



A System of Logic

John Stuart Mill

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Excerpt: ...subdivision would necessarily be founded on definite distinctions, not pointing (apart from what may be known of their causes or effects) to any difference beyond themselves. In so far as a natural classification is grounded on real Kinds, its groups are certainly not conventional; it is perfectly true that they do not depend upon an arbitrary choice of the naturalist. But it does not follow, nor, I conceive, is it true, that these classes are determined by a type, and not by characters. To determine them by a type would be as sure a way of missing the Kind, as if we were to select a set of characters arbitrarily. They are determined by characters, but these are not arbitrary. The problem is, to find a few definite characters which point to the multitude of indefinite ones. Kinds are Classes between which there is an impassable barrier; and what we have to seek is, marks whereby we may determine on which side of the barrier an object takes its place. The characters which will best do this should be chosen: if they are also important in themselves, so much the better. When we have selected the characters, we parcel out the objects according to those characters, and not, I conceive, according to resemblance to a type. We do not compose the species *Ranunculus acris*, of all plants which bear a satisfactory degree of resemblance to a model-buttercup, but of those which possess certain characters selected as marks by which we might recognise the possibility of a common Pg 277 parentage; and the enumeration of those characters is the definition of the species. The question next arises, whether, as all Kinds must have a place among the classes, so all the classes in a natural arrangement must be Kinds? And to this I answer, certainly not. The distinctions of Kinds are not numerous enough to make up the whole of a classification. Very few of the genera of plants, or even of the families, can be pronounced with certainty to be Kinds. The great distinctions...

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