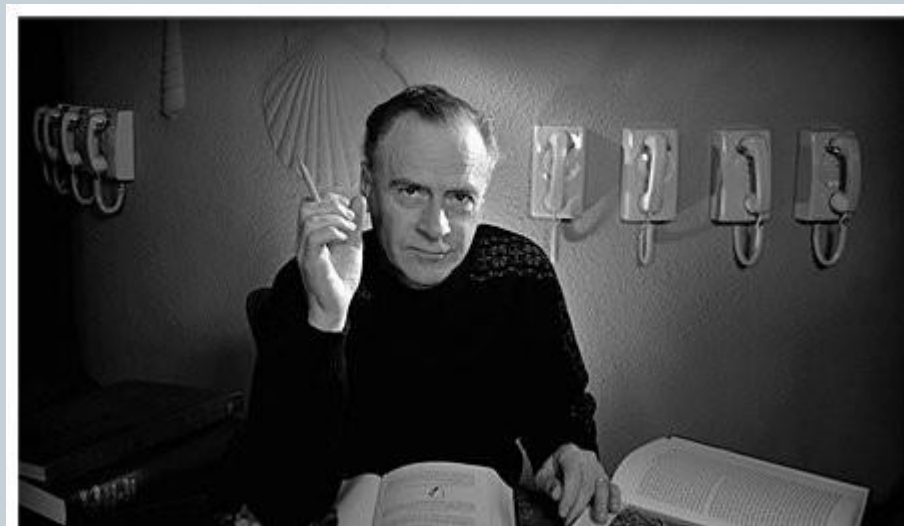


# Marshall McLuhan

## The Medium is the Message



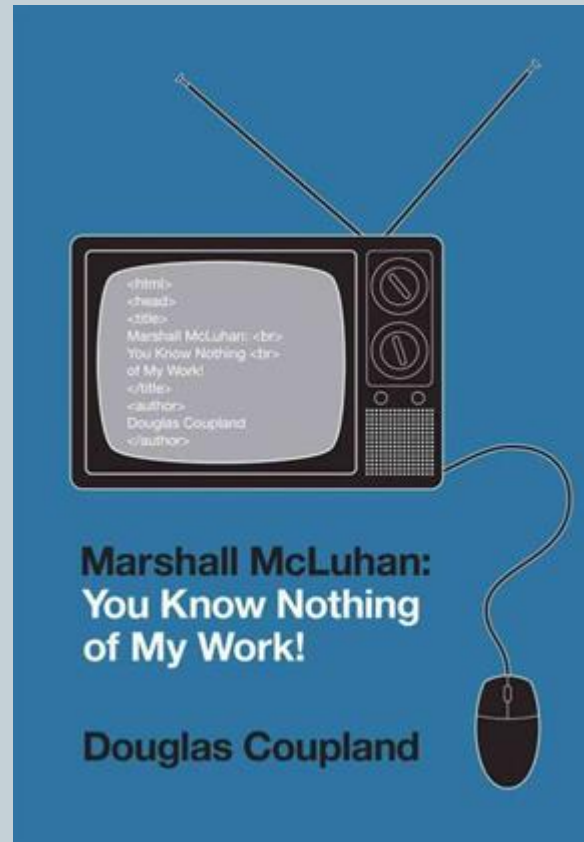
# Preface (5 min)



- Marshall McLuhan is one of those thinkers whose name everyone knows.
- His ideas, however, are less well known, at least not beyond the clichés that they've been reduced to.
- So most people know McLuhan by the aphorisms he came up with, aphorisms that have infiltrated our culture...
  - The Medium is the message
  - Global village
  - Hot vs. Cool Medium



- McLuhan was a household word in the late 60s.
- He was extremely popular, and could be found on numerous talk shows and radio programs.
- It's not difficult to find videos, films, and a lot of other stuff on McLuhan with just a cursory search on the internet.
- Now, as I understand it, it's generally a good idea to start any presentation with some light-heartedness and levity.
- And this is not difficult with Marshall McLuhan.
- So in the hope of getting everyone here in a McLuhanesque mood, I'm going to share one of my favourite McLuhan cameos in Woody Allen's Annie Hall.



# McLuhan Background (10 min max)



- McLuhan started off as an engineering student.
- Changed majors and ended up with a Bachelor of Arts degree.
- Continued his education and earned a Master of Arts degree (1934) in English.
- Pursued a graduate degree at Cambridge in 1936. Completed his Masters there in 1939-40 and began working on his doctorate.
- Was awarded a Doctor of Philosophy degree in December 1943.



