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The Social Lens

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But how could there not be arbitrariness? Nature presents [things] . . . without firmly established divisions. Everything shades off into everything else by imperceptible nuances. And if, on this ocean of objects surrounding us, there should appear a few that seem to break through the surface and to dominate the rest like the crest of a reef, they merely owe this advantage to . . . conventions . . . that have nothing to do with the physical arrangement of beings.¹

I have thus far drawn a deliberately one-sided picture of reality as an array of insular entities neatly separated from one another by great divides. Such discontinuity, however, is not as inevitable as we normally take it to be. It is a pronouncedly mental scalpel² that helps us carve discrete mental slices out of reality: "You get the illusion that [entities] are just there and are being named as they exist. But they can be . . . organized quite differently depending on how the knife moves. . . . It is important to see this knife for what it is and not to be fooled into thinking that [entities] are the way they are just because the knife happened to cut it up that way. It is important to concentrate on the knife itself."³ The scalpel, of course, is a *social* scalpel. It is society that underlies the way we generate meaningful mental entities.

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Reality is not made up of insular chunks unambiguously separated from one another by sharp divides, but, rather, of vague, blurred-edge essences that often "spill over" into one another. It normally presents itself not in black and white, but, rather, in subtle shades of gray, with mental twilight zones as well as intermediate essences connecting entities. Segmenting it into discrete islands of meaning usually rests on some social convention, and most boundaries are, therefore, mere social artifacts. As such, they often vary from one society to another as well as across historical periods within each society. Moreover, the precise location—not to mention the very existence—of such mental partitions is often disputed even within any given society.

Culture and Classification

There is more than one way to carve discrete chunks out of a given continuum, and different cultures indeed mold out of the same reality quite different archipelagos of meaning. While all cultures, for example, distinguish the edible from the inedible or the young from the old, they usually differ from one another in where they draw the lines between them. The distinction between the sexually accessible and inaccessible is likewise universal (all cultures, for example, have an incest taboo), yet the specific delineation of those who are considered off limits often var-

ies from one culture to another. Surrounding oneself with a bubble of "personal space," too, is a universal practice, yet, in marked contrast to other species, humans exhibit substantial subspecific cultural variations in where they draw its boundaries.⁴ (Along similar lines, the precise delineation of one's "personal" circle of intimates also varies from one culture to another.)⁵ By the same token, not everyone who is considered "black" in America would necessarily be classified as such in the West Indies or Brazil.

Moreover, cultures often make certain distinctions that other cultures simply do not. Whereas West Germans, for example, perceive Holland and Belgium as two distinct residential regions, Swedes and Italians both tend to regard them as a single undifferentiated whole.⁶ Even purely phonic differences that are quite critical in one language are sometimes totally ignored in others, as the same sound range covered by several distinct phonemes in one language may very well be covered by a single phoneme in another. Thus, for example, though they clearly constitute two separate phonemes in both Polish and Romanian, "c" and "q" are fully interchangeable allophones in French.⁷ For quite similar reasons, Hebrew speakers usually treat *list* and *least* (or *pull* and *pool*) as homonyms, Spanish speakers often fail to hear the difference between *race* and *raise*, and Koreans may use *rule* and *lure* interchangeably (just as Americans may have trouble distinguishing the French *peur* from *père* or the Spanish *pero* from *perro*).

Languages likewise differ from one another in the way they generate distinct lexical particles,⁸ and it is not unusual that a single word in one language would cover the semantic range of several separate words in another. Thus, for example, while there is a single word for both rats and mice in Latin, insects and airplanes in Hopi, and brothers-in-law and grandnephews in the Algonquian language of the Fox, there are separate words for blankets that are folded and spread out, for water in buckets and in lakes, and for

dogs that stand and sit in Navajo.⁹ Such differences have considerable cognitive implications. After all, it is much easier to isolate a distinct mental entity from its surroundings when one has a word to denote it.¹⁰ That explains why the Navajo, who use different verbs to denote the handling of objects with different shapes, indeed tend to classify objects according to shape much more than English speakers.¹¹ By the same token, lacking the necessary lexical tools for differentiating, it took me, a native speaker of Hebrew, a long time before I could actually notice the mental gaps—so obvious to English speakers—that separate jelly from jam or preserves.

While such cross-cultural variability often leads us to look down on other cultures' classificatory schemas as primitive or "confused," it ought to help us recognize and accept the relative validity of our own. Only their ethnocentric blinders prevent those who claim that "savages" fail to notice obvious mental discontinuities¹² from appreciating the highly sophisticated classificatory skills of these people, who clearly do make distinctions, though rarely among the things that we do.¹³

Classifying presupposes an ability to ignore "trivial" differences among variants of the same mental entity,¹⁴ and what often looks like an inability to differentiate may very well be a deliberate disregard for negligible differences that "make no difference." The Hopi are certainly not blind to the physical dissimilarity of insects and airplanes. Nonetheless, their culture has no significant conceptual distinction that corresponds to such a difference. Along similar lines, when mental distance is a function of the way items are totemically associated with social groups, there is a good reason to ignore differences among items that are regarded as interchangeable manifestations of the same totem.¹⁵ Thus, for the Australian aborigines, who classify the universe by "dividing" it among their various clans, it is far more logical to note the mental affinity between the rosella parrot and the cat, which is associated

with the same clan, than its physical resemblance to the cockatoo, which is associated with a different one.¹⁶ Since the "obvious" physical difference between the parrot and the cat is socially irrelevant, it is deliberately ignored. By the same token, while they probably never confuse the parrot with the cockatoo, aborigines may "fail" to differentiate the kangaroo rat from the gum-tree grub or the planet Venus, which are associated with the same clan.

