

## The Great Divide

Aristotle's division of physical things into inanimate bodies and living organisms, and his division of living organisms into plants, animals, and human beings, do not exhaust his scheme of classification or his set of categories.

Think, for example, of Wellington's horse at the Battle of Waterloo or of Julius Caesar crossing the Rubicon. Think of Shakespeare's Hamlet, the Loch Ness monster, or the angel Gabriel. Think of the odor of roses in full bloom, the color of a ripe tomato, Newton's theory of gravitation, or God.

None of these is a physical thing that exists now as animal, vegetable, or mineral. Wellington's horse and Julius Caesar existed in the past, but they exist no longer. Shakespeare's Hamlet is a fictitious person, not a real one. The existence of the Loch Ness monster is highly questionable. As for the odor of roses in full bloom, the angel Gabriel, Newton's theory of gravitation, and God, none of these fall under any of the headings that

cover bodies that either exist or have existed in the physical world.

The universe of objects that can be thought of is much larger than the physical world—the world of bodies, either those now in existence or those that have existed in the past. It includes the world of bodies, but it also includes much else besides. The line that divides bodies from everything else is the great divide.

What is left when we put the whole physical world to one side? What belongs to the other half of the all-embracing universe of objects that we can think about? I am not going to try to give an exhaustive enumeration of the kinds of objects that are *not* bodies, but here at least are some of the possible kinds:

- mathematical objects, such as triangles and square roots
- imaginary or fictitious characters, such as Shakespeare's Hamlet or Mark Twain's Huckleberry Finn
- disembodied or unembodied spirits of all sorts, including ghosts and angels
- gods or God when divine beings are thought of as not having bodies
- mythological beings, such as centaurs and mermaids
- minds that are able to think up the kind of questions we have been asking
- ideas or theories that minds think with

I am fully aware that this enumeration of possible objects of thought raises many questions. Do such objects exist, in any sense of that word? If they do, how does their existence differ from the existence of bodies? What does it mean to call them possibilities? Are there any objects of thought that are impossibilities? If minds are not bodies, what is their relationship to bodies?

I will try to answer some of these questions—with Aristotle's help—in later chapters of this book. Some are difficult philosophical questions that I will postpone until the very end. For the moment, asking them serves the purpose of calling attention to the larger universe of which the physical world is but a part, even though the world of bodies may be the only one that really exists.

Staying with that world, we must consider another distinction made by Aristotle. We need it to handle the question about the odor of roses in full bloom or the color of a ripe tomato. Roses and tomatoes are bodies, they are plants, but their odor and their color are not. Considering the physical world, Aristotle drew a line that divides its constituents into two major kinds. On the one side of the line, he placed *bodies*; on the other side, their *characteristics* or *attributes*, such as their odors or colors.

In our everyday speech, we ordinarily make the same distinction. We do not speak of the size and weight of a stone as if it were a body. I would not ask you to hand me the stone's size or weight, for I know that you must hand me the stone in order for me to feel its size or weight.

We can think of the stone's size or weight without thinking of the stone, but we cannot change the stone's size or weight without changing the stone. If the stone is lying in a pile of stones, we can take it from the pile and leave the other stones behind, but we cannot take the stone's size or weight away from it and leave the stone behind.

What belongs to a body in the way in which the stone's size or weight belongs to it is, according to Aristotle, something that has its existence in a thing (as the stone's weight exists in the stone), but does not exist in and of itself (as the stone exists).

A physical thing, a body, may belong to a collection of things from which it can be removed—as one stone can be taken from

a pile of stones. But each of the stones in the pile exists in and of itself, even when it exists in a collection of stones. That is not true of the stone's size or weight. Sizes and weights do not exist in and of themselves. They are always the sizes and weights of physical things, and they cease to exist when the bodies in which they exist cease to exist.

Another way of grasping this basic distinction between physical things and their attributes is to consider how things change. A stone with a rough surface can be polished and made smooth. A stone that is almost round in shape can be made perfectly round. While we are changing a stone's attributes, we are dealing with one and the same stone. It is not another stone, but the same stone altered.

If it did not remain the same stone while becoming different in this or that respect, it could not be said to have changed from being rough to being smooth or from being larger to being smaller. When we understand this, we understand Aristotle's reason for saying that a physical thing is that which remains what it is (this individual stone) while at the same time being subject to change in one respect or another (in size or weight, shape, color, or texture).

The attributes of bodies, unlike bodies themselves, are never subject to change. Roughness never becomes smoothness; green never becomes red. It is the rough *stone* that becomes smooth; the green *tomato* that becomes red when it ripens. Physical things, in short, are changeable. Physical attributes are not changeable; they are the respects in which physical things change.

Aristotle attempted to make a complete enumeration of the attributes that physical things have. Its completeness may be questioned, but the attributes he names are ones we are all



acquainted with in common experience, especially those that are the principal respects in which things change:

- in quantity, when they increase or decrease in weight or size
- in quality, when they alter in shape, color, or texture
- in place or position, when they move from here to there

A thing has other attributes, such as the relationships in which it stands to other things, the actions it performs, the results of its being acted on, the time of its coming into existence, the duration of its existence, and the time of its ceasing to exist.

Of all the attributes that a physical thing has, the most important are those that it has throughout its existence and with respect to which it does not change as long as it exists. These permanent attributes make it the kind of thing it is. For example, it is a permanent attribute of salt that it dissolves in water; a permanent attribute of certain metals that they are conductors of electricity; a permanent attribute of mammals that they give birth to living offspring and suckle their young.

Such attributes not only make a thing the special kind of thing it is, they also differentiate one kind of thing from another. Being able to ask questions of the sort we have been asking is a permanent attribute of rational animals that differentiates us from other mammals. Rational animals are, of course, bodies. They are physical things, but not only physical things.

We recognize this fact in our use of the word "person." We call human beings persons. We do not call spiders, snakes, sharks or birds persons. When we treat our pet cat or dog as if it were a person, we treat it as if it were human—or almost human. Objects that we regard as mere things, we do not treat in the same manner.

Up to this point, the word "thing" has been used to refer to

physical things—to bodies. Now the word “thing” has been used in contrast to the word “person.” It is a troublesome word. Its meaning is sometimes so broad that it refers to any possible object of thought—not only to existent physical things, but also to their attributes as well, and to objects that do not exist, objects that may never have existed, and even objects that cannot possibly exist. Sometimes the word “thing” narrowly applies only to bodies that now exist in the physical world, bodies that have existed there in the past, or bodies that can exist there in the future.

Using the same word in a variety of senses is often unavoidable. In the case of the most important words we use, especially words we use in ordinary everyday speech, it is almost impossible not to do so. Aristotle frequently called attention to the different senses in which he found it necessary to use the same word. When we think about our experience as he did, we must also pay attention to the different senses of the words we use.

Human beings are physical things in one sense of that word and not in another when we call them persons, not things. As physical things, as bodies, they have the three dimensions with which we are all acquainted. As persons, they also have three dimensions, which are quite different.