- In the early 1950s, McLuhan began the Communication and Culture seminars at the University of Toronto, funded by the Ford Foundation.
- During this period, he published his first major work, *The Mechanical Bride* (1951), in which he examines the effect of advertising on society and culture.
- From 1967 to 1968, McLuhan was named the Albert Schweitzer Chair in Humanities at Fordham University in the Bronx.
- He returned to Toronto where he taught at the University of Toronto for the rest of his life and lived in *Wychwood Park*, an upper class neighborhood near Bathurst and Davenport.
- In September 1979, McLuhan suffered a stroke which affected his ability to speak.
- The University of Toronto's School of Graduate Studies tried to close his research centre shortly after.
- The university was unsuccessful in doing this and was apparently deterred by substantial protests, most notably by Woody Allen, even though Allen's involvement is not completely substantiated.

# McLuhan's Major Publications



1. The Mechanical Bride: Folklore of Industrial Man (1951)
1. The Gutenberg Galaxy (1962)
- 2. Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man (1964)**
3. The Medium Is the Massage (1967)
4. War and Peace in the Global Village (1968)
5. From Cliché to Archetype (1970)
6. The Global Village: Transformations in World Life and Media in the 21st Century (1989) – Posthumous.

# Technology (Discussion 15 min)



- Given that much of what McLuhan talks about has to do with technology and the fact that most people have an opinion about technology, I thought we'd start with a bit of a discussion first.
- Consider the following questions:
  1. What is technology?
  2. How has technology changed your life?
  3. Can you live without technology?
  4. Is technology good/bad?
  5. Is there a specific technology that you get excited about?
  6. Does technology make your life easier, or harder?
  7. If you could go back to an age without technology, would you? Could you?
  8. Does media technology control us, or liberate us?



# Key Ideas in Understanding Media (20-25 min)



- **The medium is the message:**
  - ✦ Basically, it's not the content of the medium that matters. Instead, the characteristics of that medium determine its content.
- **We're shifting from mechanical technology to electric technology:**
  - ✦ Mechanical technology such as wheels, roads, and the printing press influence us in different ways from electric technology such as the lightbulb, television, or – today – the internet
- **Mechanical technology detribalized humans:**
  - ✦ *Now electric technology is retribalizing humans.* This shift causes stress in the ways we interact with one another. Our lack of awareness of how technology changes the way we interact is a threat to civilization.

# McLuhan – The Medium is the Message



- One of McLuhan's central ideas is the notion that “The medium is the message.”
- With this concept, McLuhan is saying that it's not the content of the medium that matters...
- Instead, the essential characteristics ( Underlying Form) of a medium determines its content (Effects).



- *The medium is the message. This is merely to say that the personal and social consequences of any medium – that is, of any extension of ourselves – results from the new scale that is introduced into our affairs by each extension of ourselves, or by any new technology (New Form).*



- In essence, what McLuhan is proposing is that medium (technology), not the content that they carry, that should be the focus of study.
- This is because the Form of a media creates an environment that is all pervasive. Because it is all pervasive it becomes transparent...
- An analogy that I heard McLuan use – our experience with media is like the experience fish have with water...it is so all pervasive that it's likely they have no awareness that they're in it.
- So because the form of media is so pervasive it is the characteristics of the media, rather than the content that should be the focus of our attention.
- The main effect does not come from the content, it comes from the form of the media that surround us.
- Ultimately new forms of media change the perceptions of society.
- Each type of medium (Print, TV, Radio, Internet, etc) has a different type of effect.
- To understand media and its effects, one needs to understand the underlying structures that make it what it is.
- Every medium/technology independent of its content has its own unique effects.



- Now a key idea in McLuhan is the notion that media are an “extension of ourselves”...
- *“It is the persistent theme of this book that all technologies are extensions of our physical and nervous systems to increase power and speed”*
- This means that anything that is an extension of ourselves is a type of media. McLuhan’s approach makes “media” and “technology” more or less synonymous terms.
- So a media is anything that extends our capabilities as humans.
- The wheel extends our feet
- The phone extends our voice
- Television extends our eyes and ears
- The computer extends our brain
- Electronic media extend our central nervous system
- Again in his own words: *“Any extension, whether of skin, hand, or foot, affects the psychic and social complex.”*



- In McLuhan's theory language too is a medium or technology.
- Unlike other types of technologies, however, language does not require any physical object outside ourselves...
- It is an extension that enables externalizing our inner thoughts, ideas, and feelings.
- Language is an extension of consciousness.



