

Chapter 2

Living things

If the rest of this book is to be of any service to you, the first axiom that you must accept is this: living things do not act like nonliving things. If you deny that, this book can only annoy you. That axiom may seem so obvious to you as to be not worth mentioning. Yet most of us very often act as if we expect other people to behave like rocks. And when we act toward other people as if they were rocks or blankets or typewriters or teacups, we make unending trouble for ourselves. It is true that people do have some features in common with rocks and typewriters. There are, however, important differences between living and nonliving things that most of us overlook time and time again, and to our sorrow. One of my chief purposes here is to make it easier for you to call to mind the important differences between people and rocks.

I do not say that we often mistake people for rocks. We do tell them apart, but how do we, indeed, do so? How do we distinguish living from nonliving things? What features are most telling? Some familiar features are not wholly reliable indicators. A slug can look very much like a little rock. A slug moves, but so does a river. A human talks, but so does a radio.

PURPOSES

The crucial difference between living and nonliving things is purpose. Physical laws are sufficient to describe the behavior of a nonliving thing. Physical laws are necessary to describe the behavior of a living creature, but they are not sufficient; you must also take account of the intentions or *purposes* of the creature. You must know what the creature *wants* to do.

Think of throwing a ball to Cora. Your hand pushes the ball in Cora's direction. Your hand "tells" the ball to go to Cora. When the ball leaves your

hand, it must move in a ballistic arc described by Newton's laws of motion; it can do nothing else. The ball will not stop until something physical stops it—Cora's hands or the ground or something else. The ball has no character enabling it to stop or turn in midair. If you have thrown the ball so high and fast that it will go over Cora's head, it will do you no good to shout at it. The ball will continue over her head.

Now think of sending Charles with a message for Cora. You tell him, "Take this to Cora," and you give him a shove in the right direction. If Charles accepts your purpose as his own, he will go off to Cora with your message. But if he has no care for your purpose, he may turn aside to watch a croquet game or to go fishing. Our ball contains within itself no purpose of its own. It moves as your hand "tells" it and as its own mass and the earth's gravitation tell it—as a physical thing must. But Charles contains within himself his own purpose, either one he generates (such as going fishing) or one he borrows or accepts from you (carrying the message to Cora).

Even if Charles accepts your charge to him and carries the message faithfully, his trajectory will not be analogous to that of the ball. Charles will turn left or right at his own initiative to avoid obstacles. He will look farther afield if he does not find Cora where he looks first. If he does not at first find Cora, Charles does not (as the ball would) fall down on the ground and lie there.

Or think of walking up to a statue—a nonliving statue of stone or wood or papier-mâché. Push on it. If you push hard enough, the statue will tip and then fall over. As the statue begins to tip, it will not increase its backward push against your hand; it will do nothing that would help it remain upright. And after it topples, it will not get up again. It will just lie there until someone moves it. If, however, you

walk up to a person and push, the person, intending to remain upright, will immediately push back. If you push harder, the person will push back hard or jump away to avoid your pushing. If you push suddenly and hard so that the person falls, he or she (the person who wants to be upright) will immediately leap upright.

The nonliving statue is passive; it obeys Newton's laws of motion. It continues in its state of rest or uniform motion until disturbed by an outside force. Then it moves in whatever direction the force pushes, and remains in its new state. The material structures of human bodies also obey Newton's laws, but people go beyond reactions to external forces, initiating their own forces to guide their actions toward their own purposes. People at all times act to maintain their preferred states. If a person wants to remain vertical, the person exerts an immediate counterforce against any disturbance to that preferred state.

In Chapter 1, I said that we choose actions because of internal urges or standards and because of what is possible in the environment, the two sources of causes acting simultaneously. What I said there may have sounded as if the two sources are equal in their effects upon our actions—or as if each realm, the living and the nonliving, puts shape on events in the other. That is not the case. Living creatures bring about events in the environment that nonliving things cannot produce. Nonliving things always go downhill unless thrown uphill by an external force. Living things go uphill whenever they wish. If they have the strength, they go directly uphill; if they do not, they find some way to circumvent that difficulty. The environment does not put shape on living behavior; the environment offers opportunities and restrictions, but it does not determine the particular actions of living things. I will put more detail on this asymmetry in Chapter 3.

Rocks, balls, and statues do not push back; people do. Rocks, balls, and statues do not start, stop, or alter their paths to carry out inner purposes; people do. Living creatures counteract disturbances to preferred or intended states; nonliving things do not.

TALKING ABOUT PEOPLE

All that, I hope, seems simple and straightforward. Yet our ways of talking about other people often sound as if we think people will behave like statues. Here are some things we say:

Put some pressure on him.
We'll push to get it done.
She can pull strings.
She made me do it.
They resisted.
She carries more weight than he does.
I've got to get the upper hand.

You can imagine saying those things about nonliving objects: *Push* the rock out of the way. *Take hold* of that thing. *Pull* the strings of the marionette. The heavy rock *resisted* our efforts. But we speak about people that way, too, as if our dealings with them were as simple as that. Some of us even speak of “knocking some sense into” people as if bringing about understanding, or at least compliance, could be brought about in a manner analogous to kicking a vending machine that isn't giving out an expected candy bar. We speak of “getting the upper hand” or of “handling” someone carefully. The word *manage* comes to us from the ancient Latin word for “hand.” We speak of a person who assists in the training of a prizefighter as his “handler.”

