The Fine Line

*Making Distinctions
in Everyday Life*

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EVIATAR ZERUBAVEL
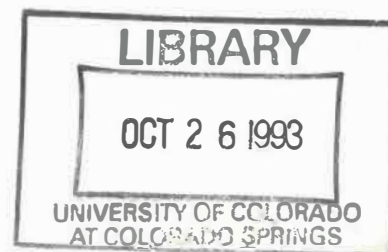
To Noam,
who taught me that socks can also be mittens.

Introduction: In the Beginning

In the beginning . . . the earth was unformed and void . . . and God divided the light from the darkness. And God called the light Day, and the darkness He called Night.[1]

The very first act of the Creation was one of dividing. It was through being separated from one another that entities began to emerge. The first day was thus spent on dividing the light from the darkness while the next two were dedicated to separating the waters under the heaven from those above it as well as from the dry land.[2] Indeed, according to Genesis, the first three days of the Creation were devoted exclusively to making distinctions.

Like most cosmogonies, the biblical story of the Creation is an allegorical account of the process through which we normally create order out of chaos. These theories of the origin of the universe almost invariably describe the formation of essences (the heavens, the earth, life) out of a boundless, undifferentiated void.[3] Distinctions, they all tell us, are at the basis of any orderliness.

Separating entities from their surroundings is what allows us to perceive them in the first place. In order to discern any "thing," we must distinguish that which we attend from that which we ignore. Such an inevitable link between differentiation and perception is most apparent in color-blindness tests or camouflage, whereby entities that are not clearly differentiated from their surroundings are practically invisible.[4] It is the fact that it is differentiated from other entities that provides an entity with a distinctive meaning[5] as well as with a distinctive identity that sets it apart from everything else.

The way we cut up the world clearly affects the way we organize our everyday life. The way we divide our surroundings, for example, determines what we notice and what we ignore, what we eat and what we avoid eating. By the same token, the way we classify people determines whom we trust and whom we fear, whom we marry and whom we consider sexually off limits. The way we partition time

and space likewise determines when we work and when we rest, where we live and where we never set foot.

Indeed, our entire social order is a product of the ways in which we separate kin from nonkin, moral from immoral, serious from merely playful, and what is ours from what is not. Every class system presupposes a fundamental distinction between personal features that are relevant for placing one in a particular social stratum (for example, occupation, color of skin, amount of formal education) and those that are not (for example, sexual attractiveness, height, intelligence), and any society that wishes to implement a welfare or retirement policy must first distinguish the well-to-do from the needy and those who are fully competent to work from those who are "too old." By the same token, membership in particular social categories qualifies us for, or disqualifies us from, various benefits, exemptions, and jobs.[6] It is the need to distinguish "us" from "them" that likewise generates laws against intermarriage, and the wish to separate mentally the "masculine" from the "feminine" that leads to the genderization of professions and sports.

It is boundaries that help us separate one entity from another: "To classify things is to arrange them in groups . . . separated by clearly determined lines of demarcation. . . . At the bottom of our conception of class there is the idea of a circumscription with fixed and definite outlines."[7] Indeed, the word *define* derives from the Latin word for *boundary,* which is *finis.* To define something is to mark its boundaries,[8] to surround it with a mental fence that separates it from everything else. As evidenced by our failure to notice objects that are not clearly differentiated from their surroundings, it is their boundaries that allow us to perceive "things" at all. These lines play a critical role in the construction of social reality, since only with them do meaningful social entities (families, social classes, nations) emerge out of the flux of human existence. Examining how we draw them is therefore critical to any effort to understand our social order. It also offers us a rare glimpse into the not-so-orderly world that underlies our social world, the proverbial chaos that preceded the Creation.

Boundaries are normally taken for granted[9] and, as such, usually manage to escape our attention. After all, "Nothing evades our attention so persistently as that which is taken for granted. . . . Obvious facts tend to remain invisible."[10] In order to make them more "visible," we must suspend our usual concern with what they sep-

arate and focus instead on the process by which we cut up the world and create meaningful entities. In short, we must examine how we actually separate entities from one another, whether it be humans from animals, work from hobby, official from unofficial, or vulgar from refined.

The way we cut up the world in our mind manifests itself in how we construct age, gender, and ethnicity as well as in how we arrange food in supermarkets and books and movies in bookstores and video stores. It is manifested as well in how we divide our homes into separate rooms, and in our sexual taboos. Conventional metaphors such as *closed, detached,* and *clear-cut* similarly reveal how we experience reality as made up of insular entities, while our need to keep such discrete islands of meaning neatly separate from one another is evident from our gut response to ambiguous creatures.

