

PART I
MAN THE
PHILOSOPHICAL
ANIMAL

Philosophical Games

Many of us have played two games without realizing we were on the way to becoming philosophical. One is called "Animal, Vegetable, Mineral"; the other, "Twenty Questions."

Both games consist in asking questions. However, that is not what makes them philosophical games; it is what lies behind the questions—a set of categories, a scheme of classification. Classifying things, placing them in this or that category, is a familiar process. Everyone does it at one time or another—shopkeepers when they take stock of what is on their shelves, librarians when they catalogue books, secretaries when they file letters or documents. But when the objects to be classified are the contents of the physical world, or the even-larger universe that includes the physical world, then philosophy enters the picture.

The two games—"Animal, Vegetable, Mineral" and "Twenty Questions"—are sometimes played as if they were the same game. That occurs when the first of the twenty questions to be

asked is "Animal, vegetable, or mineral?" in order to find out whether the object being thought of falls into one of these three large categories, or classes, of physical things. But only some of the objects we can think about are physical things. If, for example, the object decided on was a geometrical figure, such as a circle, or a number, such as the square root of minus one, or if it happened to be one of the Greek gods, such as Zeus, Apollo, or Athena, asking whether the object in question was animal, vegetable, or mineral would not—or, at least, should not—get an answer.

The game of twenty questions, when it is not begun by asking "Animal, vegetable, or mineral?" is concerned with discovering any object that can be thought about by anybody. It is not limited to objects that are physical things. Of the two games, it is the more likely to engage us in philosophical thought without our being aware of it. To become aware of it, we need Aristotle's help.

Classifying was one of the skills in which Aristotle excelled. Another was his skill in asking questions. Philosophical thought began with the asking of questions—questions that can be answered on the basis of our ordinary, everyday experience and with some reflection about that experience that results in a sharpening and refinement of our common sense.

Animal, vegetable, and mineral is a rough-and-ready, three-fold division of things we find in the physical world. But we use the word "mineral" loosely when we use it to stand for all the physical things that fall on one side of the line that divides living organisms from inanimate things—rosebushes or mice from sticks or stones. All inanimate things are not minerals, such as gold or silver that we dig from deposits in the earth. Some are rock formations found on the earth's surface or in its interior; some are other forms of matter in liquid or gaseous state.

In the category of nonliving or inanimate bodies that is loosely covered by the term "mineral," Aristotle would have us distinguish between elementary and composite bodies. An elementary body, according to Aristotle, is one that consists in a single kind of matter—gold, for example, or copper or zinc. In contrast, a composite body is one that is composed of two or more different kinds of matter, such as brass, which is a mixture of copper and zinc. But, for Aristotle, the more important distinction is the one that divides living from nonliving things.

What differentiates all living organisms from inert bodies, whether they are elementary or composite bodies? From our ordinary experience of living organisms, we know that they all have certain common characteristics. They take nourishment; they grow; they reproduce.

Among living organisms, what differentiates plants from animals? Again, from our ordinary experience, we know that animals have certain common characteristics that plants lack. They are not rooted in the earth like plants; they have the ability to move from place to place by their own means of locomotion. They do not draw their nourishment from the air and from the soil as plants do. In addition, most animals have sense organs.

The line that divides inert bodies from living organisms sometimes leaves us wondering on which side of the line a particular thing belongs. This is also true of the line that divides plants from animals. For example, some plants appear to have sensitivity even though they do not have sense organs like eyes and ears. Some animals, such as shellfish, seem to lack the power of locomotion; like plants they appear to be rooted in one spot.

In classifying physical things as inanimate bodies, plants, and animals, Aristotle was aware that his division of all physical

things into these three large classes did not exclude borderline cases—things that in a certain respect appear to belong on one side of the dividing line and that, in another respect, appear to belong on the other side. He recognized that in the world of bodies, the transition from things lifeless to living things and from plant life to animal life is gradual and not a clear-cut, all-or-none affair.

Nevertheless, Aristotle persisted in thinking that the differences between living and nonliving bodies and between plants and animals separated them into quite different kinds of things. His reason for holding this view was as follows.

