpose is to preserve different levels of assertion. We know what somebody said; sometimes we know how they learned it; separately we examine whether the report fits its object. When those levels merge, any clarification can sound like an accusation of lying. When they remain distinct, people can reconsider information together without having to agree on the conclusion in advance.

IV. A motive explains without reading another mind

In Section VIII of An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding, Hume examines the move from observed actions and circumstances to expectations of conduct. He connects it with experienced regularities between motives and actions. In paragraph 66 he also retains differences of character, habit, and opinion: different people need not behave identically in similar circumstances. Hume's text expresses a historical philosophical position. Its broad statements about human nature are not a contemporary comparative study of every culture. A narrower point matters here: circumstances enter explanations of action, and differences matter to expectations. Neither point authorises us to treat a stranger's motive as known.

The organiser may have wanted to preserve the meeting, avoid an awkward discussion, follow an instruction, or accomplish several things at once. Our fictional situation permits describing possibilities; a real participant would need to explain their own decision. Even that answer would not independently establish every causal connection. A stated motive tells us how the person accounts for their conduct, while the external sequence may clarify or complicate the picture. Several motives may indeed operate together. Demanding a single "real" explanation at the outset can narrow the inquiry before the relevant information is available. The account of what happened should not be designed solely to fit our preferred portrait of the person.

An attractive psychological story is especially easy to mistake for evidence. "They feared looking incompetent" may connect events elegantly, but elegance does not confirm the connection. A more modest inquiry asks what the person knew, which alternatives they considered, what they decided, and what they expected. Those answers may tell us more than a diagnosis of motive. Nor should missing information be replaced with the most unpleasant possibility simply because the outcome hurt us. Consequences can be discussed before the inner cause is settled. Uncertainty about intention does not prevent naming inconvenience, requesting a clear procedure, or declining a repetition. It limits what we can claim about another person's inner life.

V. Justification introduces a criterion

Justification concerns permissibility or how far an action can be attributed to a responsible agent. It therefore needs a criterion that a causal description alone does not contain. "I was irritated" may explain a sharp reply. To move from that statement to "the reply was permissible," another premise is required: under what conditions does irritation authorise that way of speaking? The premise may be unacceptable, too broad, or never stated. Often the disagreement lies in precisely this hidden transition. One person hears an explanation; the other hears a demand to stop discussing consequences. Those are different contributions to a conversation, even when the same sentence prompts both interpretations.

In Nicomachean Ethics III.1, Aristotle considers compulsion, ignorance of circumstances, and actions under pressure. His example of throwing cargo overboard in a storm preserves a complication: the action would not be chosen for itself, yet at that moment serves the passengers' safety. The passage illustrates why circumstances and possibilities matter to evaluation. We do not transfer the entire ancient account of praise, blame, and pardon into modern life. In particular, its severe discussion of what suffering should be endured is not advice to expose oneself to danger. The historical distinction between lack of freedom and a difficult choice does not issue a universal verdict.

Returning to the meeting, we can ask whether less burdensome alternatives existed, what was owed to participants, and who bears the decision's costs. The assessment need not be negative. Perhaps the replacement time was reasonable. But reasonableness needs its own grounds: available information, constraints, compared alternatives, and a clear purpose. Having a cause does not substitute for that assessment. Conversely, an explanation should not be prohibited as an excuse before it is heard. If refusing to explain becomes the condition of taking responsibility, information needed to prevent recurrence is lost. Evaluation improves when circumstances can be described while permissibility remains a separate question open to examination.

VI. Explanation can support responsibility

Acknowledging a cause and acknowledging consequences can occupy the same statement. The organiser says, "The room became unavailable; I chose a new time too quickly; participants had to rearrange their plans." The first part accounts for the problem's appearance, the second identifies an action, and the third names its effect on others. Nobody has to decide first whether the organiser is a good or bad person. The account becomes specific. It helps locate what might change: check the room earlier, establish a fallback option, or agree on notification arrangements. An apology need not contain a complete causal theory. When appropriate, however, explanation can make a subsequent change substantive.

