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MAKING DISTINCTIONS

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CHAUCER’S Wife of Bath says, “But conselling is not comande ment.” Samuel Johnson told Boswell about a headmaster who “was very severe, and wrong-headedly severe. He used to beat us unmercifully; and he did not distinguish between ignorance and negligence; for he would beat a boy equally for not knowing a thing, as for neglecting to know it.”¹ And finally there is a friend of mine, whom we shall call Jack, who is attended by a very careful physician. Jack was told by someone that he could obtain a stress electrocardiogram at a good price for a limited time only at a local clinic. It involved running on a treadmill at different speeds and having the activity of the heart measured as the speeds were increased. Jack took the test and brought the results to the physician, who looked at them and said, “Well, I will put this in your file; but we do distinguish between medical data and medical care.”

I

Distinctions are set in obscurity and imagination. Distinctions are not made anywhere and anytime, nor are they made in no place and at no time; they are made in a situation in which they are called for. Distinctions push against an obscurity that needs the distinction in question. In the story about Jack and the doctor, the obscurity against which the distinction is made is included as part of the story; in the quotation from Chaucer the obscurity that provides the setting for the distinction is not mentioned—although you would find it if you were to read the Wife of Bath’s tale—but it is easy for us to imagine a setting in which the distinction between counseling and command ment ought to be made. When we entertain a distinction, such as “counseling is not commandment,” “ignorance is not negligence,” or “medical data is not medical care,” we always experience or imagine an obscurity against which the distinction arises. When we think

philosophically about executing distinctions, we must pay attention to the obscurity that lets the distinction occur.

In order to achieve and recognize a distinction, it is sufficient if we imagine the setting in which the distinction is to be made. An imaginary setting is sufficient to register a real distinction. Sometimes, of course, distinctions are made in situations that are not imagined but lived. Jack, for example, was actually doing certain things; he had taken the test and was giving the results to the doctor. He was not imagining that all this was going on, and the distinction was made in force for him in his lived context. But you, the reader, only imagine this scene; you do not even know who Jack was or who the doctor was, you do not live through what Jack lived through, and yet you can register the same distinction that was registered for him. You could in fact register this same distinction even if my story were not true but only fictional; and you could register this same distinction even if I were to have thought up another story in which it could have been presented. What is a distinction, that it can be appreciated both in actual experience and in imagination?

At first blush we might think that the imaginative registration of a distinction is merely secondary, derived, and parasitic on the registration of distinctions in real life; but distinctions could not be appreciated in real life if they could not be achieved in imagination. The distinction between medical data and medical care struck Jack with such force because he could imagine as well as perceive the setting in which it had to be made. The distinction shed light on what Jack had lived through because it could also work for him in a situation he might only imagine. Jack may not have adverted to this need for an imaginative foil when he appreciated the distinction, but without the foil the distinction could not have occurred in the situation that was lived and not imagined. When we reflect philosophically on what occurred to Jack, we must take the imaginative aspect into account even though Jack did not.

When a distinction is made, it is made as holding everywhere and always. It is made as having held before it was made, as continuing to hold after it is made, and as holding even if no one is making it. If we say that the distinction needs to be understood against the obscurity that calls for it, are we not saying that the distinction only holds when it is propped against its particular setting? Are we not making the distinction relative to a situation, at least an imagined one, and do we not claim that the difference between
medical data and medical care holds only because Jack proceeded and spoke as though there were no such distinction?

When we as philosophers pay attention to the setting in which a distinction is registered, we do not deny that the distinction holds beyond that setting. We continue to agree with the Wife of Bath, with Samuel Johnson, and with Jack and the doctor that whenever there is counseling it is not commandment, whenever there is ignorance it is not, as such, negligence, and whenever there is medical data it is not, as such, medical care. Moreover even if we imagine our earth to be wiped out and there to be no more people anywhere, it would still hold that counseling is not commandment, that ignorance is not negligence, and that medical data is not necessarily medical care. We must recognize the great holding power of distinctions, the power that lets them survive so many changes and disasters, so many contingencies; but we must also observe that the Wife of Bath and her distinguishing colleagues can assert the distinction and recognize its durability only because they can imagine these various settings, even the setting of the earth's being wiped out, and through such imaginings acknowledge that the distinction holds, come what may.