- So every media (technology), regardless of what it is extends our capabilities.
- Every tool, technology, and communication system by which human beings interact with each other is significant to what we become.
- The interaction changes how we think, and how we respond to one another.



- One of the concerns that people often have with new technologies (especially mass media technology) is that they're going to impact us negatively.
- McLuhan was very much aware of this concern.
- For him, however, technology is just something that exists, it's a matter of fact. We're born into it and there's not much that we can do about it.
- It's also a fact for him that technology will continue to evolve in unpredictable ways and that it will have a continuing impact on who we are as human beings.



# New Media – Unprecedented Impact



- Communication technologies have been around for a long time (spoken word, written word) but they were limited in scope.
- The new electronic technologies, however, have had an unprecedented impact on humanity because they elevate the process of technological extension to a new level of significance.
- *“Whereas all previous technology (save speech, itself) had, in effect, extended some part of our bodies, electricity may be said to have outered the central nervous system itself, including the brain”.*
- What McLuhan seems to be arguing here is that pre-electric extensions are explosions physically in an outward direction, whereas electronic technology is an inward implosion toward a shared consciousness.
- *“Our new electric technology that extends our senses and nerves in a global embrace has large implications for the future of language”*
- The implications are to do with the speed and scope with which we can extend ourselves.
- One example from the mid 1800s is the telegraph.
- Before the invention of the telegraph it was necessary to move information physically (via mail) from one place to another.
- But with the telegraph, information that could take weeks to get from one place to another, could now be sent in minutes.



- This flow of information has accelerated multifold with the internet...
- The internet (and social media in general) has made it possible for us to do things that were barely imaginable 50 years ago...
  - Access online libraries & encyclopedias
  - Visit virtual art galleries
  - Access news archives
  - Online learning
  - Exchange of knowledge & education
  - Real time collaborative work
  - Visit a doctor online
  - Have social connections in distant parts of the world
  - Watch movies whenever we want etc. etc. etc.
- McLuhan's ideas seem to suggest that governance (remnants of mechanical technology) may morph into a more "Global" political systems that are more in line with the Electric Age.
- McLuhan's idea is that we're moving in the direction of a Global Village.
- So for McLuhan the electric age represents the extension of consciousness -- it's a global extension!
- This is something that McLuhan has mixed feelings about:



- *“Rapidly, we approach the final phase of the extension of man—the technological simulation of consciousness, when the creative process of knowing will be collectively and corporately extended to the whole of human society, much as we have already extended our senses and nerves by the various media. Whether the extension of consciousness, so long sought by advertisers for specific products, will be 'a good thing' is a question that admits of a wide solution.”*



- “With the arrival of electric technology, man has extended, or set outside himself, a live model of the central nervous system itself. To the degree that this is so, it is a development that suggests a desperate suicidal autoamputation, as if the central nervous system could no longer depend on the physical organs to be protective buffers against the slings and arrows of outrageous mechanism. ”



- At other times, however, he has a much more positive outlook for this Global extension:
- *“might not our current translation of our entire lives into the spiritual form of information seem to make of the entire globe, and of the human family, a single consciousness?”*
- I’ll have more to say on McLuhan’s moral position...but first...a bit of a discussion on the value of media...McLuhan (Ronen) – John (Malcolm Muggeridge)...
- But first, a short video on which our discussion will be based:



# DISCUSSION

# HOT VS. COOL & Media Effects (15 min)



- An idea that's often quoted when discussing McLuhan is his idea of Hot vs. Cool media.
- This is an idea I'm still trying to get my head around...
- The essence of this concept is that “**Cool**” media are **low resolution** and therefore require a high degree of audience participation whereas “**Hot**” media are **high resolution** (giving lots of data) and therefore require a low degree of audience participation.
- Here's a short video with McLuhan explaining the concept in his own words...