Like these "savages," though we are obviously aware of the differences in taste between milk and sardines or meat and eggs, it makes a lot of sense to ignore them when what concerns us is our calcium intake or cholesterol level. It is likewise more logical to lump shrimps with pigs than with fish if we observe the Jewish dietary laws. To most "savages," however, our ways of classifying must seem as confused as theirs seem to us:

We order the world according to categories that we take for granted simply because they are given. They occupy an epistemological space that is prior to thought, and so they have an extraordinary staying power. When confronted with an alien way of organizing experience, however, we sense the frailty of our own categories. . . . Things hold together only because they can be slotted into a classificatory scheme that remains unquestioned. We classify a Pekinese and a Great Dane together as dogs without hesitating, even though the Pekinese might seem to have more in common with a cat and the Great Dane with a pony.¹⁷

Thus, though they themselves have only one word for both insects and airplanes, the Hopi must find it odd that English uses a single word to denote water in nature and in containers.¹⁸ They must likewise find it peculiar that it "fails" to differentiate mothers' brothers from fathers' sisters' husbands, maternal from paternal grandfathers, and first from third cousins. Along similar lines, West Indians indeed find it odd that the English perceive all the various shades of dark skin as "black."¹⁹ Most "savages" must also find it

bizarre that we keep hamsters and gerbils as pets while ridding our homes of mice.

Any notion of logic is valid only within a particular cultural milieu,²⁰ and our own classifications are no more logical than those of "savages." We must therefore resist the ethnocentric tendency to regard our own way of classifying reality as the only reasonable way to do it. That entails giving up the idea that some ways of classifying are more correct and "logical" than others²¹ and, therefore, also reconsidering the standard tests through which we usually measure intelligence. Thus, for example, "a person, asked in what way wood and alcohol are alike [should not be] given a zero score if he answers: 'Both knock you out' [just] because the examiner prefers logical categories of scientific classification."²² By the same token, nor should we penalize someone who maintains (as did my daughter, when she was five) that the difference between a bus and an airplane lies in the fact that we need not pay the pilot on boarding a plane.

Ways of classifying reality vary not only across cultures but also across historical periods within the same culture. The last couple of centuries, for example, saw substantial shifts in the location of the lines we draw between the sexes,²³ the "races,"²⁴ public and private, family and community. Along similar lines, our calendar year did not always begin on January 1,²⁵ opiates were still legal in America only eighty years ago,²⁶ and lungs and gills did not become "similar" until comparative anatomists began classifying organisms according to functional rather than morphological features.²⁷ Even the location of the line separating art from life changes over time—the Romans, for example, would often execute real-life convicts on stage as part of theatrical shows.²⁸ A few decades ago, Americans were taught to regard the color of one's skin (and Germans the color of one's hair) as most salient for social exclusion. Today they learn to ignore it as socially irrelevant.

In 1792, when Mary Wollstonecraft published her *Vindication of the Rights of Women*, a distinguished Cambridge professor rebutted with a satirical *Vindication of the Rights of Brutes*.²⁹ Only two centuries ago, the mental gap between the sexes was so wide that women were perceived as "closer" to animals than to men and granting them political rights seemed as ludicrous as extending such rights to beasts. That this sounds so utterly absurd today only comes to show that absurdity is a function of where we draw lines, and that mental distances may change over time. Before the Civil War, when blacks were regarded in the United States as objects rather than persons, granting them civil rights would have legally been just as ludicrous. (In fact, public signs such as Negroes and Dogs Not Allowed suggest that, until quite recently, they were still perceived in the South as "closer" to animals than to whites.³⁰) Only a few decades ago, the idea that homosexuals should be regarded as a distinct political minority would have been as absurd as granting such status to music teachers, baseball fans, or vegetarians. Rights have historically been extended to new social categories (prisoners, noncitizens, children, the insane, the preborn) whose legal standing prior to that would have been inconceivable.³¹ (By the same token, for many centuries, European criminal courts also prosecuted pigs, rats, bees, and other animals.³² In 896 Pope Stephen VI put on trial the dead body of his predecessor, and in 1591 a Russian town bell was sentenced to banishment in Siberia, where it was kept in solitary confinement until fully pardoned three hundred years later, for ringing the signal of an insurrection.³³) The Nazi experiments with Jews and the mentally retarded likewise presupposed (and, in turn, promoted) the idea that the mental partition between true Aryans and such "subhuman" groups was as thick as the one separating person from object. To anyone brought up in such an ideological climate, objecting to experimentation with Jews would have been as

absurd as the objection to experimentation with animals seems to many of us today.

