Animal, Vegetable, Mineral: Twenty Questions

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Animal, Vegetable, Mineral. If this volume’s theme sounds like a premodern version of the parlor game “Twenty Questions,” it is perhaps only appropriate that my response should also take the form of twenty questions. The parlor game’s questions seek to arrive through processes of elimination and guesswork at a positive individual entity; but I hope my questions will do the opposite—that is, resist the allure of any singular or final answer. So here goes.

1. What do we mean by the “nonhuman” in medieval and early modern culture?

2. Are we dealing (as the “Animal, Vegetable, Mineral” parlor game does) with taxonomies of the natural world
that presume, as did Linnaeus in his *Systema Naturae* of 1735, the extremity of the nonhuman to the human?

3. Is the nonhuman itself subdivided according to this principle of absolute exteriority, which would make of animal, vegetable, and mineral entirely discrete entities?

4. Or did medieval and early modern writers see the nonhuman as always already in the human—and, by logical extension, the mineral in the vegetable, the vegetable in the animal, and so on?

5. What do we mean by the “life” of animals, vegetables, and minerals in the medieval and early modern worlds?

6. Writers in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance tend not to speak of “life” but of “lives.” This plural form certainly appeals to those of us who wish to resist making of “life” a universal abstract exchange value. But what exactly do we pluralize when we speak of “lives” rather than “life”—singular living entities, individual conceptions of “life,” otherwise homogeneous taxonomic categories?

7. How might the phrase “nonhuman lives” potentially reify even as it admirably pluralizes the “nonhuman”?

8. What critical idiolects do we invoke when we refer to “nonhuman lives”?

9. “Nonhuman lives” might tap into the language of biopolitics, famously codified by Xavier Bichat, who in

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1 Carolus Linnaeus, *Systema Naturae per regna tria naturae: secundum classes, ordines, genera, species, cum characteribus, differentiis, synonymis, locis* (Stockholm, 1735).
1800 characterized life as “a habitual succession of assimilation and excretion.” ² Bichat’s conception of life draws loosely on Aristotle’s conception of nutritive life as diminished in relation to higher forms of animal and human life. And this distinction itself resonates with the well-known Greek hierarchy of *zoe*—or bare life—and *bios*—or life proper to the *polis*, an ordering that Giorgio Agamben sees as crucial to the crypto-theological constitution of modernity. ³ How may “lives” in the plural implicitly presume a distinction between the meaningful and the negligible life—as in the political theological distinction Julia Lupton traces between the upright chair that bodies forth the king and the low-lying stool that participates in meaner forms of labor?

10. “Nonhuman lives” might also suggest Arjun Appadurai and Igor Kopytoff’s influential conceptions of object biographies as they move from one arena of valuation to another. ⁴ Are “lives,” then, diachronic extensions through space and time of individual entities—like Eleanor of Aquitaine’s vase and Emperor Frederick’s exotic animals, discussed by Sharon Kinoshita?

11. “Nonhuman lives” might presume less diachronic extension through time than forms of agency. Drawing on Jane Bennett’s accounts of vibrant matter and the hoard, we can think (as does Bruno Latour) of non-human things as participants in the course of action waiting to be given a figuration, communicating with other actants, including humans. Things, in Bennett’s words, call us. But (to rework Hotspur’s retort to Owen Glendower in Shakespeare’s Henry 4, Part 1), if things call, will we come?

12. What do all these understandings of nonhuman lives do to our conceptions of time, chronology and period, including the very terms “medieval” and “early modern”?

13. Diamonds are forever, the saying goes. The geological time that compresses carbon into adamant and eventually a diamond crystal is almost inconceivably long; the millions of years that it takes to produce a diamond make our conception of period, or even Fernand Braudel’s longue durée, seem impossibly short. As Manuel De Landa notes in his discussion of non-organic life in A Thousand Years of NonLinear History, periods are simply local strata in larger “glacial” temporalities that include the flows of lava, biomass, genes, memes, norms. And yet our restratifications of those flows do possess a historicity according to specific logics of production. Diamonds

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are forever, but the social life of the blood diamond that comes from modern Sierra Leone differs from that of the bloody diamond that comes from Sir John Mandeville’s medieval India, retrieved by a swooping eagle from the bottom of a canyon on a slab of animal meat thrown by the eagle’s handler. Each presumes different modes of supply, labor, exchange, and even imaginative possibility. How, then, do nonhuman lives ask us both to dispense with human history and to recognize the impossibility of doing so?

14. How do the terms “nonhuman” and “lives” invite us to think of their nominal opposites?

15. Death may seem to be the opposite of, and excluded from, life. Yet in medieval and early modern theology all living matter was potentially considered dead. This wholesale mortification was resisted in various vitalist traditions, which understood seemingly dead matter as heterodox forms of sublunary life possessed of “virtue,” as Valerie Allen’s discussion of Albertus Magnus reminds us. And, as Karl Steel pointed out in one of the question-and-answer periods at the conference that inspired this volume, the phrase “dead matter” presumes that it must have once been alive for it to die. How, then, should we understand death in relation to nonhuman lives?

16. The nonhuman would seem to presume the human. What is the status of the human once the nonhuman becomes an object of analysis?

17. Thomas Nagel advocates that humans should imaginatively attempt to become the bat they cannot be; the Renaissance poet Henry Vaughan asks his

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readers to acknowledge the vital vegetal life that we all possess; Geoffrey Chaucer, as Kellie Robertson reminds us, imagined himself as iron between two magnets. Are such imaginative acts of becoming-nonhuman antihumanist, posthumanist, neohumanist?

18. Lupine / sylvan children (Karl Steel); petromorphic prosopopoeia (Kellie Robertson); anthro-po-floral hospitality (Peggy McCracken); co-implicated interdependence (Eileen A. Joy); sheepish sidetracks (Julian Yates). What are the ethics of such nonhuman becomings, and how much might they be in thrall to a salvationist impulse—the hope that things will redeem us?

19. The early modern German hermeticist Heinrich Nolle suggests that “humans ape plants.” More specifically, we have seen maidens ape flowers in Peggy McCracken’s essay. What happens—as the syntax of Nolle’s phrase invites us to do—when we start thinking of humans and nonhumans in terms of networks that conjoin multiple actants?

20. Take the Bezoar stone. Edmund Scott certainly did. In his 1606 treatise *An Exact Discourse . . . of the East Indians*, Scott refers to the Bezoar stone as one of the most hotly coveted commodities in Java. This seeming mineral was of unusual provenance: it was a carbuncle excised from the intestine of an animal, usually a goat, and was believed to be caused by eating

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10 Edmund Scott, *An exact discourse of the subtilities, fashishions [sic], pollicies, religion, and ceremonies of the East Indians* (London, 1606), sig. G2. I thank Theodora Danylevich for bringing this passage to my attention.
too much persimmon fruit. The Bezoar stone was believed also to possess miraculous medicinal powers: it was traditionally ingested by the European traveler to combat the noxious effects of the pathogenic vapors she inhaled in the hot and humid climate of Java. So what is the Bezoar stone, and what are its lives—Animal, Vegetable, Mineral . . . Human?