# HOT & COOL...A LITTLE MORE



- **Hot Medium**

- extends single sense in high definition
- low in audience participation
- engenders specialization/fragmentation
- detribalizes
- excludes

- **Cool Medium**

- low definition (less data)
- high in audience participation
- engenders holistic patterns
- tribalizes
- includes

- **Hot Medium**

- photograph
- radio
- phonetic alphabet
- print
- lecture
- film
- Books

- **Cool Medium**

- cartoon
- telephone
- ideographic/pictographic writing
- speech (orality)
- seminar, discussion
- television
- comics



# Media Effects



- In 1988 McLuhan's son Eric McLuhan published a book called *Laws of Media* where he succinctly illustrates McLuhan's ideas on the effects on society of any technology (medium).
- He did this in a Tetrad of Media Effects diagram where he answered the following questions:
  - What does the medium enhance?
  - What does the medium make obsolete?
  - What does the medium retrieve that had been obsolesced earlier?
  - What does the medium flip into when pushed to extremes?

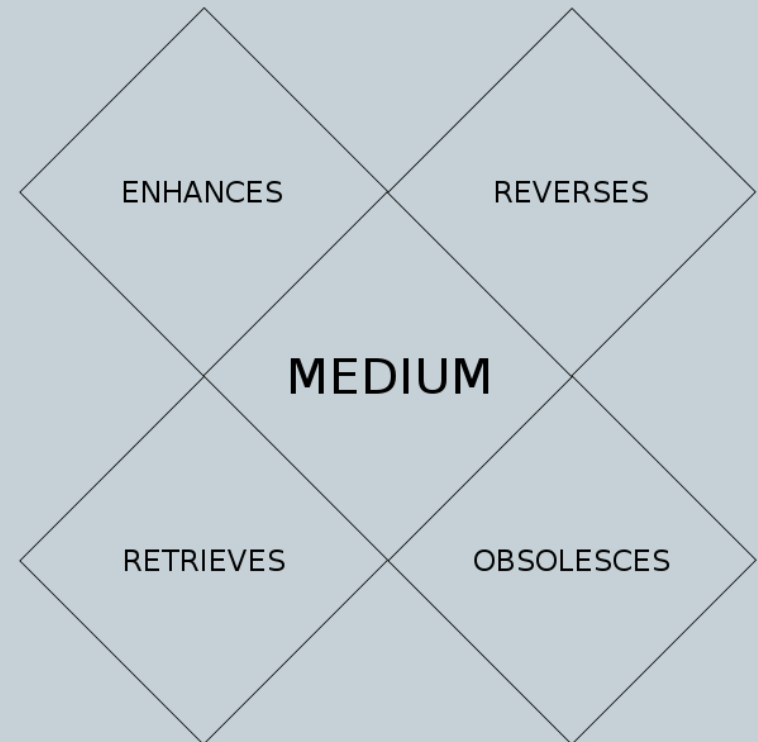
# RADIO

- He called the idea The Laws of the Tetrad...
- It works something like this...I'm simplifying...he gets into Gestalt Psychology and the concepts of "Figure" & "Ground".
- In simple terms in Gestalt Psychology the figure-ground principle states that people instinctively perceive objects as either being in the foreground or the background. They either stand out prominently in the front (the figure) or recede into the back (the ground).



- **Enhancement (figure):** What the medium amplifies or intensifies. **Radio amplifies news and music** via sound.
- **Obsolescence (ground):** What the medium drives out of prominence. **Radio reduces the importance of print and the visual.**
- **Retrieval (figure):** What the medium recovers which was previously lost. **Radio returns the spoken word to the forefront.**
- **Reversal (ground):** What the medium does when pushed to its limits. **Acoustic radio flips into audio-visual TV.**

# THE TETRAD



# McLuhan – Not a Moralizer (15 min)



- Overall McLuhan was not a moralizer and refused to make value statements about media technology.
- McLuhan was a devout Catholic who apparently read the bible daily.
- Despite what his private morality might have been, he did not let it influence his scholarship.
- A common answer that he would give to any question about the value of one type of media over another is that to moralize about media is detrimental to knowledge.
- He also said that it's intellectually questionable moralize because “a moral point of view too often serves as a substitute for understanding in technical matters.”