The lines we draw vary not only across cultures and historical periods but also within cultures at a given point in history, as one can tell from the joke about the Orthodox Jew from New York who asks a Southerner who is obviously intrigued by his traditional garb and heavy accent, "What's the matter, you've never seen a Yankee before?" At the same time that one needed seven-eighths "white blood" to avoid being considered a "person of color" in Florida, a mere three-quarters would suffice in Nebraska,³⁴ and in universities that rarely tenure their young faculty, the line normally separating faculty from students may not be as pronounced as the one separating tenured faculty from both students and nontenured faculty. The lines believed by residents of fancy neighborhoods to separate them from those who live in less prestigious neighborhoods nearby are likewise often blurred by the latter.³⁵ (When I asked the man from whom I bought my house about the nearest train station, he mentioned a station located six minutes away in a fancier neighborhood, yet "forgot" to mention a station located only two minutes away in a much less prestigious one.) Likewise, within the same culture, meat eaters draw the line between what is edible and inedible quite differently than do vegetarians. (Whereas Bertrand Russell would claim that this line ought to be drawn "at the level of the species," vegetarians may not find ordinary meat eaters that different from cannibals.) Similarly, though "intermarriage" normally denotes unions between blacks and whites or Jews and Christians, Ashkenazic Jews also use it to refer to marrying Sephardic Jews.

Of course, from the proverbial Martian's standpoint, since we only marry other humans, we are all "boringly endogamous"³⁶ and any cross-racial or interfaith "intermarriage" is embarrassingly trivial, yet even

within the same culture, lines that seem obvious to some groups may be totally ignored by others. Thus, for example, despite their obvious ubiquity to their own members, the boundaries of communes are usually ignored by the state.³⁷ And the wide mental gaps that nine-year-olds believe separate them from eight-year-olds, or that rat breeders perceive as separating their own "refined" show animals from ordinary rats, are not appreciated by anyone but them. Along similar lines, whereas no radical bookstore would place a book on the women's movement alongside books on beauty or homemaking, bookstores less sensitive to the distinction between feminist and traditional notions of womanhood might well do so.³⁸ The distinction some current college students make between "stylish radical-chic" and "granola" lesbians is likewise lost on many alumni, "to whom the shadings of lesbian politics are as irrelevant as the difference between Sodom and Gomorrah."³⁹

Such diversity also generates discord. As we carve mental entities out of reality, the location as well as the very existence of the lines separating them from one another is quite often disputed.

The prototypical border dispute is a battle over the location of some critical line in actual space, as manifested in disputes ranging from local turf feuds between neighbors or street gangs to full-scale international wars. It is the original on which numerous battles over the location of various partitions in mental space are modeled. Controversies regarding the location of group divisions (the eighteenth-century debate over whether blacks are "closer" to whites or to apes,⁴⁰ family fights over who should be invited to a wedding) or moral boundaries (the line separating legal from illegal drugs,⁴¹ the ethical limits of euthanasia) are perfect examples of such border disputes. So are the battles over the fine line between politicians' private and public lives, the definition of work (the distinction between mere "chores" and actual "labor,"⁴² the status of housework), and

whether phrenology or chiropractic are part of science.⁴³ Just as disputable is the delineation of frames, as evident from heated arguments between comedians and their audience over whether personal insults are within the limits of the comedy show frame.

Similar in essence are battles over the temporal delineation of historical narratives, such as the debate over the actual beginning of America's involvement in Vietnam (the various versions of which obviously implicate different administrations) or the dispute between Jews and Arabs over the acceptable limits of each side's historical claim to Palestine. The political significance of where we begin and end such narratives is tremendous. Whereas the story of a battle that ends with the evacuation of a settlement will most likely be remembered as a defeat, concluding it with the rebuilding of that settlement several months later allows a nation to define the evacuation as only temporary and preserve the entire event in its collective memory as a heroic symbol.⁴⁴ Equally controversial is the temporal delineation of "life." The different medical and legal definitions of the fine line separating life from death,⁴⁵ for example, often generate heated battles over the precise point when doctors may turn off life-sustaining respirators. The definition of the precise point when life begins is, likewise, at the heart of the battle over abortion. That point "is not something that is verifiable as a fact. . . . It is a question of labels. Neither side in this . . . debate would ever disagree on the physiological facts. Both sides would agree as to when a heartbeat can first be detected. Both sides would agree as to when brain waves can be first detected. But when you come to try to place the emotional labels . . . that is where people part company."⁴⁶ The battle, of course, is over the precise location of the point at which a mere "conceptus" becomes a "fetus" and a pregnant woman's body is transformed from a single into a dual entity. While pro-choicers insist that an abortion involves only the woman's own body, pro-lifers argue that it involves another liv-

ing being as well. The definition of that critical point has been disputed even within the church, and while some church fathers claimed that ensoulment occurs at conception,⁴⁷ leading theologians such as Thomas Aquinas contended that it occurs only forty days (or even eighty, in females) later. If one accepts this view, of course, aborting a still-"inanimate" eleven-week-old female pre-born can hardly be called homicide. As Justice John Paul Stevens recently cautioned the United States Supreme Court, there is no reason why we should protect "the potential life of an embryo that is still seed" any more than that of a sperm or an unfertilized egg.⁴⁸ (The rhetorical use of terms like *seed* and *potential*, as well as of others such as *baby*, is obviously of critical moral significance in legal battles over abortion.)⁴⁹

Even when we do not dispute its location, we often still disagree with one another on how impenetrable we expect a given boundary to be. Such disagreement is at the bottom of disputes over the walls of prisons (whether prisoners may take weekend leaves, how often they may be visited, the conditions for paroling them) and nation-states (immigrant quotas, the status of guest workers,⁵⁰ the right to travel abroad), battles over the extent to which groups ought to allow their languages to be "contaminated" by foreign words, and family fights over whether children may close the doors to their rooms.⁵¹ Moreover, we often wage battles over the very existence of a given boundary. States, for example, usually ignore boundaries drawn by separatists, while conservatives and liberals fight over the necessity of drawing a line between "X" and "R" rated films and evolutionists and creationists debate the distinction between science and ideology. Along similar lines, animal rights activists defy the "experiment" frame that allows the killing of animals,⁵² whereas feminists question the distinction between erotic art and pornography and object to sexism even in fiction or jokes. Governments and dissidents likewise often debate the legitimacy of the frames that dis-

tinguish "religious" sermons, "satirical" plays, and "academic" discourse from explicit political protest.