Sometimes "I had my reasons" protects a person from every further question. The problem then is not the existence of reasons, but the demand that they count as a final justification. A reply might be: "I understand that circumstance; I still want to discuss how the decision was made." It retains what was heard and returns to the unfinished part. Agreement is not guaranteed. The other person may refuse, reject the criterion, or assess the alternatives differently. Nevertheless, the disagreement becomes visible: it concerns an obligation, an acceptable risk, costs, or reliable information, rather than an abstract right to possess motives.

The opposite mistake treats every explanation as a refusal of responsibility. Someone is asked to stop describing circumstances in order to prove sincere regret. That may sound demanding without making the assessment more accurate. Circumstances can materially change the

available choice. Describing them does not oblige the affected person to forgive, rebuild trust, or continue a relationship. Responsibility, forgiveness, restored trust, and preventing recurrence are distinct processes. In our hypothetical situation, a participant can accept an apology and still decline the replacement meeting. That choice does not refute the organiser's explanation. It reflects available resources and the participant's assessment of acceptable costs after an event has already occurred.

VII. When one consideration serves several roles

The same information can support different conclusions, but its role changes with the question. A report that the room closed enters the causal history of rescheduling. It also supplies grounds for thinking the previous location unavailable. Under some conditions it may help justify an urgent decision. None of those roles cancels the others. The mistake occurs when support for one conclusion becomes support for every conclusion about the event. That is why the slogan "a cause is never a justification" is also too blunt. Causal circumstances may matter to evaluation; they simply do not complete it automatically or remove the need to state a criterion.

In Physics, Aristotle allows several causes of an event in different senses; in the Ethics, circumstances matter to distinguishing actions. In Hume, the history of motives connects with expectations of conduct. These are different inquiries, rather than three versions of a single judicial rule. Their comparison shows that an action can be approached from several sides. It does not establish that ancient ethics and Hume's philosophy share the same metaphysics of freedom. Nor do we infer a modern legal assessment from these passages. The discussion here concerns everyday and ethical responsibility. Legal consequences require the relevant rules and competence, beyond a resemblance between the words used in this essay.

In a particular disagreement, asking what a consideration does is therefore more useful than assigning it permanently to a single box. If the message record confirms that the problem was discovered late, it may weaken a complaint about delay. It does not establish that the notice was complete or understandable. The explanation becomes stronger for one part while leaving a gap elsewhere. Naming that boundary need not express distrust of the whole person. It respects the event's complexity. We can recognise that part of an accusation was excessive without jumping to the opposite excessive conclusion: that no questions remain. Partial correction should remain partial when the available information supports no broader change.

VIII. A good intention and an assessable choice

An action’s aim differs from the quality of the means chosen to pursue it. Wanting to preserve a meeting may be reasonable; the replacement time can still exclude half the participants. In Ethics III.2, Aristotle distinguishes wishing for an end from choosing means. For this article, that prompts an everyday question: through which action was the aim supposed to be realised? We do not adopt his entire vocabulary of character or every assessment he makes. We retain the difference between a desired outcome and a particular act for which someone is prepared to answer. A noble name for an aim cannot replace considering means, available alternatives, and foreseeable consequences.

Suppose the organiser says, “I wanted nobody to lose the day.” If rescheduling without consultation made people lose time, a discrepancy appears between aim and method. That need not establish deception. The organiser may have misjudged schedules or overestimated the ability to decide for everybody. What matters now is information about the choice: what was known, who could have been consulted, and how much time remained? The answers may show that an immediate choice was the only available option or that haste had an alternative. Either way, evaluation acquires an object. It no longer depends entirely on debating whether the organiser’s inner intention was kind enough.