- *Is it not obvious that there are always enough moral problems without also taking a moral stand on technological grounds? [...] Print is the extreme phase of alphabet culture that detribalizes or decollectivizes man in the first instance. Print raises the visual features of alphabet to highest intensity of definition. Thus print carries the individuating power of the phonetic alphabet much further than manuscript culture could ever do. Print is the technology of individualism. If men decided to modify this visual technology by an electric technology, individualism would also be modified. To raise a moral complaint about this is like cussing a buzz-saw for lopping off fingers. "But", someone says, "we didn't know it would happen." Yet even witlessness is not a moral issue. It is a problem, but not a moral problem; and it would be nice to clear away some of the moral fogs that surround our technologies. It would be good for morality.*

(McLuhan, 1962 [8], p. 158)



- For many years, until I wrote my first book, *The Mechanical Bride*, I adopted an extremely moralistic approach to all environmental technology. I loathed machinery, I abominated cities, I equated the Industrial Revolution with original sin and mass media with the Fall. In short, I rejected almost every element of modern life in favor of a Rousseauvian utopianism. But gradually I perceived how sterile and useless this attitude was, and I began to realize that the greatest artists of the 20th Century—Yeats, Pound, Joyce, Eliot—had discovered a totally different approach, based on the identity of the processes of cognition and creation. I realized that artistic creation is the playback of ordinary experience—from trash to treasures. I ceased being a moralist and became a student...
- The world we are living in is not one I would have created on my own drawing board, but it's the one in which I must live, and in which the students I teach must live. If nothing else, I owe it to them to avoid the luxury of moral indignation or the troglodytic security of the ivory tower and to get down into the junk yard of environmental change and steam-shovel my way through to a comprehension of its contents and its lines of force—in order to understand how and why it is metamorphosing man...
- Cataclysmic environmental changes are, in and of themselves, morally neutral; it is how we perceive them and react to them that will determine their ultimate psychic and social consequences.



- Despite his refusal to moralize or pass value judgements on media, McLuhan was aware that the power of certain media can be addictive.
- Certain media technologies (TV, Smart Phones, YouTube, Netflix etc) have a narcotic-type effect.
- In fact, one of the reasons why McLuhan wrote ***Understanding Media*** is to warn us about the effects of media that we are ignoring.
- So while he doesn't pass judgement on media (each media affects our senses differently) he does seem to believe that a possible antidote to media's addictive nature is awareness.
- By being aware of the effect media have on us we can be in a better position to counteract them. In his own words:



- *“It is the theme of this book that not even the most lucid understanding of the peculiar force of a medium can head off the ordinary "closure" of the senses that causes us to conform to the pattern of experience presented. . . . To resist TV, therefore one must acquire the antidote of related media like print.” (329)*



- So basically an antidote to the numbing effect of any particular medium is to use another medium that has a counter-effect...
- *“When the technology of a time is powerfully thrusting in one direction, wisdom may well call for a countervailing thrust” (70-71).*
- So basically turn off the TV, or the computer, or the smart phone, or whatever, and do something else...read a book, go out for breakfast with friends and have vigorous chats, or make something...perhaps your own media.
- Making media (i.e. making a YouTube video, for example) is different from consuming media.
- Again, McLuhan is arguing that a “cure” for the effects of any dominant medium or pattern of the time can be a **countervailing force in the opposite direction of the dominating force.**





- Another way to deal with the numbing effect of media, says McLuhan, is to assume the attitude of the artist...
- *“The effects of technology **do not occur at the level of opinion or concepts**, but alter **sense ratios or patterns of perception steadily** and without any resistance. The serious artist is the only person able to encounter technology with impunity, just because he is an expert aware of the changes in sense perception.” (18)*



- For McLuhan an artist is anyone who engages in insightful analysis and tries to understand the underlying life of forms, and structures, created by electric technology.
- So an artist is any person who has what McLuhan calls “integral awareness” ...
- *“The artist is the man, in any field, scientific or humanistic, who grasps the implications of his actions and of new knowledge in his own time. He is the man of integral awareness” (65)*
- Finally, one more quote:



- *“It is not an exaggeration to say that the future of modern society and the stability of its inner life depend in large part on the maintenance of an equilibrium between the strength of the techniques of communication and the capacity of the individual’s own reaction.”*

# Inspired by McLuhan – Neil Postman (10 min)



- McLuhan focuses on Aristotle's Formal Cause in his understanding of media...
- Neil Postman, whose work is inspired by McLuhan, seems much more motivated by Aristotle's Final Cause.
- Aristotle's Final Cause is an attempt to understand the purpose, or end of a thing.
- Postman, unlike McLuhan, believes that the moral worth of any technologies, especially mass communication technologies, must be measured by the purpose or end that they serve.
- In books such as *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, and *Technopoly* Postman examines (and laments) the effects of new communication technologies (Especially TV) on culture.



