

Man's Three Dimensions

Regarding ourselves simply as bodies—or merely as physical things—I would say that our three dimensions, like the three dimensions of any other body, are length, breadth, and height. That is the way in which any body occupies space.

While, as bodies, we are physical things like all other bodies, we are, as we have just seen, the special kind of thing—the only kind of thing—that is called a person. What are our three dimensions as persons, not just as bodies?

In space, a dimension is a direction in which I can move. I can move my hand from left to right, from front to back, from up to down. Like spatial dimensions, personal dimensions are also directions—directions in which I, as a person, can act as a human being. I am sure that we have only three dimensions as physical bodies, but I cannot be as sure that we have only three dimensions as active human beings—only three directions in which our activities can take us.

However, I think that the three dimensions I shall name represent three very important directions that human activity can take. There may be others, but I doubt if there are any as important as these. The three are making, doing, and knowing.

In the first of these three dimensions, making, we have man the artist or artisan—the producer of all sorts of things: shoes, ships, and houses, books, music, and paintings. It is not just when human beings produce statues or paintings that we should call them artists. That is much too restricted a use of the word art. Anything in the world that is artificial rather than natural is a work of art—something man-made.

In the second of these dimensions, doing, we have man the moral and social being—someone who can do right or wrong, someone who, by what he or she does or does not do, either achieves happiness or fails to achieve it, someone who finds it necessary to associate with other human beings in order to do what, as a human being, he or she feels impelled to do.

In the third dimension, knowing, we have man as learner, acquiring knowledge of all sorts—not only about nature, not only about the society of which human beings are a part, not only about human nature, but also about knowledge itself.

In all three of these dimensions, man is a thinker, but the kind of thinking he does in order to make things differs from the kind of thinking he does in order to act morally and socially. Both kinds of thinking differ from the kind of thinking a human being does in order just to know—to know just for the sake of knowing.

Aristotle was very much concerned with the differences that distinguish these three kinds of thinking. He used the term “productive thinking” to describe the kind of thinking that man engages in as a maker; “practical thinking” to describe the kind

that he engages in as a doer; and “speculative” or “theoretical thinking” to describe the kind he engages in as a knower.

This threefold division of the kinds of thinking can be found in Aristotle’s books. Some of them, such as his books on moral and political philosophy, are concerned with practical thinking and with man as a doer—as an individual living his own life and trying to make it as good as possible, and also as a member of society, associated with other human beings and cooperating with them. Some of these books, such as the ones on natural philosophy, are concerned with theoretical thinking about the whole physical world, including man as a part of that world, and man’s mind and knowledge as well.

He wrote a treatise about man as a maker, but that book deals only with man as a maker of poetry, music, and paintings. He entitled it *Poetics* because the Greek word from which we get the word “poetry” means making—making anything, not just the kind of objects that entertain us and that give us pleasure when we enjoy them. Men and women produce an extraordinary variety of useful things, things we use in our daily lives, such as the clothes we wear, the houses we live in, the furniture in those houses, and the implements needed to make such things.

The more general treatment of man as a maker, particularly man as a maker of useful physical things, we find in the books that Aristotle wrote about nature—his books of natural philosophy. In his effort to understand the phenomena of nature, Aristotle frequently resorted to comparisons between the way men produce things and the way nature works. His understanding of what is involved in human making helped him—and it will help us—to understand the workings of nature.

That is why I am going to begin, in Part II of this book, with making as a dimension of human activity. After that, in Part III,

I am going to deal with the dimension of human activity in which man is a moral and social being. And finally, in Part IV, I will come to man as a knower, postponing to the last the most difficult questions that we have to consider—questions about the human mind and knowledge itself.

The most challenging words in anyone's vocabulary are three words that name the universal values that elicit respect and evoke wonder. They are truth, goodness, and beauty—or the true, the good, and the beautiful. These three values pertain to the three dimensions of human activity.

In the sphere of making, we are concerned with beauty or, to say the least, with trying to produce things that are well made. In the sphere of doing, as individuals and as members of society, we are concerned with good and evil, right and wrong. In the sphere of knowing, we are concerned with truth.