

## Aristotle – Physics

[Translated by R. P. Hardie and R. K. Gaye]

### Book I

#### 1

When the objects of an inquiry, in any department, have principles, conditions, or elements, it is through acquaintance with these that knowledge, that is to say scientific knowledge, is attained. For we do not think that we know a thing until we are acquainted with its primary conditions or first principles, and have carried our analysis as far as its simplest elements. Plainly therefore in the science of Nature, as in other branches of study, our first task will be to try to determine what relates to its principles.

The natural way of doing this is to start from the things which are more knowable and obvious to us and proceed towards those which are clearer and more knowable by nature; for the same things are not ‘knowable relatively to us’ and ‘knowable’ without qualification. So in the present inquiry we must follow this method and advance from what is more obscure by nature, but clearer to us, towards what is more clear and more knowable by nature.

Now what is to us plain and obvious at first is rather confused masses, the elements and principles of which become known to us later by analysis. Thus we must advance from generalities to particulars; for it is a whole that is best known to sense-perception, and a generality is a kind of whole, comprehending

many things within it, like parts. Much the same thing happens in the relation of the name to the formula. A name, e.g. 'round', means vaguely a sort of whole: its definition analyses this into its particular senses. Similarly a child begins by calling all men 'father', and all women 'mother', but later on distinguishes each of them.

## 2

The principles in question must be either (a) one or (b) more than one. If (a) one, it must be either (i) motionless, as Parmenides and Melissus assert, or (ii) in motion, as the physicists hold, some declaring air to be the first principle, others water. If (b) more than one, then either (i) a finite or (ii) an infinite plurality. If (i) finite (but more than one), then either two or three or four or some other number. If (ii) infinite, then either as Democritus believed one in kind, but differing in shape or form; or different in kind and even contrary.

A similar inquiry is made by those who inquire into the number of existents: for they inquire whether the ultimate constituents of existing things are one or many, and if many, whether a finite or an infinite plurality. So they too are inquiring whether the principle or element is one or many.

Now to investigate whether Being is one and motionless is not a contribution to the science of Nature. For just as the geometer has nothing more to say to one who denies the principles of his science – this being a question for a different science or for or common to all – so a man investigating principles cannot argue with one who denies their existence. For if Being is just one, and one in the way mentioned, there is a principle no longer, since a principle must be the principle of some thing or things.

To inquire therefore whether Being is one in this sense would be like arguing against any other position maintained for the sake of argument (such as the Heraclitean thesis, or such a thesis as that Being is one man) or like refuting a merely contentious argument – a description which applies to the arguments both of Melissus and of Parmenides: their premisses are false and their conclusions do not follow. Or rather the argument of Melissus is gross and palpable and offers no difficulty at all: accept one ridiculous proposition and the rest follows – a simple enough proceeding.

We physicists, on the other hand, must take for granted that the things that exist by nature are, either all or some of them, in motion which is indeed made plain by induction. Moreover, no man of science is bound to solve every kind of difficulty that may be raised, but only as many as are drawn falsely from the principles of the science: it is not our business to refute those that do not arise in this way: just as it is the duty of the geometer to refute the squaring of the circle by means of segments, but it is not his duty to refute Antiphon's proof. At the same time the holders of the theory of which we are speaking do incidentally raise physical questions, though Nature is not their subject: so it will perhaps be as well to spend a few words on them, especially as the inquiry is not without scientific interest.

The most pertinent question with which to begin will be this: In what sense is it asserted that all things are one? For 'is' is used in many senses. Do they mean that all things 'are' substance or quantities or qualities? And, further, are all things one substance – one man, one horse, or one soul – or quality and that one and the same – white or hot or something of the kind? These are all very different doctrines and all impossible to maintain.