- “To say it, then, as plainly as I can, this book is an inquiry into and a lamentation about the most significant American cultural fact of the second half of the twentieth century: the decline of the Age of Typography and the ascendancy of the Age of Television. This change-over has dramatically and irreversibly shifted the content and meaning of public discourse, since two media so vastly different cannot accommodate the same ideas. As the influence of print wanes, the content of politics, religion, education, and anything else that comprises public business must change and be recast in terms that are most suitable to television”



- “We were keeping our eye on 1984 (George Orwell). When the year came and the prophecy didn't, thoughtful Americans sang softly in praise of themselves. The roots of liberal democracy had held. Wherever else the terror had happened, we, at least, had not been visited by Orwellian nightmares.
- But we had forgotten that alongside Orwell's dark vision, there was another - slightly older, slightly less well known, equally chilling: Aldous Huxley's Brave New World. Contrary to common belief even among the educated, Huxley and Orwell did not prophesy the same thing. Orwell warns that we will be overcome by an externally imposed oppression. But in Huxley's vision, no Big Brother is required to deprive people of their autonomy, maturity and history. As he saw it, people will come to love their oppression, to adore the technologies that undo their capacities to think.
- What Orwell feared were those who would ban books. What Huxley feared was that there would be no reason to ban a book, for there would be no one who wanted to read one...”



- With regards to technological innovations Postman says that we need ask the following questions (*Building a Bridge to the 18<sup>th</sup> Century*) before making a final assessment on the moral value of any technological change:
  - What is the problem to which this technology is the solution
  - Whose problem is it?
  - Which people and what institutions might be most seriously harmed by a technological solution?
  - What new problems might be created because we have solved this problem?
  - What sort of people and institutions might acquire special economic and political power because of technological change
  - What changes in language are being enforced by new technologies, and what is being gained and lost by such changes?
- I would definitely recommend reading *Amusing Ourselves to Death & Technopoly...*



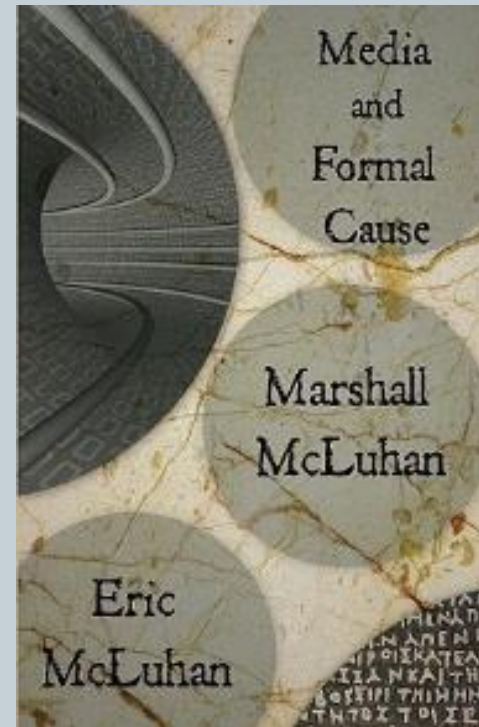
# DISCUSSION



# Expanding on McLuhan



- McLuhan is very much a thinker in the Aristotelian tradition -- especially in terms of Aristotle's Four Causes.
- In fact, this was an idea that came to me as I was reading about McLuhan -- an original idea, right?
- Well, no...in doing a bit of research I discovered that McLuhan's son had written a paper with exactly this thesis...





- So one of Aristotle's central ideas is the concept of the hylomorphic composition.
- It is his idea of how it's possible to join matter (hyle) and form (morphe).
- Aristotle rejects Plato's Transcendent Forms in favour of the idea of immanent Forms.
- In this view Forms exist within particular sensible things.
- The Form of a thing is what gives it its essence – in other words, it's what makes it what it is.
- The Form is what is real – it is the object of knowledge (epistemology).
- Form determines matter...it is what gives things their nature.
- Everything in the natural world is composed of both form and matter; there can be no instances of unformed matter or unmattered form.

# Four Causes



- So the Form is the essence of a thing, what makes it what it is...
- Aristotle argues that there are actually four principles, or “causes”, which are necessarily involved in the constitution of a thing:
  1. Material Cause -- The matter
  2. Efficient Cause – The mover
  3. **Formal Cause – The essence, or whatness of a thing**
  4. Final Cause – The end, purpose, Telos of a thing
- The Forms propel things from their Potentiality to their Actuality.