

properties in the object – most probably on the original designer’s instruction, but that is not relevant for the point at issue, since it need not necessarily go like that – and then makes use of these properties to realize a particular outcome.

## 4 The Metaphysics of Artifacts

If this view is adopted, it seems that what an object is for becomes a very flippant sort of thing. A bottle that I use temporarily as the support for a stick at the top of which I am fastening something, changes from being for containing liquids to being for holding a stick upright and then back again to being for containing liquids. If we think of an artifact as something that definitely *is* for something, as a defining property, this seems unacceptable. However, we do accept it in the case of natural objects that we use for a purpose. This stone was not for anything, it is now for cracking a nut, and it will again be not for anything in a few minutes time. I may want to crack another nut in a moment, but I can pick up any other available stone for this, in complete disregard of the first stone’s ephemeral existence as a nut-cracker. Similarly I could pick another bottle for the next stick. Indeed, as far as the purpose of holding a stick upright is concerned, it does not matter whether the bottles are artifacts and in that sense already ‘for something’. They are chosen because they have the right physical properties, just as the stones have the right physical properties for the job of cracking a nut. If bottles grew on trees, that would be just as fine: and indeed, in some countries bottles, i.e., things having the right properties for containing liquids and for keeping sticks upright, do grow on trees. How much do we gain by claiming that bottles – our bottles, made of glass or plastic – essentially are for containing liquids and that gourds essentially are natural objects that, accidentally, can be used for containing liquids?

This capricious metaphysics is a problem only if we interpret the ‘being for something’ of artifacts as the *being* something, essentially, similar to the way certain objects *are* stones or electrons, and consider particular artifacts as *being* screwdrivers, drills, and so forth, essentially. But must we? To maintain that we must is at odds with the character of the intentional idiom. The universal terms occurring in this idiom do not figure in strict, exceptionless laws, comparable to the laws of nature, that determine whether or not we have cut the intentional realm ‘at the joints’. Natural-kind terms refer to objects that all share certain properties, which serve to define them and that figure in the laws to which each and every representative of the kind answers. This is not so for artifacts. Whatever we would take as the defining characteristic of a particular artifact kind or functional kind, it would be the case that certain objects, even artificial objects, would fit the description that we do not consider as such, and that objects that we consider as specimens of the artifact kind do not possess the defining characteristic. For newly designed specimens of a specific artifact kind, the defining characteristics must sometimes be reinterpreted. The status of a Phillips screwdriver as a screwdriver is not contested, but a Phillips screwdrivers does not drive traditional screws, and a traditional

screwdriver drives, with difficulty, only some crosshead screws. This simple example shows that the conditions in which an artifact is meant to show a specific physical behavior are, in a sense, part of its characteristics.

For the technologically sophisticated artifacts of modern culture, the claim that certain objects that we do not consider as specimens of such artifacts would still fit their defining description is, of course, highly theoretical. It is difficult to imagine an object that has the capacity to function as a television set or a satellite while not being designed as a television set or a satellite. However, this does not imply that it is possible to delineate the kinds of television sets or satellites similarly to the way natural kinds are delineated. Hardly any other object would react in the same way as a current television set does to the physical input for which these television sets are designed, but future television sets may operate quite differently in connection with related changes in future broadcasting methods.

The extension of terms from the intentional vocabulary is, therefore, determined by fiat, rather than by behavior falling under strict laws. Compare, in this respect, Derek Parfit's account of what a person is.<sup>11</sup> How exactly Parfit explicates the notion of a person is not relevant here. What is relevant is the fact that in his account, as inevitably in any account, the boundaries of personhood are not in all circumstances clear. Sometimes a particular person's question 'Will that still be me?' or 'Will that mean my death?' is indeterminate. Parfit's examples are perhaps contrived, involving perfect replicas being made while the original is destroyed or brains being split after which each half is transplanted into a different body. But take a more realistic event: as a result of a car accident Geoffrey suffers severe brain damage, and when he recovers it turns out that he has lost all his previous memories. He has to start conscious life anew. Should we say that a person – Geoffrey – died in that car accident? Parfit calls such questions *empty questions*.

In the same way the question 'What is this object for?' may sometimes be an empty question, even for an object that is, purely historically, a (technical) artifact. A screwdriver's hilt from which the shaft has come loose, a single cogwheel from an old alarm clock, are they for anything, even though no-one would deny that they were made for a definite purpose and have been used for that purpose. However we may answer the question, the answer does not add to what is worth knowing about the object.<sup>12</sup>

Thus one should not take the functional terms used to refer to technical artifacts too seriously in a metaphysical sense. Calling something a screwdriver should be seen as shorthand for 'the thing that was made to drive screws', or (less often) for 'the thing I use to drive screws', rather than for 'the thing that *is* a screwdriver'. Technical artifacts are a lot like persons in this respect, or rather persons in an imaginary world where no moral laws forbid us from brainwashing, molding and transforming people

---

<sup>11</sup> Parfit (1984, part III).

<sup>12</sup> Note that this question, when posed by an archaeologist concerning an excavated object, is never an empty question, since in this case the question's aim is to increase our incomplete knowledge of the practices and ways of life of a vanished culture.