
To Whom It Makes a Difference

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THE SUMMING UP in the preceding chapter together with the logical assessment of the alternatives that the future holds sets the stage for the problem to which we now turn—the problem of determining the practical and the theoretical consequences that flow from opposite answers to the questions about how man differs.

Just as the question itself is divided into two parts, so the problem of the consequences must be divided into two parts. The first part of the problem asks what difference it makes whether man differs from other animals in kind or only in degree. Although our present answer to the question of how man differs is that he differs in kind, we have allowed for the possibility that contrary evidence may be forthcoming in the future; and so we are concerned with the consequences of finding out that man differs only in degree. In addition, we must consider the difference it makes which of the other pair of alternatives is true—that man differs in kind but only superficially, or that man differs radically in kind from other things.

The second part of the problem concentrates on that same pair of alternatives—on the difference it makes whether the materialist or the immaterialist hypothesis is true, and, with that, whether the difference in kind, between man and other things, is superficial or radical. Here we can take no position at present, in the light of available evidences and arguments. But with an eye on the certainty that one or the other position will be confirmed

in the future, we are concerned now to consider the consequences that then would follow alternatively on one side and on the other.

The consequences with which we are concerned may be either practical or theoretical. By *practical* consequences, I mean effects in the realm of action, either directly on conduct or on the principles that underlie conduct or that are appealed to in order to justify conduct. By *theoretical* consequences, I mean effects in the realm of thought, either by entailment or by opposition. What other propositions (opinions or beliefs) are affected by the conclusion that man's difference in kind is radical, or by the conclusion that it is only superficial? What is entailed by either conclusion? What is precluded as contrary to either conclusion?

In Chapter 17, we will deal with the practical consequences of all the alternatives that we have considered. In Chapter 18, we will restrict our attention to the choice between saying that the difference between man and other things is only a superficial difference in kind and saying that it is a radical difference in kind. It is only this set of alternatives—involving the truth of the materialist hypothesis, on the one hand, and of the immaterialist hypothesis, on the other—that has serious consequences in the realm of theory, affecting some of man's fundamental convictions and beliefs.

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Different attitudes can be and are taken toward the problem of drawing practical consequences from the fact that man differs from other animals in kind or only in degree.

On the one hand, there are those who maintain that the difference between the way in which we treat men and the way in which we treat other animals is not at all dependent on or affected by how man differs from other animals. Our differential conduct toward man and beast is emotionally, not rationally, motivated; or if it is not wholly emotional, its reasons are purely reasons of expediency, not reasons of principle. [1] If the fact is that men and other animals differ in kind, we can, of course, use that to justify the different kinds of treatment we accord men and other animals. But if the fact is that men and other

animals differ only in degree, we can find other ways of justifying our differential treatment of men and other animals. It might suffice to argue that one kind of treatment is appropriate for members of our own species, and another kind for other species, even if all the differences among species are only differences in degree. In short, the ultimate reason why we treat men as we do, or attribute to them a certain respect or dignity that we deny other animals, or excoriate the enslavement, exploitation, and consumption of men, but not of animals, is that we simply *like* the results that such policies produce for ourselves and our fellow men. If the facts of the matter tend to support such policies, well and good; but if they do not, no matter, for we can find other ways, equally good, of justifying the policies we *like* or think it *expedient* to act on.

On the other hand, there are those—and I am one of them—who maintain that sound policies for the conduct of our relations with our fellow men and for our quite different treatment of other animals must be based on the nature of man, on the nature of other animals, and on the character of the difference between them. For example, I would say that if man differs only in degree from other animals, then a sharp line cannot be drawn to separate the world of persons from the world of things; in fact, the distinction between person and thing becomes meaningless or at best arbitrary if there are only differences in degree, since that distinction is either a distinction in kind or no distinction at all.

I would maintain, furthermore, that the special dignity and respect accorded persons and not accorded things is based on an argument that involves two premises—one a normative or “ought” premise, the other a factual or “is” premise. The normative premise consists in the proposition that persons *ought* to be treated in a certain way, different from the way in which we treat things: their lives and liberties ought to be respected; we ought not to use them merely as means (we ought not to make chattel slaves of them; we ought not to consume them as food, etc.) The factual premise consists in the proposition that men are persons and other animals are things. I am not saying here what must be true in order to establish the proposition that men are persons and that other animals are things. I am content to rest my case here on the point that if men and other animals differ only in degree, the

whole distinction between person and thing evaporates and we are left with no argument of this sort to justify our differential treatment of men and other animals. [2]

At this point, we must face the obvious objection from the man who takes the other attitude toward such matters. He claims that we do not need an argument of this sort to justify our conduct; we can find other ways of doing it, just as good. I cannot deny that other ways of justifying our conduct are possible. I know they have been used. I can only deny that they are *just as good*. These other ways of justifying our conduct are all *ad hoc*. They are all rationalizations of what we want to do rather than reasons of principle. Those who want to do opposite things can always find ways of rationalizing—and thus justifying—their opposite purposes. Thus, for example, if we want to treat men differently from animals even though they differ only in degree, we can justify this by saying that men all belong to the same species. But if some men want to treat other men as men now treat animals (using them as means, enslaving them, or killing them for expediency's sake), they can also justify this by saying that, even though all men belong to the same species, nevertheless, some men are superior in degree to other men, and so superior men are justified in treating inferior men as men treat other animals who are inferior in degree.

In contrast, when we confine ourselves to justifying our conduct by appealing to normative principles and the facts of the case, we cannot justify opposite lines of conduct. If the principles and facts dictate one line of conduct, they preclude support for or justification of the opposite. This is the one clear advantage of conduct that is *principled* over *unprincipled* conduct even though the latter can be justified in some *ad hoc* fashion. [3]

Within the scope of this book, I cannot argue further for the position that I am here taking; namely, that conduct should be principled and that, when it is, the facts of nature have practical consequences. My further analysis of the practical consequences of saying that man differs in kind or only in degree will be of interest only to those who agree with me about this. Those who do not will, of course, continue to say that it makes no practical difference at all how in fact man differs from other animals—whether in kind or in degree.