Such battles are basically about whether what may look like several separate entities are indeed just different variants of a single entity. The entire debate over the reunification of East and West Germany or North and South Korea, for example, was basically over whether there should be one or two of each. Such disagreements also led some people to reproach those who found John Poindexter's and Oliver North's reasoning at the Iran-Contra hearings, for example, evocative of the Nuremberg trials, as well as those who compared the secession of Lithuania from the Soviet Union in 1990 to that of South Carolina from the Union in 1860,⁵³ with "How can you even compare?" The current battle between Israeli liberals and ultranationalists over whether or not to prosecute Jewish vigilantes in the West Bank is, likewise, basically about whether they and others who break the law constitute one moral entity or two separate ones ("lawbreakers" and "overzealous patriots").

Language certainly plays a major role in such disputes. That is why Israel has traditionally refused to recognize Palestinians as a distinct entity and why a seceding East Pakistan immediately renamed itself Bangladesh. When sociology conference organizers debate whether to include a single "Race and Ethnicity" session or two separate ("Race" and "Ethnicity") ones, they are actually fighting over whether or not being black or Oriental is different from being Irish or Italian, and when Czechs and Slovaks debate whether to name their union "Czechoslovakia" or "Czecho-Slovakia,"⁵⁴ the separatist overtones of the latter name are quite obvious. The label "*parapsychological*" clearly excludes phenomena from the realm of science, whereas the label "*nonhuman animals*"⁵⁵ clearly defies the conventional distinction between human and animal. Moving away from the discrete labels "homosexual" and "heterosexual" to a continuous homosexuality-

heterosexuality scale⁵⁶ likewise helps rid the gay of their "specialness" stigma, whereas using "Ms." as the counterpart of "Mr." clearly helps feminists downplay the distinction between married ("Mrs.") and unmarried ("Miss") women (which, since it does not apply to men, implies that marriage transforms women more than it does men).

Such labeling politics reveal how attitudes toward (protecting or defying) boundaries and distinctions betray deep sentiments (conservative or progressive) toward the social order in general. Like the heated battles over drugs, censorship, and abortion, they show that not only does the way we cut up the world underlie the way we think, it clearly also touches the deepest emotional as well as moral nerves of the human condition.

The Color Gray

That the location as well as the very existence of boundaries is often disputed is even more understandable given the pervasive presence of ambiguity in our life. To the rigid mind, the world is a set of discrete entities separated from one another by gaps. Crossing these gaps entails sharp, dramatic breaks. Movement between islands of meaning therefore has a jerky, staccato nature characterized by abrupt transitions. That is why we gain or lose a full hour as we cross time-zone boundaries⁵⁷ or experience some shock upon waking up from a daydream.⁵⁸ Such experience of reality obviously allows no room for ambiguity. Yet "things," noted Anaxagoras, are rarely "cut off with an axe."⁵⁹ In reality, there are no discrete entities literally detached from their surroundings by actual gaps. Nature "refuses to conform to our craving for clear lines of demarcation; she loves twilight zones."⁶⁰ Our neat and orderly classifications notwithstanding, the world presents itself not in pure black and white but, rather, in ambiguous shades of gray, with mental twilight zones and intermediate essences. Despite the stubborn efforts of the

rigid mind to deny it, at least some element of ambiguity in our life is inevitable.

Differentiating discrete, insular entities from their surrounding environment is certainly not our only mode of perceiving the world. Hearing, taste, and smell, for example, do not allow a sharp delineation of "things" as do touch or vision.⁶¹ Listening to music, for instance, is an entirely different perceptual experience than looking at a map, as sounds, in marked contrast to countries or school districts, cannot be confined within limits. By the same token, it is much easier mentally to detach a camouflaged figure from its surrounding ground than to isolate the distinctive taste of turmeric in a curry. Nor will an olfactory "map" "have the sharp edges of a visual map—it will be fluid . . . literally drifting on the wind, with eddies and intense centers shading off toward ill-defined edges."⁶² Our primal "visceral space-sense," in short, is clearly "not about edges, boundaries, outlines."⁶³ Furthermore, as evident from our use of common contours in drawings,⁶⁴ not to mention the critical optical fact that we are almost constantly moving,⁶⁵ even what we see are actually blurred-edge essences that visually fade into one another. The fact that it takes congenitally blind persons who gain sight following surgery a long time before they can actually perceive bounded "things"⁶⁶ suggests that even visual contours are something we *learn* to see.

