

## CHAPTER 3

### Words and Meanings

#### Part 6

[ In this section Mortimer Adler is pressing the point that humans are different from other mammals by an order of magnitude. He shows this by discussing how humans can distinguish between "perceptual" ideas and "conceptual" ideas. ]

Another mistake about language that follows as a consequence of the failure to distinguish the human intellect from the senses is, strictly speaking, not a philosophical mistake. It is one of which animal psychologists and behavioral scientists are for the most part guilty, though many contemporary philosophers associate themselves with the position taken by students of animal behavior.

In their study of the evidence of animal communication, they seldom if ever note the difference between **signs that function merely as signals** and **signs that function as designators**—as names that refer to objects. Almost all of the cries, sounds, gestures, that animals in the wild, and domesticated animals as well, use to express their emotions and desires, serve as signals, not as designators.

It is only in the laboratory and under experimental conditions, **often with very ingeniously contrived special apparatus**, that such **higher mammals as chimpanzees and bottle-nosed dolphins appear** to be communicating by using words **as if** they were names, and even to be making sentences by putting them together **with some vestige of syntax**.

The appearance is then misinterpreted by the scientists as a basis for asserting that the only difference between animal and human language is one of degree, not of kind—a difference in the number of name words in an animal's vocabulary and a difference in the complexity of the utterances that are taken to be sentences.

This misinterpretation arises from the neglect or ignorance, on the part of the scientists, **of the difference between perceptual and conceptual thought**. That, in turn, stems from their **failure to acknowledge the difference between the senses and the intellect** or their denial that the difference exists.

That these differences should not be ignored and cannot be denied would have to be conceded by anyone who looked at the evidence with an unprejudiced eye—by anyone who did not start out with the firm intention of showing that humans and brutes differ only in degree. While there is evidence that chimpanzees under experimental conditions do use artificially contrived signs to designate or name things, **the things they name are all perceptual objects**. There is not a single piece of evidence showing their ability to use signs to designate what is not perceived through their senses or **what lies totally beyond the sensible realm** and is intrinsically imperceptible.

Therein lies the difference between the animal's power of perceptual thought and **the human power of conceptual thought**. There is no doubt that the animal's power of perceptual thought enables it to perform acts of abstraction and generalization that have a certain similitude to human abstraction and generalization.

The animal's behavior manifests different reactions to objects that are different in kind. But the kinds of things that animals appear to differentiate are all kinds of which there are perceptual instances in the animal's experience. Humans differentiate kinds or classes of which there either are no perceptual instances in their experience or of which there cannot be any. This is the distinguishing characteristic of conceptual thought and the irrefutable evidence of the presence of intellect in man and of its absence in brutes.

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In all the experimental work done on animals, there is no instance where a sign that an animal uses gets its meaning from a collocation of

other signs that purport to express its meaning. In every case, a new sign that is introduced into the animal's vocabulary becomes meaningful through being attached to a perceptual object with which the animal has direct acquaintance.

If the students of animal behavior had engaged in their observations and experiments with a recognition of the difference between perceptual and conceptual thought, and with an acknowledgment that humans have intellect as well as senses, whereas animals lack intellects, they would not be so prone to ignore or deny the difference in kind between the human and animal use of signs as names or designators.

Adler, Mortimer, *Ten Philosophical Mistakes* (London 1985), Chapter 3, Section 6, pp.?? (I do not have my copy of the book at this moment...only a PDF without page numbers!?!? R.A. Baker, Ph.D.)