The way we draw lines varies considerably from one society to another as well as across historical periods within the same society. Moreover, their precise location, not to mention their very existence, is often disputed and contested within any given society. Nonetheless, like the child who believes the equator is a real line[11] or the racist who perceives an actual divide separating blacks from whites, we very often experience boundaries as if they were part of nature. Not until he smashes the nurse station's glass do McMurphy's fellow inmates in *One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest* realize that the wall dividing the sane from the insane is not as inevitable as it seemed.[12]

Several years ago I had a dream in which everything around me was noticeably cracked. After a while, however, as I took off my glasses, all the cracks suddenly disappeared and everything seemed to flow smoothly into everything else. I then looked at my glasses and realized that the cracks were on them! As the dream seems to imply, boundaries are mere artifacts that have little basis in reality. It is we ourselves who create them, and the entities they delineate are, therefore, figments of our own mind. Nonetheless, our entire social order rests on the fact that we regard these fine lines as if they were real.

Things assume a distinctive identity only through being differentiated from other things, and their meaning is always a function of the particular mental compartment in which we place them. Examining how we draw lines will therefore reveal how we give meaning to our environment as well as to ourselves. By throwing light on the way in which we distinguish entities from one another and thereby

give them an identity, we can explore the very foundations of our social world, which we normally take for granted.

At a time when political and moral distinctions are constantly blurred—when the international order we have regarded for nearly half a century as a given is virtually collapsing and our definitions of work, art, and gender are in flux—the very notion of a social order is being questioned. At such a point it is therefore critical for us to understand the actual process by which we establish boundaries and make distinctions. How we draw these fine lines will certainly determine the kind of social order we shall have.

1

Islands of Meaning

The first man who, having enclosed a piece of ground, bethought himself of saying "This is mine," and found people simple enough to believe him, was the real founder of civil society.[1]

We transform the natural world into a social one by carving out of it mental chunks we then treat as if they were discrete, totally detached from their surroundings. The way we mark off islands of property is but one example of the general process by which we create meaningful social entities.

In order to endow the things we perceive with meaning, we normally ignore their uniqueness and regard them as typical members of a particular class of objects (a relative, a present), acts (an apology, a crime), or events (a game, a conference).[2] After all, "If each of the many things in the world were taken as distinct, unique, a thing in itself unrelated to any other thing, perception of the world would disintegrate into complete meaninglessness."[3] Indeed, things become meaningful only when placed in some category.[4] A clinical symptom, for instance, is quite meaningless until we find some diagnostic niche (a cold, an allergic reaction) within which to situate and thus make sense of it.[5] Our need to arrange the world around us in categories is so great that, even when we encounter mental odds

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and ends that do not seem to belong in any conventional category, we nonetheless "bend" them so as to fit them into one anyway,[6] as we usually do with the sexually ambiguous[7] or the truly novel work of art.[8] When such adjustment does not suffice, we even create special categories (avant-garde, others, miscellaneous) for these mental pariahs.

The process of placing the various things we perceive in categories, however, is usually accompanied by a complementary process of separating them from other things. That entails isolating mental entities from the context in which they are experienced and treating them as if they were totally detached from their surroundings.[9] Such discontinuous experience of reality presupposes a fundamental distinction between "figures" and the "ground" within which they are perceptually embedded.[10]

The images of figure and ground, of course, are visual, and vision "is our intellectual sense par excellence. It discriminates and defines. . . . When we open our eyes, a diffuse ambience of sounds and smells yields to a sharply delineated world of objects. . . . Sight gives us a world of discrete objects. . . ."[11] Nonetheless, as evident from any attempt to follow one of the many simultaneous conversations one hears at a party, the inevitable connection between differentiating figures from grounds and the ability to "focus" is not confined to vision alone. Separating things from the context in which they are embedded (decontextualization) is the basic model for mental differentiation in general. Like their visual prototype, all mental entities are experienced as insular "figures" that are sharply differentiated from the ocean surrounding them. To capture fully our phenomenology of the social world, we must first examine, therefore, the way we carve such supposedly discrete islands of meaning out of our experience.
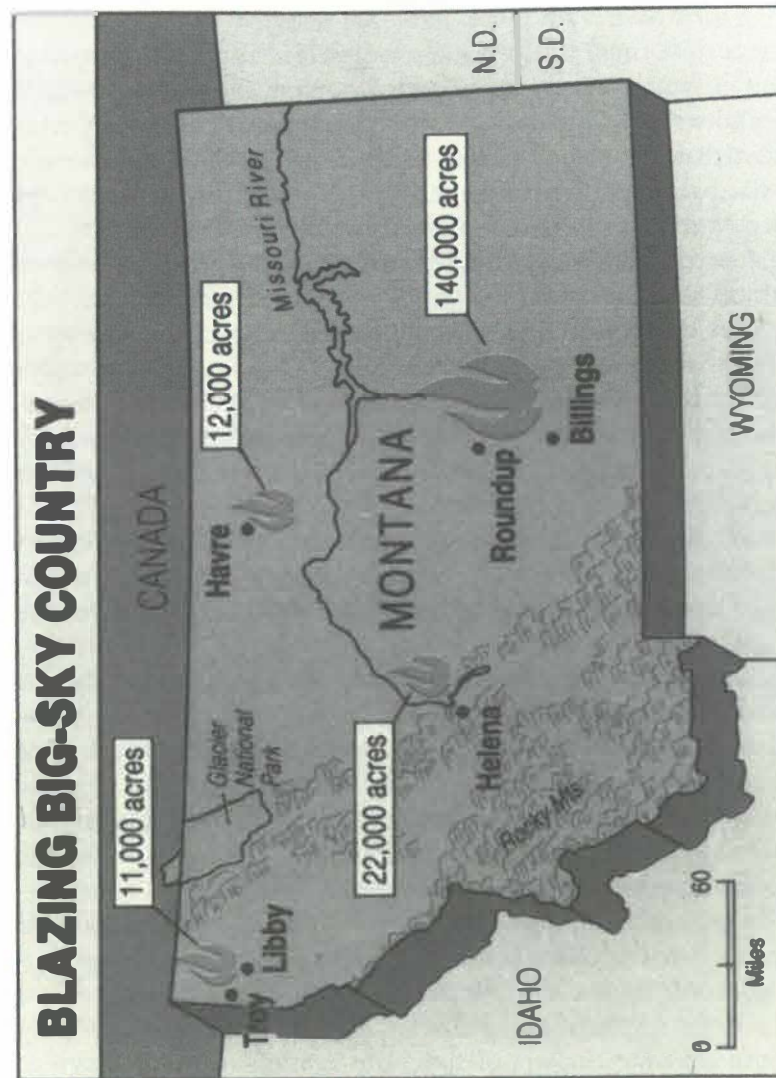
Chunks of Space