The transition from any supposedly discrete "thing" we mentally carve out of ecological continuums (a forest, a mountain, a desert) to its surroundings is more gradual than abrupt and usually involves a zone rather than a sharp line.⁶⁷ As we look at coastlines, for example, we see that they actually connect land and water at least as much as they separate them from each other.⁶⁸ The absence of clear-cut dividing lines obviously generates ambiguity. When shop interiors and exteriors or sidewalk and street literally interpenetrate one another,⁶⁹ our conventional either/or logic is clearly inadequate. . . . Just as ambiguous in the way it

actually negotiates inside and outside is the door, the quintessential embodiment of the half-open.⁷⁰ Even the notion (on which rests our initial experience of an insular self) that our body is a closed system sharply cut off from everything else is defied by the fact that the air we constantly breathe is part of *both* the self and its environment.⁷¹

The fact that "framed" experiential realms like art or play are never really totally cut off from their unframed surroundings generates somewhat similar ambiguity. A typical case in point is the ambiguous "slide"⁷² we experience as we gradually drift from being wide awake to being sound asleep or out of ordinary reality into the world of make-believe. Moreover, framed events also "spill over" the frames that are supposed to contain them, thereby generating inevitably ambiguous situations.⁷³ Thus, for example, we sometimes mistake the framed for the unframed, like the hundreds of thousands of panic-stricken listeners who mistook Orson Welles's 1938 radio dramatization of *The War of the Worlds* for a real invasion from Mars. At the same time, however, we sometimes also mistake the unframed for the framed. When comedian Dick Shawn died of a heart attack in the middle of a performance, it took his audience a while before they realized that it was not part of the show,⁷⁴ not unlike the spectators at a Halloween costume party who mistook a real murder for a mere gag.⁷⁵ Moreover, we cannot always tell parody from plagiarism or clinical from erotic massage, and when Daddy yawns in the middle of reading what Piglet said to Pooh, it may not always be absolutely clear to his child whether it is Daddy or Piglet who is yawning.

Nor are the supposedly discrete temporal blocks we mentally carve out of historical continuums (day and night, childhood and adulthood) really separated from one another by actual gaps. In actuality, they "flow" into each other, essentially connected by borderline ("liminal"⁷⁶) intermediate periods such as twilight and adolescence. As actual

mixtures of the essences they connect,⁷⁷ such temporal bridges are inevitably ambiguous. That explains why we often feel in limbo when we commute between home and work⁷⁸ as well as the ambiguous sense of ownership we experience between the time we sign an agreement to buy a house and the time we actually close the deal. Just as ambiguous are "liminal persons" who are structurally as well as existentially caught in the interstitial cracks betwixt and between several status categories to neither of which they fully belong⁷⁹—newborns who are yet to be circumcised or baptized, students between high school and college, new recruits who are no longer civilians but have yet to be sworn in as full-fledged soldiers, fiancés, presidents-elect, prisoners on parole, and patients in terminal coma.

Just as ambiguous are immigrants, converts, slaves,⁸⁰ parvenus, and products of "mixed" marriages. Lying on the proverbial margins of several different social categories, such "marginal" persons⁸¹ are living proof that social life is indeed organized in a web of crosscutting networks rather than confined to insular groups.⁸² After all, even a group such as "family" is never fully insular. Not only do we normally transgress its boundaries when we marry; such lines are fuzzy anyway, as they actually entail an entire twilight zone inhabited by borderline individuals whose membership is ambiguous—distant "wakes-and-weddings" relatives, live-in housekeepers, pets we include even in our family photo albums, next-door neighbors, dead members who are psychologically still present.⁸³ It is not at all clear, for example, whether my third cousin is part of my family and should thus be invited to family reunions and avoided as a sexual partner. (Genetically speaking, of course, we are all cousins to some degree.) The delineation of other clusters of social identity is just as problematic. Thus, for example, despite the rough clustering of white-collar, blue-collar, and agricultural occupations,⁸⁴ social classes are about as discrete as families.⁸⁵ So

are generations, social movements, and subcultures. In fact, even "cultures" and "societies" are not really discrete. Inter-marriage has always existed even among Jews⁸⁶ and Gypsies, whereas pidgins and creoles attest to the noninsular nature of speech communities. (Even languages like Basque include at least some nonindigenous words.) Color lines are just as fuzzy. Since "races" are never in a state of perfect reproductive isolation, they do not constitute discrete gene pools. As a result, not a single gene that is present in all members of one race and none of another has yet been identified.⁸⁷ The differences between the sexes are also just a matter of degree, as even the distributions of purely physiological male and female features are rarely bipolar. While men's voices are usually deeper than women's, and the female body is, on the average, less muscular and hairy than the male's, many women nonetheless do have a deeper voice or a more muscular and hairy body than many men. In fact, even the distinction between human and animal is repeatedly blurred by philosophers and natural scientists who claim that "there are no leaps in nature,"⁸⁸ essentially backing Aristotle's notion of a great "chain of being" connecting all classes of living things (as well as living and "lifeless" things⁸⁹) through a continuous gradation of differences rather than sharp-cut divisions.⁹⁰ After all, "about 99 percent of our genes are identical to [those of] chimpanzees, so that the remaining 1 percent accounts for all the differences between us. . . . [T]he greater distances by which we stand apart from the gorilla, the orangutan, and the remaining species of living apes and monkeys . . . are only a matter of degree."⁹¹

In short, instead of well-defined islands unequivocally separated from each other by substantial gaps, the world normally presents itself in the form of blurred-edge essences distinguished from one another only by "insensible gradations."⁹² Analytic thinking, therefore, is clearly not the only mode by which we process reality. In fact, even most

of the concepts we use to organize our experience are not clear-cut and sharply delineated but, rather, vague⁹³ and often modified by such "hedges" as "largely," "sort of," "quite," "almost," or "more or less."⁹⁴ (Until recently, such an ability to process fuzzy categories and negotiate subtle nuances actually distinguished our thinking from that of machines.)⁹⁵ . . . Membership in categories is basically a matter of degree and the transition from member to nonmember gradual rather than abrupt.⁹⁶ We therefore normally process them not in terms of their outlines, but, rather, in terms of their most central, prototypical instances (the "clearest cases"),⁹⁷ and as we move away from the latter we get progressively more distant from their core essence through a gradual "fadeout."⁹⁸ The fact that the orbits of such mental fields ("light" and "dark," "soft" and "loud," "winter" and "spring") usually overlap⁹⁹ obviously makes ambiguity an inevitable presence in our lives.

