When Aristotle asks in *Met.* VII.1 “What is (a) substance?”, he’s not asking for a list. He takes it for granted that most folks can reliably identify genuine substances or entities (the “C-substances” of the *Categories*). Rather, he’s asking what makes these things substances, what is the substance of one of these things?

We know on the basis of his doctrine of the Four Causes what his answer will be: form is what makes a substance the very thing that it is, and this is also his official answer in *Met.* VII.3. But Aristotle wants to probe the issue more deeply in order to understand better the nature of form itself. This is the project in *Met.* VII and VIII.

As a simple example, consider “Cloak”, a particular bronze sphere (cf. 1045a22 ff.):

Cloth

Cloak is a hylomorphic compound, a compound of matter (hulê) and form, or shape (morphê). The matter of Cloth is a certain quantity of bronze, $B$, and the form of a sphere, $S$. To put the point in the simplest way possible:

$$\text{Cloth} = B + S$$

The substance of Cloth – what makes Cloth a thing at all – is the form of sphericality.

**Question #1**: Why does Aristotle choose form over matter in answering the substance question?

**Answer**: Because a substance is essentially one thing (1030b5-10), a “this something” (1029a27-8). Cloth’s matter is a certain quantity of bronze, but that bronze isn’t (and doesn’t by itself constitute) any unity (1029a20 ff.). This fact is reflected in our use of language: we can talk about one sphere or two spheres, but it is at least odd (and perhaps in violation of the rules of grammar) to speak of one bronze or two bronzes. No quantity of bronze is in itself a something.

**Question #2**: But just before going into the furnace, $B$ had a determinate shape (morphê) that could be described in mathematically-precise terms and given a name, just like Cloth’s shape. Why the prejudice?

**Answer**: Any lump of bronze has a determinate shape, but form isn’t just that. Aristotle says that there’s an intimate connection between form and function, between the formal cause and final cause of a thing (198a26). *Genuine form endows its possessor with distinctive capacities over and above those of its material constituent*. Cloth has distinctive capacities over and above the capacities of bronze, whereas $B$ does not. (If it does have truly distinctive capacities, then it’s not a mere lump.)
**Question #3:** What are Cloak’s distinctive capacities?

**Answer:** The following counterfactual is true of Cloak: if Cloak were on an indefinitely large, perfect plane and a simple-vector force were applied to it, then (idealizing out surface friction) Cloak would roll in a perfectly straight line for as long as you like.

Notice that I can tell you *in advance* what Cloak will do. Cloak’s shape is such as to equip it to behave in predictable (indeed, law-abiding) ways. A near-sphere doesn’t do that: even the smallest imperfection will cause it to deviate from a straight line and will ultimately bring the object to rest. (See below* for a corollary.)

**Question #4:** So what is the form?

**Answer:** Hey, you know how to do arithmetic! Just make a simple transformation:

\[ S = \text{Cloak} - B \]

Form (i.e., \( S \)) is simply the difference between Cloak and the bronze that constitutes it. That is, the form is the difference between an actual sphere and that which is merely potentially a sphere. More generally: form is actuality.

Form is not something separate from the matter that gets added to it to make a substance. Form is a condition or modification of the matter, a way that the matter is structured or organized that (a) is stable to a sufficiently high degree (a “this”), and (b) endows the underlying matter with determinate capacities or functions over and above those possessed by the matter itself (a “such”). This explains Aristotle’s deflationary comment in *Met.* VIII.6 that “the ultimate matter and the form are one and the same; the matter <is something> potentially, and the form <is that thing> actually.” Form doesn’t exist except in matter, but it isn’t just the matter.

**Question #5:** But what is this thought experiment about Cloak supposed to show us? What’s the bigger picture?

**Answer:** Aristotle says that the form/substance of a living thing is its soul (1035b15 ff.), and this is where his real interests lie. (He uses artifacts in his examples because they’re simpler.) His hylomorphism allows him to retain Plato’s view concerning the importance of the soul and also to emphasize his own view that the world in which we live is indeed the real world, not (as Plato maintained) merely a realm of shadows. One’s soul is not different from any other form, on Aristotle’s view: it is firmly embedded in the material realm (thought not itself a material thing).

*Anti-Platonist corollary:* note that in specifying Cloak’s capacities, I had to appeal to features of Cloak’s environment (imagined features, as it happens), and this is quite generally the case. But because capacities and form go together as hand-in-glove, it follows that a substance’s form is partly a function of its environment. A simple example: what sorts of structures will count as a *pump* depends on the range of viscosities of the liquids to which the device will be applied. But if that’s the case, Aristotle can proudly declare that his forms are fundamentally different from Plato’s in at least this sense: Plato’s forms are “themselves by themselves,” whereas Aristotle’s forms are inextricably linked to the environment in which they are realized – indeed, so much so that whether a particular structure counts as a form will be a contingent matter determined by relevant facts about the world in which that structure is realized. For instance, a lumpy-looking bit of bronze might well have a genuine form if its specific shape enables it (along with all and only things shaped just like it) to fit into a particular receiver as a key fits into a lock.