The perception of supposedly insular chunks of space is probably the most fundamental manifestation of how we divide reality into islands of meaning. Examining how we partition space, therefore, is an ideal way to start exploring how we partition our social world.

The way we carve out of ecological continuums such as continents and urban settlements supposedly insular countries and neighborhoods is a classic case in point.[12] Despite the fact that Egypt and

Libya or Chinatown and Little Italy are actually contiguous, we nevertheless treat them as if they were discrete. Such discontinuous perception of space is nicely captured by the map shown here, which almost literally lifts Montana out of its actual context. Not only does it represent that state as a discrete three-dimensional chunk jutting out of a flat backdrop, it also portrays both the Missouri River and the Rocky Mountains as if they indeed broke off at its borders.

Spatial partitions clearly divide more than just space. The lines that mark off supposedly insular chunks of space often represent the invisible lines that separate purely mental entities such as nations or ethnic groups from one another, and crossing them serves to articulate passage through such mental partitions. That is why we attribute such great symbolic significance to acts such as trespassing[13] or crossing a picket line and regard the crossing of the Red Sea by the ancient Israelites coming out of Egypt as an act of liberation. That is also why the Berlin Wall could represent the mental separation of democracy from communism and why opening the border between Austria and Hungary in 1989 could serve as a symbolic display of the spirit of glasnost.

Often abstract and highly elusive, mental distinctions need to be concretized. Wearing different sets of clothes, for example, helps substantiate the mental distinction between business and casual or ordinary and festive, just as color coding helps us mentally separate different types of information we put in our notebooks, calendars, or files. Choosing among different variants of a language (such as the one used for speeches and the one used for intimate conversations) likewise helps express the mental contrast between the formal and the informal.[14] In a similar manner, we often use differentiation in space to reinforce mental differentiation. Partitioning our home into separate rooms, for example, helps us compartmentalize our daily activity into separate clusters of functions (eating, resting, playing, cleaning) as well as mentally separate culture (study) from nature (bathroom)[15] or the formal (living room) from the informal (family room). Along similar lines, separate aisles in music stores help reinforce the mental separation of classical and popular music, just as separate floors of department stores help us keep the worlds of men and women separate in our mind. In a similar manner, we express discontinuities among supposedly separate bodies of information by relegating them to separate drawers, newspaper sections, and library floors; and keep different categories of food separate in our mind by assigning them to separate pages of restaurant menus, chapters of-

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Carving discrete chunks of space out of ecological continuums: a visual representation of the social construction of islands of meaning

cookbooks, aisles of supermarkets, and sections of the refrigerator. Similar forms of zoning help give substance to the mental contrasts between even more abstract entities such as the sacred and the profane,[16] the permitted and the forbidden,[17] the dangerous and the safe, and the good and the evil.[18]

The mental role of spatial partitions is also evident from the way neighborhood boundaries graphically outline rather elusive social class differences.[19] Even more revealing is the way separate bathrooms in the army help articulate status differences between officers and soldiers. The conspicuous absence of doors from rooms we define as public likewise highlights the role of spatial partitions in keeping the private and public spheres separate.[20] "A lock on the door," notes Virginia Woolf in her aptly titled study of privacy and selfhood, *A Room of One's Own,* "means the power to think for oneself."[21] It is the realization that the definition of our selfhood is at stake that makes us so sensitive to the symbolism of having the license to close the door to our room or office.

