

PHILOSOPHICAL GAMES

Mortimer Adler

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 acci-

dental; 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.

THE GREAT DIVIDE

Aristotle's division of physical things into inanimate bodies and living organisms, and his division of living organisms into plants, animals, and human beings, do not exhaust his scheme of classification or his set of categories.

Think, for example, of Wellington's horse at the Battle of Waterloo or of Julius Caesar crossing the Rubicon. Think of Shakespeare's Hamlet, the Loch Ness monster, or the angel Gabriel. Think of the odor of roses in full bloom, the color of a ripe tomato, Newton's theory of gravitation, or God.

None of these is a physical thing that exists now as animal, vegetable, or mineral. Wellington's horse and Julius Caesar existed in the past, but they exist no longer. Shakespeare's Hamlet is a fictitious person, not a real one. The existence of the Loch Ness monster is highly questionable. As for the odor of roses in full bloom, the angel Gabriel, Newton's theory of gravitation, and God, none of these fall under any of the headings that cover bodies that either exist or have existed in the physical world.

The universe of objects that can be thought of is much larger than the physical world—the world of bodies, either those now in existence or those that have existed in the past. It includes the world of bodies, but it also includes much else besides. The line that divides bodies from everything else is the great divide.

What is left when we put the whole physical world to one side? What belongs to the other half of the all-embracing universe of objects that we can think about? I am not going to try to give an exhaustive enumeration of the kinds of objects that are not bodies, but here at least are some of the possible kinds:

- mathematical objects, such as triangles and square roots
- imaginary or fictitious characters, such as Shakespeare’s Hamlet or Mark Twain’s Huckleberry Finn
- disembodied or unembodied spirits of all sorts, including ghosts and angels
- gods or God when divine beings are thought of as not having bodies
- mythological beings, such as centaurs and mermaids
- minds that are able to think up the kind of questions we have been asking
- ideas or theories that minds think with

I am fully aware that this enumeration of possible objects of thought raises many questions. Do such objects exist, in any sense of that word? If they do, how does their existence differ from the existence of bodies? What does it mean to call them possibilities? Are there any objects of thought that are impossibilities? If minds are not bodies, what is their relationship to bodies?

I will try to answer some of these questions—with Aristotle’s help—in later chapters of this book. Some are difficult philosophical questions that I will postpone until the very end. For the moment, asking them serves the purpose of calling attention to the larger universe of which the physical world is but a part, even though the world of bodies may be the only one that really exists.

Staying with that world, we must consider another distinction made by Aristotle. We need it to handle the question about the odor of roses in full bloom or the color of a ripe tomato. Roses and tomatoes are bodies, they are plants, but their odor and their color are not. Considering the physical world, Aristotle drew a line that divides its constituents into two major kinds. On the one side of the line, he placed *bodies*; on the other side, their *characteristics* or *attributes*, such as their odors or colors.

In our everyday speech, we ordinarily make the same distinction. We do not speak of the size and weight of a stone as if it were a body. I would not ask you to hand me the stone’s size or weight, for I know that you must hand me the stone in order for me to feel its size or weight.

We can think of the stone’s size or weight without thinking of the stone, but we cannot change the stone’s size or weight without changing the stone. If the stone is lying in a pile of stones, we can take it from the pile and leave the other stones behind, but we can-

not take the stone's size or weight away from it and leave the stone behind.

What belongs to a body in the way in which the stone's size or weight belongs to it is, according to Aristotle, something that has its existence in a thing (as the stone's weight exists in the stone), but does not exist in and of itself (as the stone exists).

A physical thing, a body, may belong to a collection of things from which it can be removed—as one stone can be taken from a pile of stones. But each of the stones in the pile exists in and of itself, even when it exists in a collection of stones. That is not true of the stone's size or weight. Sizes and weights do not exist in and of themselves. They are always the sizes and weights of physical things, and they cease to exist when the bodies in which they exist cease to exist.

Another way of grasping this basic distinction between physical things and their attributes is to consider how things change. A stone with a rough surface can be polished and made smooth. A stone that is almost round in shape can be made perfectly round. While we are changing a stone's attributes, we are dealing with one and the same stone. It is not another stone, but the same stone altered.

If it did not remain the same stone while becoming different in this or that respect, it could not be said to have changed from being rough to being smooth or from being larger to being smaller. When we understand this, we understand Aristotle's reason for saying that a physical thing is that which remains what it is (this individual stone) while at the same time being subject to change in one respect or another (in size or weight, shape, color, or texture).

The attributes of bodies, unlike bodies themselves, are never subject to change. Roughness never becomes smoothness; green never becomes red. It is the rough *stone* that becomes smooth; the green *tomato* that becomes red when it ripens. Physical things, in short, are changeable. Physical attributes are not changeable; they are the respects in which physical things change.

Aristotle attempted to make a complete enumeration of the attributes that physical things have. Its completeness may be questioned, but the attributes he names are ones we are all acquainted with in common experience, especially those that are the principal respects in which things change:

- in quantity, when they increase or decrease in weight or size
- in quality, when they alter in shape, color, or texture
- in place or position, when they move from here to there

A thing has other attributes, such as the relationships in which it stands to other things, the actions it performs, the results of its being acted on, the time of its coming into existence, the duration of its existence, and the time of its ceasing to exist.

Of all the attributes that a physical thing has, the most important are those that it has throughout its existence and with respect to which it does not change as long as it exists. These permanent attributes make it the kind of thing it is. For example, it is a permanent attribute of salt that it dissolves in water; a permanent attribute of certain metals that they are conductors of electricity; a permanent attribute of mammals that they give birth to living offspring and suckle their young.


Such attributes not only make a thing the special kind of thing it is, they also differentiate one kind of thing from another. Being able to ask questions of the sort we have been asking is a permanent attribute of rational animals that differentiates us from other mammals. Rational animals are, of course, bodies. They are physical things, but not only physical things.

We recognize this fact in our use of the word “person.” We call human beings persons. We do not call spiders, snakes, sharks or birds persons. When we treat our pet cat or dog as if it were a person, we treat it as if it were human—or almost human. Objects that we regard as mere things, we do not treat in the same manner.

Up to this point, the word “thing” has been used to refer to physical things—to bodies. Now the word “thing” has been used in contrast to the word “person.” It is a troublesome word. Its meaning is sometimes so broad that it refers to any possible object of thought—not only to existent physical things, but also to their attributes as well, and to objects that do not exist, objects that may never have existed, and even objects that cannot possibly exist. Sometimes the word “thing” narrowly applies only to bodies that now exist in the physical world, bodies that have existed there in the past, or bodies that can exist there in the future.

Using the same word in a variety of senses is often unavoidable. In the case of the most important words we use, especially words we use in ordinary everyday speech, it is almost impossible not to do so. Aristotle frequently called attention to the different senses in

which he found it necessary to use the same word. When we think about our experience as he did, we must also pay attention to the different senses of the words we use.

Human beings are physical things in one sense of that word and not in another when we call them persons, not things. As physical things, as bodies, they have the three dimensions with which we are all acquainted. As persons, they also have three dimensions, which are quite different. 

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