Difference of Degree and Difference of Kind In Philosophical Thought

In an effort to differentiate between difference of degree and difference of kind, Mr. Portos *(Harry Stottlemeier's Discovery,* chapter 7) gives concrete examples of difference of degree in the varying heights and weights of Jill, Laura and Fran, and of the difference of kind in the different types of measurement needed to calculate their heights and weights. He attempts to use these distinctions and their application to illustrate two things to the girls; that the difference between the mental behavior of animals and men is one of degree, and that the difference of kind of mental behavior that exists between animals and men can be arrived at according to the extent that each of these classes possesses a culture.

Jill, Laura and Fran find all these distinctions difficult to follow at first. While they seem to grasp them regarding their own heights and weights, they tend to lose them when dealing with the philosophical concepts of mind and culture. What is distinct about the two types of measurement needed to calibrate height and weight, is not as distinct about the varying degrees to which animals and men possess culture and mental aptitude.

R. G. Collingwood, in *An Essay on Philosophical Method,* illustrates the principle of overlapping classes regarding philosophical subject matter in which difference of degree and difference of kind are "fused." He states that "differences in degree and differences in kind are two species of the genus difference, and in the case of philosophical concepts, they must accordingly overlap to form a type of difference partaking of the nature of both." (p. 74)

Jill, Laura and Fran could readily see the difference of degree between their heights and weights as discerned in terms of who is taller and who is heavier, and that these differences are calculated differently. Thus, marking the differences in measurement, whether it be of height or weight, is marking differences of degree because they are marking the difference between the same kind of thing (measurement) which differs in some further way. But, the girls noted, they are also marking differences of kind here because they are dealing with two difference kinds of measurement, height and weight.

Collingwood sees these aforementioned non-philosophical differences of degree and of kind as able to be "disentangled." Here we have distinction and opposition: the girls are of different heights and weights and these heights and weights are measured differently. But, Collingwood concurs, "differences of degree and differences of kind ... are in philosophy fused into a new type of difference uniting the characteristics of both." Here "distinction and opposition ... coalesce into one, so that what seems at first sight a mere opposition — the relation, that is, between a term and its own absence — turns out to be also a distinction between two terms, and vice versa." (p. 76)

In the case of Mr. Portos' man/animal-mind/culture, it is not merely that man has culture and animal doesn't, and, therefore, man possesses a mind and animal doesn't. Nor is it that just man possesses a greater degree of culture than animal, and, therefore, a greater degree of mental ability. Rather, there is an overlap here in "that the lower is contained in the higher, the higher transcending the lower and adding to it something new, whereas the lower partially coincides with the higher, but differs from it in rejecting this increment." (p. 91) Collingwood concludes that this overlap then is not one of "extension between the classes," but rather "an overlap of intention between concepts, each in its degree a specification of their generic essence, but each embodying it more adequately than the one below." (p. 91)

After several other illustrations given by Mr. Portos, Fran begins to make some philosophical sense concerning all these "distinctions about distinctions." She discerns: "Animals just do certain kinds of things, live and travel in certain set ways. But man can invent new ways of living and new ways of changing the world around him." (p. 33) In essence, she is articulating that animal culture overlaps human culture not in that it includes human culture as a part of itself, but rather in that it adopts part of human culture (set ways of doing things) while still denying another part (new ways of doing things).

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References

Collingwood, R. G. *An Essay on Philosophical Method.* Oxford, England: Oxford University Press, 1933.

Lipman, M. *Harry Stottlemeier's Discovery.* New Jersey: First Mountain Foundation, 1971.