Blocks of Time

The way we divide time is evocative of the manner in which we partition space. Just as we cut supposedly discrete chunks like countries and school districts off from ecological continuums, we also carve seemingly insular segments such as "the Renaissance" or "adolescence" out of historical continuums. Such discontinuous experience of time is quite evident from the way we isolate from the flow of occurrences supposedly freestanding events such as meetings, classes, and shows, some of which we further subdivide into smaller though still discrete particles—meals into courses, baseball games into innings.[22] It is also manifested in our ability to create stories with beginnings and ends as well as in the way we break down novels, sonatas, and plays into chapters, movements, and acts.

In a similar manner, we isolate in our mind supposedly discrete blocks of time such as centuries, decades, years, months, weeks, and days, thus perceiving actual breaks between "last week" and "this week"[23] or "the fifties" and "the sixties." That is why many of us may not carry over sick days from one year to the next and why officials try to use up their entire budget before the end of the fiscal year. A similar discontinuity between successive tax years also leads some couples to plan the births of their offspring for December, even

to the point of inducing those that would naturally have occurred in January.

Central to such discontinuous perception of time is our experience of beginnings, endings, and "turning points." Most revealing in this regard is the sense of conclusion we experience as a performance, picnic, or season is coming to an end,[24] the radical change we expect at the turn of a century or a millennium or even between two contiguous decades, and the experience of a "fresh" start (or "turning over a new leaf") often associated with the beginning of a "new" year. Even in services that operate around the clock, night staff are often expected to allow the day ("first") shift a fresh start with a "clean desk."[25] A pregnant friend of mine who came back to the same clinic that had handled her previous pregnancy within the same year was asked to provide her entire medical history all over again, as she would now be considered a "new" case.

Temporal differentiation helps substantiate elusive mental distinctions. Like their spatial counterparts, temporal boundaries often represent mental partitions and thus serve to divide more than just time. For example, when we create special "holy days," we clearly use time to concretize the mental contrast between the sacred and the profane.[26] In a similar manner, we use it to give substance to the equally elusive contrast between the private and the public domains, using, for example, the boundary of the workday to represent the mental partition between being "on" and "off" duty.[27] Groups likewise use the way they periodize their own history to highlight certain ideological distinctions, as evident, for example, in the Zionist use of "the Exile"[28] or the American use of "the Great Depression" or "Vietnam" as discrete historical eras. The boundaries of the Sabbath, the workday, and "the Vietnam era" clearly represent major mental discontinuities. Like neighborhoods, drawers, and wings of museums, what they define are clearly more than mere chunks of time.

Frames

Temporal differentiation often entails an experience of discontinuity among different sorts of reality as well. Transitions from televised news to commercials or from live coverage to replay, for example, obviously involve more than just breaks in time. Along similar lines, warmup and "real" jumps in long-jump competitions

are clearly anchored not only within two distinct blocks of time but also within two separate realms of experience, as are comments made before meetings begin and those included in the official minutes.[29]

Spatial differentiation often entails similar experiential discontinuity. The knight on the chessboard and the glass of water on the table are obviously situated not only within two distinct chunks of space but also within two separate "realities." That is also true of what occurs on and off the stage or inside and outside the picture frame.

Crossing the fine lines separating such experiential realms from one another involves a considerable mental switch from one "style" or mode of experiencing to another, as each realm has a distinctive "accent of reality."[30] At the sound of the bell that signals the end of a boxing match, as brutal punches are instantly transformed into friendly hugs, our entire sense of what is real is dramatically altered. That also happens, of course, when actors enter the stage and are immediately transformed into fictional characters. Picture frames similarly remind viewers that they cannot smell the flowers or eat the apples they see in pictures,[31] as pictorial space is "a structure altogether different from the real space we experience. Within actual space an object can be touched, whereas in a painting it can only be looked at; each portion of real space is experienced as part of an infinite expanse, but the space of a picture is experienced as a self-enclosed world. . . . [The work of art] builds a sovereign realm."[32]

It is precisely that quality that makes frames the ideal prototype of all boundaries delineating the various realms of our experience,[33] those mental lines that separate ordinary reality from the "worlds" of art, dream, play, and symbolism as well as off-the-record from official statements, parenthetical from ordinary remarks,[34] the metaphoric from the literal, satire from sheer slander, commentary from pure coverage, parody from plagiarism, and maneuvers from actual war. Framing is the act of surrounding situations, acts, or objects with mental brackets[35] that basically transform their meaning by defining them as a game, a joke, a symbol, or a fantasy. Play, for example, is actually "a name for contexts in which the constituent acts have a different sort of relevance . . . from that which they would have had in non-play. . . . The essence of play lies in a partial denial of the meanings that the actions would have had in other situations."[36]