The same precision can apply to our own position. A participant may seek fair treatment while making a demand in a way that obstructs clarification. This neither equates the roles nor erases the original inconvenience. It introduces another question about a present action. “I am defending something important” and “my method is justified” also need a separate transition. Sometimes clarification strengthens a demand: a duty to notify can replace a global accusation of indifference. Sometimes it identifies a limit: consultation cannot be expected if no time for it really remained. Revising a means need not abandon an aim. It may express the aim more precisely and make the next choice less dependent on mutual guesses.

IX. An unknown cause and a known boundary

A complete explanation can be unavailable while a practical question need not always wait. A participant does not know why the organiser again chose an inconvenient hour, but knows they cannot attend. They can state that without diagnosing the organiser’s motive. Similarly, an arrangement may be changed when repeated rescheduling makes planning impossible, while the internal cause remains uncertain. The decision should rest on actual observations and personal constraints. It does not require declaring the other person deliberately harmful, generally incompetent, or hopeless. Narrow grounds support a narrow conclusion, and sometimes that is enough for the decision actually facing us.

The situation differs when an unknown cause is essential to deciding. If participation depends on resolving the technical fault, suitable information about that fault is needed. The organiser's general confidence will not accomplish the task. We distinguish questions on which action can proceed without a complete explanation from questions where missing grounds change what can responsibly be chosen. This is no universal permission to decide through any uncertainty. Consequences, reversibility, and obligations matter. The article considers an ordinary organisational situation. Dangerous, medical, or legal choices should not be inferred from its hypothetical example merely because the language sounds similar or the diagram of the problem appears familiar.

Uncertainty is not an automatic justification either. Failure to establish intention limits an accusation of deliberate harm. It does not erase a harmful consequence when that consequence is established. If alternatives are unknown, we cannot confidently claim either complete inevitability or the ease of choosing otherwise. Both limits can remain while the next procedure is discussed. Such a position is less dramatic than a final verdict, but it does not invent the missing history. It leaves room for new information. When information arrives, the conclusion depending on it changes; the entire account and every earlier decision need not change together or be treated as though they had never mattered.

X. Three questions return us to the event

Distinguishing cause, grounds, and justification is not intended to win an argument about terminology. It returns discussion to the event and makes transitions between conclusions assessable. What led to rescheduling? What supports that description? Why is the selected method considered permissible? Separating the questions may reveal agreement about the fault, different assessments of urgency, and incompatible schedules. Further discussion then concerns procedure and costs, rather than someone's general honesty or worth. Complexity has not disappeared. It has acquired several comprehensible objects that can be approached separately while their connections remain visible. That is a more limited achievement than solving the whole relationship, but it can still matter.

The distinction must not become another way to evade an answer. Someone can name cause, grounds, and a norm impeccably while avoiding a substantial question about consequences. Terminological accuracy is useful insofar as it makes the action and its cost visible. After the explanations, return to the original situation: what needed explaining, which decision is pending, and what remains unknown? A longer answer that loses its object has failed its task. Our hypothetical meeting provides a reminder. Participants ultimately need to know whether a discussion will happen, when, under which conditions, and how another change will be communicated. Vocabulary should help reach those matters rather than cover their absence.

Neither Aristotle nor Hume supplies an agreement among every philosophical tradition here. The passages read help distinguish tasks of explanation, choice, and evaluation. The practical proposal that follows belongs to this article and remains open to revision. Its possible value lies in a clearer question and a more bounded conclusion; improved relationships are not promised. Sometimes clarity reveals a real divergence of interests or obligations rather than a route to reconciliation. That is also a substantive outcome. We may understand a cause, recognise sufficient grounds for a fact, and reject an action’s justification. Or we may revise a complaint after learning the circumstances while retaining the right to discuss consequences and choose our own further participation.

What this means in practice

Choose one ordinary disagreement in which why keeps recurring. Describe the event neutrally: who did what, when, and with what consequence. Then formulate three separate questions. The first concerns how the event arose; the second concerns support for its description; the third concerns permissibility or responsibility. Beside each, record only what is actually known. Keep another person’s report as a report and a guess about motive as a guess. One question may have several answers, while another has none yet.