Managers and administrators often speak with metaphors implying that “hard” things or methods are more effective or reliable or true than “soft” ones. “Now, don't go soft; you're going to have to be hard with him.” “These are the hard facts.” To many people, hard, strong, and tough sound good, while soft, weak, and tender sound bad—or at least incompetent. As Kenneth Boulding (1990, pp. 77–78) has pointed out, however, actions called strong and hard are usually those using threats, and threats often have less lasting effect than negotiating or purchasing, even though talking and paying for benefits are sometimes considered weak behavior. Taking a “hard line,” Boulding says, usually signals unwillingness to learn. To be “tough,” he says, is usually to defend oneself against change, whereas “it is the softies who are adaptable,” and often “the softies who survive and have the greatest power” (p. 78).

Among nonliving things, it is sometimes true that the harder things are the more effective. One uses harder metals to shape softer metals. But even with nonliving things, the opposite is also sometimes true. Water wears away rock. A dinner plate is easily broken with a fist. An edge of paper will cut tough skin.

My point is simple: Our language provides us with many easy ways to speak misleadingly about living things, including ourselves. If we go by the surface of the words, if we do not beware the metaphors, we can find ourselves behaving stupidly toward others.

TREATING PEOPLE LIKE THINGS

Not only do we often talk about people as if they were nonliving objects, but we often act toward them that way. Here are a few ways we do that.

Suspended Animation

We treat people like inanimate objects when we act as if people, like rocks, do nothing between the times they are in our presence—as if nothing goes on with other people except those matters in which we have a hand. Few teachers (at least those in colleges where I have studied or taught) try to find out what students already know before starting their lectures.

We often think, too, that if other people do not seem to be doing anything, then indeed they must be doing nothing, or at least nothing that could be important to us. We often think that children who are quiet are not doing anything important to themselves, either. I remember a day at school when I was in the fifth grade. It came time for music appreciation, and I discovered, to my joy, that the teacher was about to play Rossini's overture to "William Tell" on the phonograph. It was one of my favorite pieces. I put my arms on my desk, put my head on my arms, and closed my eyes, ready to hear every treasured note with full concentration. I heard the teacher's shoes clacking along the aisle. "Philip!" she said. "Sit up and listen to the music!"

Another example: I was once giving a long lecture to a large crowd and noticed some signs of inattention. Even a dear friend, sitting near the front, was staring unseeingly out a window. I wanted to do something to recapture everyone's attention (I am a glutton for attention). I thought my friend, knowing my ways and having often indulged my quirky behavior, would forgive me for a remark that would embarrass a stranger. "Mary Ann!" I said, "Sit up and pay attention!" She turned to me with dreamy eyes, smiled a small smile, and said, "I was thinking about something you said earlier." I was doubly embarrassed. I had acted as if, since she had been sitting unmoving as a rock, she had been giving me no more attention than a rock would give. But on the contrary, she had gone away in her mind to tuck something I had said alongside her other prized ideas.

Employers often ask questions of a prospective employee about what he or she can do, but rarely ask questions like that after the person is hired. Twenty years and more can go by without a query. Some

forward-looking organizations, it is true, do keep track of the changing capabilities of their employees; some actually encourage their employees to expand their capabilities, and many of those latter organizations actually make use of the employees' new capabilities. That appreciation of human resourcefulness, however, is not common. It is so rare that organizations that show it are written about admiringly in magazines and professional journals.

Employers treat people like objects, too, when they act as if nothing relevant happens to employees between work shifts. Sometimes employers say, "Don't tell me your troubles," or "Work and home don't mix." The idea seems to be that an employee who admits to having human capabilities and purposes is a defective part in the machine. Some employers are learning that all of us bring all of our characteristics with us no matter where we are, at home, at work, or elsewhere, and we can only pretend not to do so. Most employers and managers I have met, however, seem not yet to have learned that.

Job Descriptions

Job descriptions are typically used in ways that treat people like objects. Many organizations, perhaps especially governmental bureaucracies but thousands of others too, write out descriptions of the duties required in jobs placed at the lower and middle levels of the hierarchy. When personnel officers hire people for those jobs, they seek people who seem likely to act according to those descriptions. Their conception seems to be that an organization is built of all-but-unalterable jobs operated by people, and you need operators who will slide smoothly into the jobs. Writing a job description is like telling a supplier how a part must fit into a machine. You tell the supplier as exactly as you can just what the machine can and must do at the point where you need a new part. You don't think of the part or the machine as changeable, lively, or resourceful; you don't think that together, the new part and the old machine might produce a new and improved way of functioning. On the contrary, you want a part that will operate exactly as the last part did, and that will certainly not require any alterations in the functioning of the machine as a whole.

Despite a lot of talk about working conditions, "human relations," "empowerment," and so on, in many ways we go on treating employees like cogs in the machine. Even when managers come to a realization that they want to stop treating employees