A frame is characterized not by its contents but rather by the distinctive way in which it transforms the contents' meaning. The

way framing helps de-eroticize what we normally consider sexual is quite suggestive of the remarkable transformational capacity of frames. The party frame, for example, allows even perfect strangers to hold one another while moving together in a pronounced rhythmic fashion (though only while the music is playing).[37] In a similar manner, in the context of art, respectability is granted to otherwise obscene literary passages and poetic metaphors as well as to nude modeling and photography,[38] just as the play frame helps de-eroticize games such as "house" and "doctor." Ordinary sexual meanings are likewise antisepticized by science, which allows genital display in anatomy books, and medicine, which de-eroticizes mouth-to-mouth resuscitation and gynecological examinations.[39]

In cutting chunks of experience off from their surroundings, frames obviously define not only different but also separate realms of experience. In delineating a space which the viewer cannot enter, picture frames, for example, "[cut] the artist's statement off from the room in which it is hung,"[40] thus visually articulating an experiential cleavage between ordinary reality and the artistic realm.[41] Supposedly bounded, experiential realms do not spill over into one another,[42] and the "reality" of any object is therefore always confined to the boundaries of the particular frame within which it is situated. That is why it is so difficult to prolong a dream after waking up or to sustain an erotic experience when someone knocks on the door, as well as why we normally do not hold others responsible for any harm they may have caused us in our fantasies. Along similar lines, terrified as we are by Captain Hook, Darth Vader, or the Wicked Witch of the West when we read about them or watch them on the screen, we nonetheless know that they can never step out of the fictional frames in which they belong and therefore cannot really hurt us.

Picture frames also make us disregard the wall surrounding the picture.[43] Like them, all frames basically define parts of our perceptual environment as irrelevant, thus separating that which we attend in a focused manner from all the out-of-frame experience[44] that we leave "in the background" and ignore. Thus, for example, when we play checkers, the material of which the pieces are made is considered totally irrelevant to the game and, therefore, out of frame. In fact, when a piece is missing, we often replace it with a coin, totally disregarding the latter's ordinary monetary value. Likewise, within an erotic context, we normally perceive others as attractive or not, ignoring ordinary distinctions based on social class, status, or ethnic origin.[45]

Moreover, frames make us ignore entire acts or objects despite their obvious physical presence in the situation. At concerts, for example, we usually disregard such acts as replacing a mouthpiece or wiping spittle off one's horn, which are clearly not part of the framed performance in which they are visually embedded. We likewise ignore "background" activity such as nail biting or doodling at meetings and routinely skip page numbers and translators' notes when reading books.[46] And just as we exclude from the game frame such accidents as unintentionally knocking a piece off the chessboard (in sharp contrast to removing deliberately a captured piece), we also instruct jurors to ignore "unacceptable" evidence presented to them.

The experiential discontinuity between what is situated "inside" and "outside" frames also applies to human objects, as mere presence at a social situation may not always guarantee inclusion in the frame surrounding it.[47] In social gatherings, full-fledged participants are often surrounded by a mental partition[48] that keeps mere bystanders practically "out of focus." (Such discontinuity becomes apparent when we poke fun at those who laugh at jokes that were not addressed to them or when cardplayers scold kibitzers who offer unsolicited advice: "Who asked you, anyway?")[49] Cabdrivers, waiters, stenographers, and children are often assigned such out-of-frame status. So are technicians installing equipment at rock concerts, attendants who clean after the animals at circuses, food vendors at sports events, and photographers at weddings, all of whom are clearly situated outside the entertainment frame that surrounds everyone else. Despite their obvious physical presence at these situations, they are considered "non-persons"[50] and thus relegated to the out-of-frame "background." That is also why we sometimes fail to notice the very presence of those we assume do not understand the language we speak or the topic we discuss.[51]

Chunks of Identity

The manner in which we isolate supposedly discrete "figures" from their surrounding "ground" is also manifested in the way we come to experience ourselves.[52] It involves a form of mental differentiation that entails a fundamental distinction between us and the rest of the world. It is known as our sense of identity.

The most obvious form of identity is the experience of an insular self that is clearly cut off from one's surrounding environment,[53] a

self with "clear and sharp lines of demarcation" that we experience as autonomous and "marked off distinctly from everything else."[54] Such self presupposes the experience of some "ego boundary"[55] that marks the "edge" of our personhood,[56] the point where we end and the rest of the world begins. Such boundary is at the heart of the fundamental experiential separation of what is "inside" the self from what lies "outside" it.[57]

The experience of a self presupposes some "psychological division from the rest of the world."[58] It is a product of a long process that begins when, as infants, we psychologically disengage ("hatch") from our initial "symbiotic" relationship with our most immediate other, usually our mother.[59] As a result of such process of individuation, we withdraw from a somewhat fluid reality into one where the self as well as other individuals with sharp and firm contours seem to emerge as discrete entities that are clearly separate from their environment.[60]

The self is but one particular focus of identity. There are many other answers to the existential question of where we end and the rest of the world begins, and they all involve supposedly bounded clusters of individuals (a family, a profession, a political party, a nation) who experience themselves collectively—and are usually perceived by others—as insular entities[61] clearly separate from everyone else. In short, we experience ourselves not only as "I" but also collectively as "we," that is, as liberals, baseball fans, Muslims, women, humans. It is such perceptions of social clusters as discrete entities that lead us to regard a marriage between a Christian and a Jew or an Armenian and a Pole as "mixed."