The Social Construction of Discontinuity

Breaking up reality into discrete islands of meaning is, thus, an inevitably arbitrary act. The very existence of dividing lines (not to mention their location) is a matter of convention. It is by pure convention, for example, that we regard Danish and Norwegian as two separate languages yet Galician as a mere dialect of Portuguese. It is likewise by sheer convention that we draw a line between heroin and other lethal substances such as alcohol and tobacco (not to mention its own chemical cousins, which we use as pain-killers or as controlled substitutes for heroin itself).¹⁰⁰ It is mere convention that similarly leads us to regard cooking or laundering as "service" occupations and fishermen or raftsmen as less skilled than assembly-line workers or parking-lot attendants.¹⁰¹ Just as arbitrary is the way in which we carve supposedly discrete species out of the continuum of living forms,¹⁰² separate the masculine

from the feminine,¹⁰³ cut up continuous stretches of land into separate continents (Europe and Asia, North and Central America), or divide the world into time zones.¹⁰⁴ Nor are there any natural divides separating childhood from adulthood, winter from spring, or one day from the next (both my children, indeed, used to refer to the morning before their last afternoon nap as "yesterday"),¹⁰⁵ and if we attribute distinctive qualities to decades ("the Roaring Twenties") or centuries ("nineteenth-century architecture"),¹⁰⁶ it is only because we happen to count by tens. Had we used nine, instead, as the basis of our counting system, we would have undoubtedly discovered the historical significance of 9-, 81-, and 729-year cycles and generated fin-de-siècle and millenary frenzy around the years 1944 and 2187. We probably would also have experienced our midlife crisis at the age of thirty-six!

It is we ourselves who create categories and force reality into supposedly insular compartments.¹⁰⁷ Mental divides as well as the "things" they delineate are pure artifacts that have no basis whatsoever in reality.¹⁰⁸ A category, after all, is "a group of things [yet] things do not present themselves . . . grouped in such a way. . . . [Nor is their resemblance] enough to explain how we are led to group . . . them together in a sort of ideal sphere, enclosed by definite limits."¹⁰⁹ Classification is an artificial process of concept formation rather than of discovering clusters that already exist.¹¹⁰ Entities such as "vitamins," "politicians," "art," and "crime" certainly do not exist "out there." The way we construct them resembles the way painters and photographers create pictures by mentally isolating supposedly discrete slices of reality from their immediate surroundings.¹¹¹ In the real world, there are no divides separating one insular "thing" from another. The "introduction of closure into the real" is a purely mental act.¹¹²

And yet, while boundaries and mental fields may not exist "out there," neither are they generated solely by our own mind. The

discontinuities we experience are neither natural nor universal, yet they are not entirely personal either. We may not all classify reality in a precisely identical manner, yet we certainly do cut it up into rather similar mental chunks with pretty similar outlines. It is indeed a mind that organizes reality in accordance with a specific logic, yet it is usually a group mind using an unmistakably social logic (and therefore also producing an unmistakably social order).¹¹³ When we cut up the world, we usually do it not as humans or as individuals, but rather as members of societies.

The logic of classification is something we must learn. Socialization involves learning not only society's norms but also its distinctive classificatory schemas. Being socialized or acculturated entails knowing not only how to behave, but also how to perceive reality in a socially appropriate way. An anthropologist who studies another culture, for example, must learn "to see the world as it is constituted for the people themselves, to assimilate their distinctive categories. . . . [H]e may have to abandon the distinction between the natural and the supernatural, relocate the line between life and death, accept a common nature in mankind and animals."¹¹⁴ Along similar lines, by the time she is three, a child has already internalized the conventional outlines of the category "birthday present" enough to know that, if someone suggests that she bring lima beans as a present, he must be kidding.

Whenever we classify things, we always attend some of their distinctive features¹¹⁵ in order to note similarities and contrasts among them while ignoring all the rest as irrelevant.¹¹⁶ The length of a film, for example, or whether it is in color or in black and white is quite irrelevant to the way it is rated. . . . What to stress among what is typically a "plethora of viable alternatives" is largely a social decision,¹¹⁷ and being socialized entails knowing which features are salient for differentiating items from one another and which ones ought to be ignored as irrelevant.¹¹⁸ It

involves learning, for example, that, whereas adding cheese makes a hamburger a "cheeseburger,"¹¹⁹ adding lettuce does not make it a "lettuceburger," and that it is the kind of meat and not the condiment that goes with it that gives a sandwich its distinctive identity. It likewise involves learning that the sex of the person for whom they are designed is probably the most distinctive feature of clothes (in department stores men's shirts are more likely to be displayed alongside men's pajamas than alongside women's blouses), and that the way it is spelled may help us locate an eggplant in a dictionary but not in a supermarket. Similarly, we learn that in order to find a book in a bookstore we must attend its substantive focus and the first letters of its author's last name (and ignore, for example, the color of its cover), yet that in order to find it in a book exhibit we must first know who published it. (We also learn that bookstores regard readers' ages as a critical feature of books, thus displaying children's books on dogs alongside children's books on boats rather than alongside general books on dogs.) We likewise learn that, in supermarkets, low-sodium soup is located near the low-sugar pineapple slices ("diet food"), marzipan near the anchovy paste ("gourmet food"), and canned corn near the canned pears (rather than by the fresh or frozen corn). And so we learn that, for the purpose of applying the incest taboo, brotherhood "counts" as a measure of proximity to oneself whereas having the same blood type is irrelevant.¹²⁰

