

ARISTOTLE FOR EVERYBODY: Difficult Thought Made Easy

Mortimer J. Adler

INTRODUCTION

Why Aristotle?

Why for everybody?

And why is an exposition of Aristotle for everybody an introduction to common sense?

I can answer these three questions better after I have answered one other. Why philosophy? Why should everyone learn how to think philosophically—how to ask the kind of searching questions that children and philosophers ask and that philosophers sometimes answer?

I have long been of the opinion that philosophy is everybody's business—but not in order to get more information about the world, our society, and ourselves. For that purpose, it would be better to turn to the natural and the social sciences and to history. It is in another way that philosophy is useful—to help us to understand things we already know, understand them better than we now understand them. That is why I think everyone should learn how to think philosophically.

For that purpose, there is no better teacher than Aristotle. I do not hesitate to recommend him as the teacher to begin with. The only other teacher that I might have chosen is Plato, but in my judgment he is second best. Plato raised almost all the questions that everyone should face; Aristotle raised them too and, in addition, gave us clearer answers to them. Plato taught Aristotle how to think philosophically, but Aristotle learned the lesson so well that he is the better teacher for all of us.

Since we are concerned with learning how to think the way Aristotle did, what Aristotle thought is more important than who he was or when and how he lived. The centuries and the changes that separate him from us may make the conditions of his life and the society in which he lived appear strange to us; but, as I will try to explain, they do not make either the style or the content of his thinking strange to us.

Aristotle was born in 384 B.C. in the Macedonian town of Stagira on the north coast of the Aegean Sea. His father was a physician in the court of the King of Macedonia. The King's grandson became Alexander the Great, to whom Aristotle later became both tutor and friend.

At the age of eighteen, Aristotle took up residence in Athens and enrolled in Plato's Academy as a student of philosophy. It was not long before Plato found Aristotle a troublesome student who questioned what he taught and openly disagreed with him. When Plato died, and Alexander became the ruler of Greece, Aristotle opened his own school, the Lyceum. That was in 335 B. C.

The Lyceum had a fine library, an extensive collection of maps, and a zoo in which Aristotle collected specimens of animal life. It has been said that some of these were sent to him by Alexander from the countries he conquered. When Alexander died in 323 B.C., Aristotle exiled himself from Athens to one of the Aegean islands. He died there a year later at the age of 63.

Aristotle lived in a society in which the citizens had free time to enjoy the pursuits of leisure because they had slaves to take care of their estates and to do menial work. It was also a society in which women occupied an inferior position. Plato, in projecting the institutions of an ideal state, proposed that all political offices, except that of military leader, should be open to women, because he regarded men and women as essentially equal; but Aristotle accepted the more conventional view of his day concerning the inferiority of women.

I shall have more to say in a later chapter about Aristotle's views with regard to slavery and to women. Here I want to say at once that my use of the words “man,” “men,” and “mankind” in their generic sense to stand for human beings of both genders, and not just for the male portion of the population, is in no way an indication that I share Aristotle's view about women. On the contrary, with regard to this point, I am a Platonist.

There may be some persons who regard Aristotle's antiquity as a disadvantage. They may feel that it would be much better to select as a teacher someone alive today—someone acquainted with the world in which we live, someone who knows what modern science has discovered about that world. I do not agree with them.

Though Aristotle was a Greek who lived twenty-five centuries ago, he was sufficiently acquainted with the main outlines of the world in which we live to talk about it as if he were alive today. As an aid to our being able to think philosophically, Aristotle would not be a better teacher even if he were acquainted with everything that modern scientists know.

In an effort to understand nature, society, and man, Aristotle began where everyone should begin—with what he already knew in the light of his ordinary, commonplace experience.

Beginning there, his thinking used notions that all of us possess, not because we were taught them in school, but because they are the common stock of human thought about anything and everything.

We sometimes refer to these notions as our common sense about things. They are notions that we have formed as a result of the common experience we have in the course of our daily lives—experiences we have without any effort of inquiry on our part, experiences we all have simply because we are awake and conscious.

In addition, these common notions are notions we are able to express in the common words we employ in everyday speech.

Forgive me for repeating the word “common” so many times. I cannot avoid doing so, and I have to lay stress on that word because what it means lies at the heart of my argument. Not everything is common. There are many things we call our own, but there are other things that we recognize as not exclusively ours. We share them with others, such as a book that our friends have read or a motion picture some of us have enjoyed, or a house that all the members of the family share when they live in it together.

The things we share are common. There are many things that different groups of people share. There are fewer things that we all share and are common to all of us, simply because we are all human. It is in this last, all-embracing sense of the word “common” that I refer to common experiences and common notions, or common sense, as common.

Our common-sense notions are expressed by such words as “thing,” “body,” “mind,” “change,” “cause,” “part,” “whole,” “one,” “many,” and so on. Most of us have been using these words and notions for a long time—since we were quite young. We started to use them in order to talk about experiences that all of us have had—of things moving or remaining at rest, of plants growing, of animals being born and dying, of sitting down and getting up, of aches and pains, of going to sleep, dreaming, and waking up, of feeding and exercising our bodies, and of making up our minds.

I could enlarge this list of our common experiences, just as I could enlarge the list of the common words we use and the common notions we have. But even without the additions that could be made, it should be clear that the words, experiences, and notions I have mentioned are all common—not exclusively yours, or mine, or anyone else's.

In contrast, the things that scientists observe in their laboratories or that explorers observe on their expeditions are very special experiences. We may learn about them from their reports, but, as a rule, we do not experience them ourselves.

Human beings have learned a great deal since Aristotle's day, mainly through the discoveries of modern science. Applied science has created a world and a way of life very different from his world and his way of life. He did not have an automobile, could not talk on the telephone, never saw what can be seen through a micro-

scope or a telescope, did not have a close view of the surface of the moon, and never heard a description of its surface by men walking on it. But Aristotle had the same common experiences in his day that we have in ours. The kind of thinking he did about them enabled him to understand them better than most of us do.

That and that alone is the reason he can help us to understand these common experiences better and help us to understand ourselves and our lives, as well as the world and the society in which we live, even though our way of life, our world, and our society are different from his.

Aristotle's thinking began with common sense, but it did not end there. It went much further. It added to and surrounded common sense with insights and understandings that are not common at all. His understanding of things goes deeper than ours and sometimes soars higher. It is, in a word, *uncommon* common sense.

That is his great contribution to all of us. What I am going to try to do in this book is to make his *uncommon* common sense easier to understand. If it becomes easier to understand, it might even become less uncommon.

PART ONE: MAN THE PHILOSOPHICAL ANIMAL

1. 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. 

WELCOME NEW MEMBERS

Ben Aaronson

Stuart Garrie

Israel Sandoval

John Segvich

We welcome your comments, questions or suggestions.

THE GREAT IDEAS ONLINE

published weekly for its members by the

CENTER FOR THE STUDY OF THE GREAT IDEAS

Founded in 1990 by Mortimer J. Adler & Max Weismann

Max Weismann, Publisher and Editor

Ken Dzugan, Senior Fellow and Archivist

A not-for-profit (501)(c)(3) educational organization.

Donations are tax deductible as the law allows.