The experience of such discrete entities presupposes a perception of some boundaries surrounding them.[62] Even a couple going steady experiences some clear partition separating them from others around them.[63] Such fine mental lines help us perceive a fundamental discontinuity between insiders and outsiders, those included in a social cluster and those who are left outside its confines. Only in relation to those lines do sentiments such as fidelity, loyalty, or patriotism, for example, evolve, and only in relation to them do we learn whom we can trust and of whom we should beware, who is available to us as a sexual partner and whom we must avoid. These are the boundaries that basically define the mental entities we come to experience as "us" and "them." They constitute the basis of our sense of identity and determine much of the scope of our social relations.

Mental Fields

Early in life space is the only mode available for organizing a self.[64] Indeed, our individuation begins with the development of locomotor functions such as crawling, which allow us to literally withdraw from others.[65] Later we establish some nonspatial sense of selfhood,[66] actualizing our separateness by acts such as saying no[67] and experiences such as ownership of toys, yet the basic way in which we experience the self and its relations with others remains spatial nonetheless. We thus associate selfhood with a psychological "distance" from others[68] and experience privacy (including its nonspatial aspects, such as secrecy) as having some "space" for ourselves or as a "territory" of inaccessibility surrounding us.[69] We experience others as being "close" to or "distant" from us and portray our willingness or unwillingness to make contact with them using topological images such as "opening up" (or "reaching out") and being "closed" (or "removed").[70] We also use the image of "penetration" to depict the essence of the process of becoming intimate.[71]

Similar spatial imagery captures our experience of groups as bounded, "closed"[72] entities that one almost literally "enters" and "exits."[73] We thus "*incorporate*" members into, "*expel*" them from, and assign them "central" or "marginal" places in groups. We also use images such as "*extra*marital" (or "*out of* wedlock"), "mobility,"[74] and "knows his place"; perceive actual social "distance"[75] between blacks and whites or senior and junior executives; and mentally locate "distant" relatives in terms of the number of "steps" they are "removed" from us.[76] Such mental geography has no physical basis but we experience it as if it did.

We likewise use spatial images to depict supposedly discrete chunks of professional jurisdiction (boundary, turf, territory, arena)[77] as well as knowledge. We thus perceive academic disciplines as surrounded by mental "walls"[78] and works as lying on the "fringes" of sociology or outside our "area" of expertise, and regard those whose interest does not transcend the confines of their "field" as "limited" or "narrow minded." Similar spatial imagery seems to underlie our perception of the *extra*curricular, *extra*judicial, and *eso*teric as well as of insular "domains" such as work, religion, or art.

Somewhat similar is our experience of the fine mental lines that separate acceptable from unacceptable behavior—the assertive from the rude, the funny from the crude. We basically "confine [ourselves]

to a particular radius of activity and . . . regard any conduct which drifts outside that radius as somehow inappropriate or immoral. . . . Human behavior can vary over an enormous range, but each community draws a symbolic set of parentheses around a certain segment of that range and limits its own activities within that narrower zone."[79] Our quasi-spatial experience of such "normative outlines" of society[80] is quite evident from our use of verbs such as "*trans*-gress" or "*ex*ceed" (which literally mean to step or go beyond), prefixes such as "over-" (as in "*over*ambitious"), "out-" (as in "*out*-law"), or "extra-" (as in "*extra*vagant"), and metaphors such as "line of decency"[81] or "limits of authority."

In a somewhat similar manner, we also "enter" conversations, go "out of" business, portray breakthroughs as the crossing of a Rubicon[82] or a forbidden frontier,[83] and can appreciate a cartoon depicting someone reaching a line demarcated by the sign "Boundary of Self Respect."[84] Similar spatial imagery also underlies such concepts as "*extra*ordinary," "*out*standing," or "*exo*tic."