Separating the relevant (figure) from the irrelevant (ground) is not a spontaneous act. Classifying is a normative process, and it is society that leads us to perceive things as similar to or different from one another through unmistakably social "rules of irrelevance"¹²¹ that specify which differences are salient for differentiating entities from one another and which ones are only negligible differences among variants of a single entity. Ignoring differences which "make no difference" involves some social pressure to disregard them. Though we often notice them, we

learn to ignore them as irrelevant, just as we inhibit our perception of its ground in order to perceive the figure.¹²² Along the same lines, ignoring the stutter or deformity of another is not a spontaneous act but rather a social display of tact.¹²³ It is rules of irrelevance that likewise lead judges, professors, and doctors to display "affective neutrality"¹²⁴ and acquit innocent defendants, reward good students, and do their best to save patients' lives even when they personally despise them. They also lead bureaucrats who screen applications to exclude applicants' sex or race from their official considerations even if they are personally attentive to it.

The social construction of discontinuity is accomplished largely through language:

We dissect nature along lines laid down by our native languages. The categories . . . we isolate from the world of phenomena we do not find there because they stare every observer in the face. . . . [T]he world is presented in a kaleidoscopic flux of impressions which has to be organized by our minds—and this means largely by the linguistic systems in our minds. We cut nature up . . . as we do, largely because we are parties to an agreement to organize it in this way—an agreement that . . . is codified in the patterns of our language. . . . [W]e cannot talk at all except by subscribing to the organization and classification of data which the agreement decrees.¹²⁵

Not only does language allow us to detach mental entities from their surroundings and assign them fixed, decontextualized meanings, it also enables us to transform experiential continuums into discontinuous categories ("long" and "short," "hot" and "cold"). As we assign them separate labels, we come to perceive mental essences such as "professionals," "criminals," or "the poor" as if they were indeed discrete.¹²⁶ It is language that allows us to carve out of a continuous voice range the discrete categories "alto" and "soprano," distinguish "herbs" (basil, dill) from leaves we would never allow on our table, define vague discomfort in seemingly sharp categories such as "headache" or "nausea,"

and perceive after-shave lotion as actually different from eau de toilette or cologne. At the same time, it is our ability to assign them a common label that also allows us to lump things together in our mind.¹²⁷ Only the concept "classical," for example, makes Ravel's music similar to Vivaldi's, and only the concept "alcoholic" makes wine seem "closer" to vodka than to grape juice.

Since it is the very basis of social reality,¹²⁸ we often forget that language rests on mere convention and regard such mental entities, which are our own creation, as if they were real. "The trouble," the Eleatic Stranger reminds young Socrates,

began at the moment when you [said] that there are two classes of living creature, one of them being mankind, and the other the rest of the animals lumped together. . . . [B]ecause you were able to give the common name "animals" to what was left, namely to all creatures other than man, you thought that these creatures do in actual fact make up one class. . . . [Yet cranes too might] classify the race of cranes as being distinct from all other creatures: the rest they might well lump together, men included, giving them the common appellation of "the beasts." So let us try to be on the watch against mistakes of that kind.¹²⁹

By the same token, as we divide a single continuous process into several conceptual parts ("cause" and "effect,"¹³⁰ "life" and "death"¹³¹), we often commit the fallacy of misplaced concreteness and regard such purely mental constructs as if they were actually separate. We likewise reify the mental divide separating "white-collar" from "manual" labor¹³² as well as the purely mental outlines of such entities as races, classes,¹³³ families, and nations. Like the dwellers of Plato's proverbial cave, we are prisoners of our own minds, mistaking mere social conceptions for actual experiential perceptions.

It is society that helps us carve discrete islands of meaning out of our experience. Only English speakers, for example, can "hear" the gaps between the separate words in "perhaps they should have tried it earlier,"

which everyone else hears as a single chain of sound. Along similar lines, while people who hear jazz for the first time can never understand why a seemingly continuous stretch of music is occasionally interrupted by bursts of applause, jazz connoisseurs can actually "hear" the purely mental divides separating piano, bass, or drum "solos" from mere "accompaniment." Being a member of society entails "seeing" the world through special mental lenses. It is these lenses, which we acquire only through socialization, that allow us to perceive "things." The proverbial Martian cannot see the mental partitions separating Catholics from Protestants, classical from popular music, or the funny from the crude. Like the contours of constellations, we "see" such fine lines only when we learn that we should expect them there. As real as they may feel to us, boundaries are mere figments of our minds. Only the socialized can "see" them. To all cultural outsiders they are totally invisible.

