

On Distinctions

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We awake to a world of perceptually differentiated entities. We may proceed conceptually in that world in two ways. We may continue to differentiate in the world or part of the world. We make a cut or draw a distinction in a field in order to differentiate one region in the field from another region in it. Or we may de-differentiate in the world or part of the world. We erase or heal over a cut in a field, undoing a distinction in it.

For purposes of taking a botany exam, you might take the field “trees” and differentiate deciduous from evergreen trees, then continue by differentiating evergreen pines from evergreen spruces and then evergreen white pines from evergreen red pines. For purposes of enlarging social justice in a society, you might take the field “black and white adults” and ignore the perceptually given differentiations – black/white, adult/child, male/female, rich/poor, etc.

Let us take a set of about a dozen distinctions applicable to the nineteenth-, twentieth-, and twenty-first-century West.

How the distinctions are made:

Via the senses

Visually

- a) beautiful/ugly, a classic aesthetic distinction, made of persons, objects, and processes, and readily worked into hierarchies

- b) strong/weak, apparent in a person's appearance or performance

Visually but with deeper determinants

- a) male/female, visually apparent but characteristically involving serious anxieties, projections, and pathologies in both directions, male to female and female to male; strong/weak and beautiful/ugly distinctions are usually implicated
- b) old/young, implicating the destruction of pre-modern societies
- c) non-white/white, perhaps more mysterious than sex, gender, and generational distinctions; since the color distinction is easily added to sex, gender, and generational distinctions, it can lead to the highest degree of the judgment "they are other than us," and if violence is culturally attached to the degree of otherness, then the highest degree of violence will be attached to color difference

Aurally

by inferring class, or level of education, or position of authority by semantic, syntactic, and logistic sophistication, dialect, inflection

Not via the senses, ideologically

- a) by religion, the distinctions in the West generally among Protestant/Catholic/Jew/Atheist or Christian/Muslim
- b) by nation, among Britons/Germans/Americans *et al*
- c) by class, usually upper/middle/working, vaguely involving wealth, education, profession, and birth in different and changing degrees

- d) by moral probity, even more vague, and often bringing to bear religious, national, and class distinctions, distinctions involving linguistic sophistication, age, strength, and aesthetic status; for all the vagueness, consequential

All these distinction-making habits, with their variants, were entrenched in the West by the end of the nineteenth century. Different regions of the West have specialized. Europe inherited and variously persisted in making class distinctions. The United States paid relatively little attention to class; its specializations have been color and wealth at home and moral probity abroad. Germany made a religious distinction that led in the twentieth century to crimes of unspeakable magnitude.

That a distinction is made does not necessarily mean that it will be made violently. In a contestual and hierarchical society, however, in which (a) childrearing and schooling conventions tend to increase the proportion of adults who are either inclined to violence themselves or obedient to those inclined to violence, and (b) certain forms of violence are celebrated (as in the manic popular culture of the United States) and little attention is given to effectively inhibiting violence (as does the Roots of Empathy program in Canada), increasing the intensity of distinction-making may well increase the incidence of violence. It must be noticed that the correlation works in the other direction: certain less contestual, less hierarchical past societies, less draconian in their childrearing and later enculturation practices and better equipped with violence-inhibiting conventions, show a diminished incidence of violence. The root-mechanism of diminished violence is selective distinction-dissolving.