Spatial metaphors pervade much of our thinking.[85] In a wide variety of contexts, we use them to depict purely mental relations among entities. In fact, we basically experience reality as a "space"[86] made up of discrete mental fields delineated by mental "fences"[87] that define[88] and separate them from one another. Given the significance of proximity in perceptual grouping (the closer things are to one another, the more we tend to perceive them as a single entity[89]), we use closeness as a metaphor for conceptual similarity,[90] essentially seeing difference in terms of mental distance.[91] We thus consider similar mental items as belonging "together"[92] and different ones as being "worlds apart," and we may even try to locate an item "exactly halfway" between two others.[93]

A foremost prerequisite for differentiating any entity from its surrounding environment are exceptionally strong intra-entity relations.[94] A mental field is basically a cluster of items that are more similar to one another than to any other item. Generating such fields, therefore, usually involves some lumping. As we group items in our mind (that is, categorize the world), we let their similarity outweigh any differences among them. As a result we perceive mental fields as relatively homogeneous lumps and regard their constituent items as functionally interchangeable variants ("allo-" variants) of a single unit of meaning.[95] Even when we notice differences among them, we dismiss them as totally irrelevant[96]—"making no difference"—and consequently ignore them.

Thus, despite the obvious differences among them, we regard the prefixes of the adjectives "*in*accurate," "*im*proper," "*dis*honest," and "*un*usual" as functionally equivalent variants of a single morpheme.[97] We regard them as basically "the same" because no confusion of meaning is likely to occur if one of them is substituted for another (that is, if we say "disaccurate" or "unproper"). Nor do we normally attribute much significance to the difference between right-eye and left-eye winks, which we perceive as functionally interchangeable variants of a single gesture,[98] or between a kiss and an affectionate look, which we often substitute for each other as tokens of intimacy.[99] Along similar lines, we usually ignore the obvious difference between 490- and 540-millimicron-long light waves, regarding both as variants of the color "green,"[100] and casually substitute pretzels for potato chips as party snacks. And though clearly aware of the difference between thirty-one- and twenty-eight-day blocks of time, we nonetheless regard both as structurally equivalent variants of the unit "month"[101] and expect identical monthly paychecks for January and February. Along similar lines, we usually perceive conventional historical periods as relatively homogeneous stretches, often lumping together events that occurred centuries apart from one another yet within the same "period" (as in "the Middle Ages").[102]

In a similar manner, we establish social clusters in our mind by regarding all cluster members as similar and ignoring all differences among them, as when we lump together all those whose income falls below a certain "poverty line" as an undifferentiated lot—"the poor." We generally tend to downplay differences within our own group as well as among others,[103] as evident from the extremely broad categories ("Orientals") in which we lump those who came to America[104] or from various catchall categories for outsiders, such as the ancient Greek "barbarian," the Armenian *odar*,[105] the Gypsy *gadjo*, or the Jewish *goy*.

Ignoring intracluster differences and regarding all cluster members as basically "the same" often results in stereotypes, as when racists claim that all blacks are lazy or that all Orientals look alike. Nonetheless, without some lumping, it would be impossible ever to experience any collectivity, or mental entity for that matter. The ability to ignore the uniqueness of items and regard them as typical members of categories is a prerequisite for classifying any group of phenomena. Such ability to "typify"[106] our experience is therefore one of the cornerstones of social reality.

Ritual Transitions

Most of the fine lines that separate mental entities from one another are drawn only in our own head and, therefore, totally invisible. And yet, by playing up the act of "crossing" them, we can make mental discontinuities more "tangible." Many rituals, indeed, are designed specifically to substantiate the mental segmentation of reality into discrete chunks. In articulating our "passage" through the mental partitions separating these chunks from one another, such rituals, originally identified by Arnold Van Gennep as "rites of passage,"[107] certainly enhance our experience of discontinuity.

The various rites we perform when we cross the equator, tropic of Cancer, or arctic circle[108] are perfect cases in point. In dramatizing our passage through these imaginary lines that exist only on maps, they certainly make them more "tangible" (somewhat like the road sign Welcome to Massachusetts). In a similar manner, we also dramatize the mental discontinuity between the public and private domains by knocking on the door before entering a room as well as by altering our appearance, as in the following caricature of a stereotypical return home, "from 'a hard day at the office': a banal scene in which the social passage is signified by the man successively removing his hat . . . taking off his jacket, stripping away his tie (exaggerated gesture), opening his shirt collar. . . . A whole set of statements about the contrast between [home] and the 'larger world' is going on."[109] Along similar lines, soldiers coming home even for a few hours often change into civilian clothes just to actualize their "exit" from the military world. Lowering their voices on entering church similarly helps congregants substantiate the mental separation of the sacred from the profane, whereas the ritual apology ("I beg your pardon") we offer on entering each other's "personal space" likewise promotes our experience of an insular self.