If we did not, in the first place, recognize and understand the clear-cut distinction between a stone and a mouse, we would never find ourselves puzzled by whether something difficult to classify was a living or a nonliving thing. Similarly, if we did not recognize the clear-cut distinction between a rosebush and a horse, we would never wonder whether a given specimen of living organism was a plant or an animal.

Just as animals are a special kind of living organism because they perform functions that plants do not, so for a similar reason are human beings a special kind of animal. They perform certain functions that no other animals perform, such as asking general questions and seeking answers to them by observation and by thought. That is why Aristotle called human beings rational animals—questioning and thinking animals, able to engage in philosophical thought.

There may be animals that appear to straddle the borderline that divides humans from nonhumans. Porpoises and chimpanzees, it has recently been learned, have enough intelligence to engage in rudimentary forms of communication. But they do not appear to ask themselves or one another questions about the nature of things, and they do not appear to try, by one means or

another, to discover the answers for themselves. We may speak of such animals as almost human, but we do not include them as members of the human race.

Each distinct kind of thing, Aristotle thought, has a nature that distinguishes it from all the others. What differentiates one class of things from everything else defines the nature possessed by every individual thing that belongs to that class. When we speak of human nature, for example, we are simply saying that all human beings have certain characteristics and that these characteristics differentiate them from other animals, from plants, and from inanimate things.

Aristotle's scheme of classification arranged the five main classes of physical things in an ascending order. He placed elementary and composite bodies at the bottom of the scale. Each of the higher classes is higher because it possesses the characteristics of the class below and, in addition, has certain distinguishing characteristics that the class below does not have.

In the scale of natural things, the animate is a higher form of existence than the inanimate; animals are a higher form of life than plants; and human life is the highest form of life on earth.

All living organisms, like all inanimate bodies, occupy space and have weight, but in addition, as we have noted, they eat, grow, and reproduce. Because they are living organisms, animals, like plants, perform these vital functions, but they also perform certain functions that plants do not. At the top of the scale are human beings who perform all the vital functions performed by other animals and who, in addition, have the ability to seek knowledge by asking and answering questions and the ability to think philosophically.

Of course, it can be said that many of the higher animals think, and even that computers think. Nor is it true that only

humans have intelligence. Intelligence in varying degrees is to be found throughout the animal world, just as it is to be found in varying degrees in members of the human race. But the special kind of thinking that gives rise to asking and answering philosophical questions distinguishes humans from other animals. No other animal plays philosophical games.

In the world of physical things that Aristotle divides into five large classes, the word "body" names the one, all-embracing class. There is no more inclusive class of which bodies are a subclass. Every *thing* in the physical world is a *body* of one kind or another.

Can we go to the opposite extreme and find a subclass of bodies at which we must stop because we are unable to divide it any further into smaller subclasses? Is the human species such a subclass of animals?

Faced with that question, most of us probably think at once of different races or varieties of mankind—differentiated by skin color, by facial characteristics, by head shape, and so on. Why do not such characteristics divide human beings into different kinds or subclasses?

In this connection, Aristotle made an important distinction. Not all the characteristics of a thing, he said, define its nature or essence. As we have already seen, Aristotle thought man should be defined as a rational—or philosophical—animal. Being able to ask questions about the what, the why, and the wherefore of things is what makes anyone a human being, not the skin color, the snub nose, the straight hair, or the shape of the head.

We can, of course, divide human beings into an endless variety of subclasses—tall or short, fat or thin, white or black, strong or weak, and so on. But although such differences may

be used to distinguish one subgroup of human beings from another, they cannot be used, according to Aristotle, to exclude any of these subgroups from the human race. What is even more important, it cannot be said that the members of one subgroup are more or less human than the members of another.

In other words, the differences between one subclass of human beings and another are superficial or minor, as compared with the basic or major differences that separate human beings from other animals. Aristotle called the superficial or minor differences accidental; the basic or major differences he regarded as essential.

Human beings and brute animals are essentially different; tall human beings and short ones, fat human beings and thin-ones, are accidentally different. It is only in this way that one human being differs from another. We are all animals of the same kind, but one individual may have more and another individual less of this or that human characteristic. Such individual differences are much less important than the one thing that unites all men and women—their common humanity, which is the one respect in which all human beings are equal.