Select the question that matters to the next decision. You might say, “I understand the circumstance you described. What matters now is why that method was chosen and which alternatives remained.” Or: “I am not disputing your intention; I need confirmation of this particular fact.” These are possible formulations rather than a prescribed script. Sometimes the exchange should be postponed or ended, particularly when conditions for discussion are absent. Do not use the scheme to compel someone to disclose feelings or agree with your assessment.

Finally, note what changed: the description, confidence in a fact, assessment of an action, or your decision. Keep those changes distinct. New circumstances may revise one part without justifying the entire event. This is an original proposal for clarifying a conversation, with no established guarantee of benefit. It replaces no professional support and requires no forgiveness. One more precise question and an honest boundary to its answer can be a sufficient result.

Key quotation

> *We may change the name of things; but their nature and their operation on the understanding never change.*

David Hume, An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding, Section VIII, Part I, paragraph 70, English original. The sentence belongs to Hume's argument about causes and voluntary actions. Here it invites attention to the object behind a label rather than asserting that Hume's entire theory has been proved.

Connections between traditions

1. **Aristotle, Physics II.3 / Hume, Enquiry VIII, paragraphs 65–70.** Both connect explanation with relationships between events, but pursue different tasks. Aristotle distinguishes kinds of cause; Hume discusses experienced regularities and inferences about actions. Sharing a word does not establish a common theory of necessity.

2. **Aristotle, Physics II.3 / Ethics III.1.** The source of change matters to a causal description and to voluntariness. In the latter text it enters ethical assessment of a particular act; the physical account alone establishes no measure of blame or pardon.

3. **Ethics III.1–2 / Hume VIII, paragraph 66.** Circumstances and differences between people matter to understanding conduct. Aristotle distinguishes compulsion and choice; Hume explains why regularity need not mean identical conduct. Their criteria are not interchangeable.

4. **Aristotle, Physics II.3 / Ethics III.2.** An aim can explain action, while wishing for an end differs from choosing means. The connection permits two questions; it does not make every professed good aim a justification for its means.

5. **Hume VIII, paragraphs 65–70 / Aristotle's Ethics III.1.** A history of motives and a question about praise or blame may concern the same act. Expected conduct and permissible conduct nevertheless present different tasks. The article draws on their proximity while preserving the historical approaches' independence.

Primary sources

• Aristotle, Physics II.3, translated by R. P. Hardie and R. K. Gaye. Chapter II.3 read completely; supports kinds of cause without turning ancient physics into a modern scientific finding.

• Aristotle, Nicomachean Ethics III.1–2, translated by W. D. Ross. Chapters 1–2 read completely, with the opening of chapter 3; supports circumstances of voluntariness and wishing versus choosing. Historical ethics, not a legal or clinical standard.

• David Hume, An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding, VIII, Part I, paragraphs 65–70. The identified passage and adjacent context were read; supports a philosophical account of motives and expectations. No complete-work reading or empirical confirmation of universality is claimed.

Tags

cause, grounds, justification, explanation, why, argument, reasoning, evidence, motive, intention, action, responsibility, permissibility, circumstances, compulsion, voluntariness, ignorance, choice, aim, means, consequences, Aristotle, Physics, Nicomachean Ethics, David Hume, necessity, trust, uncertainty, partial agreement, ethical assessment

About the authors

Andrey Zarinsh is the author and founder of United Wisdom. He explores inner transformation, the unity of traditions, intercultural dialogue, and contemporary spiritual discipline. Instagram: @andrey.zarinsh.

Maria Evilkut is a co-author of United Wisdom. Alongside her research, she seeks to test these ideas in practice and observe how principles of unity and mutual understanding work in real life between people and cultures. Instagram: @ilkutki.