In a similar manner, weddings substantiate the boundaries of the family, whose crossing transforms people into spouses and in-laws. They also signal, of course, the crossing of the mental partition that separates marriage from singlehood, just like puberty rites[110] (or modern equivalents such as obtaining a driver's license or going for the first time to an R-rated film), which dramatize the transition from childhood to adulthood. (The fact that we rarely celebrate divorces and usually articulate second weddings considerably less than first ones suggests that entering marriage entails a much greater break in identity than exiting or reentering it.) In dramatizing the

moments of entering and exiting it, birth and death rituals[111] likewise substantiate the experience of life as a discrete block of time (as well as the mental contrast between life and nonlife). The need to substantiate the way we segment time into discrete blocks also accounts for the holidays we create to commemorate critical transition points between historical epochs[112] as well as for the rituals we design to articulate significant changes in our relative access to one another—greetings, first kisses, farewell parties, bedtime stories.[113] Changes of lighting or background music likewise signal transitions among successive segments of theatrical performances, films,[114] rock concerts, and circus shows, whereas ritual switches from sitting to standing help to "punctuate" religious services[115] and demarcate featured solos in jazz.

The ritual of raising the curtain before the beginning of a show[116] and the almost obligatory "once upon a time" or "and they lived happily ever after"[117] that signal crossings of the line separating fairy tales from "real" life similarly serve to substantiate the boundaries of frames.[118] So do the ritual glove touch or kickoff that prefaces sports events, the suspension of meter that signals the dissolution of the poetic frame,[119] and the caption "The End" that used to announce the conclusion of films. (Within films, conventional cues such as soft focus, overexposure, change from color to black and white, and suspension of background music often signal transitions from characters' here and now into their memories, fantasies, or dreams.) Along similar lines, organ preludes are often used to announce a religious frame,[120] "soft" music (and candlelight) a romantic frame, and dance music (and hors d'oeuvres) a party.

By switching from one language to another or even from standard to colloquial speech, we often articulate transitions from formality to informality or from just talking to quoting.[121] In a similar manner, speakers often clear their throats to announce the conclusion of their informal introductory remarks (just as chairpersons use gavels to announce the formal parts of meetings), change their tone to signal diversions from the general thrust of their talk to "parenthetical" remarks, and sit down to announce the beginning of the more informal question-and-answer part.[122] Children likewise use a change of voice to "enter" the make-believe frame[123] and the ritual call "Time" to exit from a game in order to tie a loose shoelace or get a drink.

Along similar lines, by punishing deviants who transgress its moral boundaries, society not only forces us to see that such lines do

indeed exist but also demarcates their precise "location." Like weddings, funerals, and bedtime stories, punishment is a ritual that dramatizes the act of crossing some mental partition. In substantiating the mental segmentation of human behavior into acceptable and unacceptable, it serves to "locate and publicize"[124] moral edges:

> The deviant is a person whose activities have moved outside the margins of the group, and when the community calls him to account for that vagrancy it is making a statement about the nature and placement of its boundaries. . . . Members of a community inform one another about the placement of their boundaries by participating in the confrontations which occur when persons who venture out to the edges of the group are met by policing agents. . . . Whether these confrontations take the form of criminal trials, excommunication hearings, courts-martial, or even psychiatric case conferences, they [demonstrate] where the line is drawn. . . . Morality and immorality meet at the public scaffold, and it is during this meeting that the line between them is drawn. . . . Each time the community moves to censure some act of deviation, then, and convenes a formal ceremony to deal with the responsible offender, it . . . restates where the boundaries of the group are located.[125]

Moral boundaries remain a meaningful point of reference, of course, only as long as society indeed curbs all attempts to transgress them.[126] When society fails to punish deviants who venture beyond the limit of what it defines as acceptable, members will wonder whether such a line really exists.

Only the need to announce crossings of frame boundaries prompts us to indent quotations like the one above on a page of text[127] and only the need to substantiate an insular self compels us to say grace before we ingest parts of the environment into our body through the act of eating. Substantiating the insularity of conventional chunks of space, time, and identity is likewise the only reason for the rites we perform around doorsills,[128] the birthday cards[129] and New Year midnight kisses with which we "punctuate" life as well as history, and the various initiation rites (such as baptism, adoption, and naturalization) by which we dramatize the incorporation of new members into religious communities, families, or nations. Such rituals of "passage" are all products of some basic need to substantiate in our acts the mental discontinuities we perceive in our mind. As such, they play a major role in our ability to think analytically.

2

The Great Divide

That's one small step for man, one giant leap for mankind.[1]

Mental Gaps

Creating islands of meaning entails two rather different mental processes—lumping and splitting. On the other hand, it involves grouping "similar" items together in a single mental cluster—sculptors and filmmakers ("artists"), murder and arson ("felonies"), foxes and camels ("animals"). At the same time, it also involves separating in our mind "different" mental clusters from one another—artists from scientists, felonies from misdemeanors, animals from humans. In order to carve out of the flux surrounding us meaningful entities with distinctive identities, we must experience them as separate from one another.

Separating one island of meaning from another entails the introduction of some mental void between them. As we carve discrete mental chunks out of continuous streams of experience, we normally visualize substantial gaps separating them from one another.[2] Such mental versions of the great divides that split continuous stretches of land following geological upheavals underlie our basic experience of mental entities as situated amid blank stretches of emptiness. It is our perception of the void among these islands of meaning that makes