

Classifying Critters

In this Tutorial, I present one way of showing how humans fit into the domain of living organisms, and suggest how that domain fits into the cosmos.

We don't think of rocks as 'living,' but plants can't live without them, so we will start there. When rocks break down into fine particles and partially dissolve in water, we have the beginnings of soil, which contains the same kinds of chemicals that make up the rocks. Green plants use these chemicals, along with sunlight, air, and water, to grow.

We don't think of plants as 'critters' like rabbits and cows, or even like beetles and spiders, but we do think of them as 'living.' Animals and insects need the plants as much as the plants need the soil. So we can ask, what do plants DO that makes them so important to all of us?

All plants use the chemicals they get from their surroundings. Green plants also use the energy from the sun, and the carbon dioxide from the air, to make what they need to grow into many different shapes and sizes. Every kind of critter that doesn't make its own food directly from chemicals gets its food from plants. Their bodies—their roots, stems, leaves, flowers, fruit and seeds—feed every other kind of living thing. Their roots also help keep the soil from washing away down hillsides; and as they decay, they enrich the soil so other plants will grow.

Plants grow in almost every part of our world, even in the oceans. But we also know that they don't move themselves around much. Oh, their seeds can travel great distances, and some extend roots that grow into new plants, but the plants themselves pretty much stay in one place, and use the chemicals they find there to grow. If they use up all the nutrients in the area they live in, they die.

We can call plants a CHEMISTRY-BINDING class of life.

Animals (including insects, fish, reptiles, and birds) use basic energies that come from chemical reactions, just as plants do. However, they can't make what they need directly the way plants do; they get this from plants. Some animals eat plants directly. Some eat animals that eat plants. Some do both. But without the CHEMISTRY-BINDERS, animals could not survive. What do animals DO that makes them different from plants? They do move around, some more than others, but at some point in their life-cycle, they travel. When they can't find enough food in one area, most of them can move to another place.

Animals take care of their needs in many important ways, and many plants depend upon the activities of animals to live and grow. But plants and animals don't change very much with the years either in their shape or their behavior. We know that, given long enough, plants and animals do change; but it takes a very, very long while for them to do so.

We call animals a SPACE-BINDING class of life.

Most of us feel that humans somehow show significant differences from even the most interesting and clever animals. Think about this. Yes, we do use basic energies from chemical reactions, and yes, we do move around in our environments. So what do humans DO that make us different from animals? You show the most important thing you can do as you read this page. Humans talk, aloud to each other, or silently to themselves, or in written words. But animals also 'talk' to each other, don't they? Dogs bark, and lions roar, and whales sing. What makes human language different?

As far as we know, animals do not retain a history. Their communication seems to deal with the present only: "come here for food!" or "run away! I see danger!" or other important, immediate issues. They don't imagine 'what might happen if...' and they don't discuss what they did some time ago. As far as we know, they don't invent new sounds for new things they find; and they don't change the patterns of their sounds, any more than they change their ways of living. Every beaver builds essentially the same kind of dam its grandparents built; we can expect beavers to go on building that kind of dam as long as beavers exist. They don't invent new kinds of dams.

When a 'new idea' shows up in an animal group others learn to do it by watching. They just try it out; they don't hold a conference to decide if it might make an improvement in their living. We humans do talk about our new ideas. In fact, we use our language to do lots of things that animals don't: we imagine things that haven't happened; we recall things that happened long ago; we organize ideas into categories and theories; we worry about the future; and we can lie. As far as we know, animals don't do any of those things.

Probably the most important thing we humans do with language, however, comes from our ability to deal with what we remember, what we observe, and what we expect or imagine. We change quite rapidly over time. Humans no longer build the same kinds of dams that we built thousands of years ago. We don't live in the same kinds of communities, wear the same kinds of clothing, or treat diseases in the same ways. We extend our ability to communicate around the globe, and into space. We not only remember what happened in the past, we can figure out why it happened as it did, and think of ways to improve our ability to handle such a situation in the future. We can think of things that might happen in the future, and plan to deal with the consequences.

Every human group that we know of does this. Each group speaks its own language, and deals with such issues in its own way, but they all do it. Every normal human who has acquired language TIME-BINDS—accumulates a human heritage—quite without thinking about it. This seems as natural to humans as SPACE-BINDING does to animals, and CHEMISTRY-BINDING to

plants.

No other class of life can do this: either accumulate knowledge at an increasing rate, or say that they have done so. Moreover, no other class of life has the ability to lie to itself as humans do. We have seen that each class of life depends upon the others to exist, but only humans have come to the point where we can 'forget' this and pretend that we are the only important critters in the world.

We can call humans a TIME-BINDING class of life.

So we have found two very important things to remember about classifying critters:

1. Every class of life depends upon every other class of life.
2. Only TIME-BINDERS can 'know' this, and only TIME-BINDERS can 'pretend' not to know this.

We also must remember that the TIME-BINDING class of life includes all human groups. We don't know of any human group that does not do this. So when we think of classifying 'humans,' we should begin by showing how they all fit into this group. Differences in color, belief-system, language, etc. seem less important when we remember the ability that all humans share: the ability to TIME-BIND.

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