Only through such "glasses" can entities be "seen." As soon as we remove them, boundaries practically disappear and the "things" they delineate fade away. What we then experience is as continuous as is Europe or the Middle East when seen from space or in ancient maps, or our own neighborhood when fog or heavy snow covers curbs and property lines, practically transforming familiar milieus into a visually undifferentiated flux. This is the way reality must appear to the unsocialized—a boundless, unbroken world with no lines. That is the world we would have inhabited were it not for society.

Notes

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3. Ibid.

4. Hall, *The Hidden Dimension*, pp. 131–164.

5. Kurt Lewin, "Some Social-Psychological Differences between the United States and Germany," in *Resolving Social Conflicts* (London: Souvenir, 1973 [1936]), pp. 18–25.
6. Peter Gould and Rodney White, *Mental Maps* (Harmondsworth, England: Penguin, 1974), pp. 182–184.
7. Jakobson, *Six Lectures on Sound and Meaning*, p. 30. See also pp. 28–33, 74–76.
8. Benjamin L. Whorf, "Language, Mind, and Reality," in *Language, Thought, and Reality* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1956 [1942]), p. 253.
9. Eco, *A Theory of Semiotics*, pp. 76–78; Benjamin L. Whorf, "Science and Linguistics," in *Language, Thought, and Reality*, p. 210; A. R. Radcliffe-Brown, "The Study of Kinship Systems," in *Structure and Function in Primitive Society* (New York: Free Press, 1965 [1941]), p. 73; Gary Witherspoon, *Language and Art in the Navajo Universe* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1977), p. 121.
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11. John B. Carroll and Joseph B. Casagrande, "The Functions of Language Classifications in Behavior," in Eleanor E. Maccoby et al., eds., *Readings in Social Psychology* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1958), pp. 26–31. See also pp. 22–26.
12. See, for example, Lucien Lévy-Bruhl, *How Natives Think* (New York: Washington Square Press, 1966 [1910]).
13. See, for example, Claude Lévi-Strauss, *The Savage Mind* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966 [1962]).
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15. Durkheim and Mauss, *Primitive Classification*, p. 20.
16. See Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*, pp. 167–168.
17. Darnton, *The Great Cat Massacre*, p. 192.
18. See Whorf, "Science and Linguistics," p. 210.
19. Tajfel, *Human Groups and Social Categories*, p. 170.
20. Mannheim, *Ideology and Utopia*, pp. 84–87.
21. See, for example, Bärbel Inhelder and Jean Piaget, *The Early Growth of Logic in the Child* (New York: Humanities Press, 1964), pp. 105, 116–117, 169, 282; Jane Thompson, "The Ability of Children of Different Grade Levels to Generalize on Sorting Tests," *Journal of Psychology* 11 (1941):123.
22. Rudolf Arnheim, *Visual Thinking* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969), p. 200.
23. Judith M. Gerson and Kathy Peiss, "Boundaries, Negotiation, Consciousness: Reconceptualizing Gender Relations," *Social Problems* 32 (1985):317–331.
24. Williamson, *New People*; Domínguez, *White by Definition*. See also John K. Chance, *Race and Class in Colonial Oaxaca* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1978), pp. 94–104, 126–143, 155–159.
25. Reginald L. Poole, "The Beginning of the Year in the Middle Ages," *Proceedings of the British Academy* 10 (1921–1923):113–137. See also Zerubavel, *Patterns of Time in Hospital Life*, p. 8.
26. Stephen J. Gould, "Taxonomy as Politics: The Harm of False Classification," *Dissent*, Winter 1990, p. 74.
27. Foucault, *The Order of Things*, pp. 264–265.
28. Beare, *The Roman Stage*, p. 238.
29. Singer, *Animal Liberation*, p. 1.
30. In the eighteenth century, the governor of Grenada likewise appointed one superintendent for both blacks and mules. See Jordan, *White over Black*, p. 233.
31. Christopher D. Stone, *Should Trees Have Standing?* (Los Altos, Calif.: William Kaufmann, 1974), pp. 6–7.
32. Evans, *The Criminal Prosecution and Capital Punishment of Animals*.
33. *Ibid.*, pp. 198–199, 175. See also p. 172.
34. Stephenson, *Race Distinctions in American Law*, p. 15. See also Williamson, *New People*.
35. Hunter, *Symbolic Communities*, pp. 84, 181.
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41. Gould, "Taxonomy as Politics."
42. Viviana A. Zelizer, *Pricing the Priceless Child* (New York: Basic Books, 1985), pp. 58, 75, 84.
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54. *Newsweek*, April 9, 1990, p. 32.
55. Singer, *Animal Liberation*, pp. 2, 21.
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58. Schutz, "On Multiple Realities," pp. 231–232. See also Davis, *Smut*, p. 74.
59. Sven-Tage Teodorsson, *Anaxagoras' Theory of Matter* (Goteborg, Sweden: Acta Universitatis Gothoburgensis, 1982), p. 99. See also S. Sambursky, *The Physical World of the Greeks* (New York: Macmillan, 1956), pp. 132–157.
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61. Tuan, *Segmented Worlds and Self*, pp. 126–128.
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63. *Ibid.*, p. 16.
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131. Danet, "'Baby' or 'Fetus'?" pp. 187–188. See also Robert S. Morison, "Death: Process or Event?" *Science* 173 (August 20, 1971):694–695.
132. Braverman, *Labor and Monopoly Capital*, pp. 325–326.
133. Bates and Peacock, "Conceptualizing Social Structure," pp. 569–570, 575.

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