A distinction, with its necessity, is displayed to the Wife of Bath, and her attention is focused on the distinction. Imagination and a setting marked by obscurity are needed to display the distinction, but they do not enter into what is distinguished, nor do they make the distinction imaginary or local. Samuel Johnson would not say that the distinction between ignorance and negligence is imaginary or that it holds only when he makes it; he sees through the display of the distinction to the distinction itself and recognizes it as permanent. But when we do philosophy we pay attention to the display and must note the place of imagination and obscurity in it. In doing this we are different from Samuel Johnson and the Wife of Bath; we neither absorb them into ourselves nor do we simply adopt their stance, because we think about them as recognizing distinctions. We let them be agents of distinction, and we try to show how they are able to reach a necessity that stretches beyond the setting in which they think. It would be a confusion of the philosophical viewpoint with prephilosophical experience and thought if we were to say that the philosophical acknowledgment of imagination and of the obscure context somehow localized the distinction itself or made it less necessary or less universal.

Can we ever possess a distinction without the imagination's inte-
vention? We can "possess" one if verbally repeating the distinction without insight is to count as possession of it. Suppose I am unfamiliar with legal matters and a lawyer says to me, "Torts are not class action suits," and I happen to remember the phrase. Later when someone is talking about torts I repeat the phrase and my interlocutors find it a surprisingly apt remark. I may have conveyed the distinction but I did not possess it; my failure to possess it stems from my unfamiliarity with torts, class action suits, and other legal matters, and this unfamiliarity means that I also cannot imagine new settings for torts and class action suits, imaginative settings in which the necessity of the distinction would have forced itself on me. It is not just unfamiliarity that makes me incapable of handling the distinction; it is also the unimaginability that unfamiliarity breeds.

Of course the unfamiliarity in such cases is not total; I would have to have some sense of legal matters to know that the terms "torts" and "class action suits" belong in the law and not in cooking or card playing. But I am not familiar with torts or class action suits as such, except as very vague things that I cannot really distinguish from one another and from other things in the genus of legal matters. Vague acquaintance with something is precisely the inability to move on from repeated perceptions to an imaginative projection. It is the inability to recognize something as the same again not only in further perceptions of it, but in imaginative sketches: sketches of settings that are different from those we have perceived, but that are capable of still presenting the same thing again. Imagination goes to work within the obscurity that provides the setting for the distinctions that are to be made.

II

*Distinctions are prior to judgments and definitions.* How is making distinctions different from other activities of the mind? How, in particular, is it different from judging and defining? When we make a judgment we declare that this individual or group or type of thing has a certain feature or is an instance of a kind: "He is temperate;" "Young people are optimistic;" "Argon is an inert gas." We subsume a case under a predicate. The achievement of judging is to unify, so judging is not the same as making a distinction, but judgment does presume that some distinctions have been made. Only because the predicate has been distinguished from other kinds or features is
it definite enough for us to say explicitly that this or that is a case of the predicate. This reliance of judgments on distinctions comes out neatly in sentences that both place an instance under a category and, at the same time, display a distinction: “He could practice abstinence, but not temperance;” “We had talk enough, but no conversation;” “I have found you an argument; but I am not obliged to find you an understanding.”2 Behind such judgments, and also showing through them, are the distinctions “abstinence is not temperance,” “talk is not conversation,” “argument is not understanding.” And if the judgments were simple, devoid of the contrasting element—“He could abstain,” “We talked,” “You have the argument”—the distinction would still be behind them but would no longer show through.

Of course every category we possess can be distinguished from an indefinite number of other categories. Abstinence is not only different from temperance, but also from deprivation, gluttony, desire, selfishness, and an infinity of other things. We might on a given occasion explicitly engage one of these distinctions—“abstinence is not temperance”—but if we do not specify a distinction, we do not necessarily engage all the distinctions a term can enter into. The context will almost always pull one or two distinctions to the fore and emphasize certain contrasts even if they are not expressed; the point of almost any assertion is not only to state something, but to distinguish it from something near it which might have been anticipated and with which it might have been confused. Certain distinctions are activated, perhaps silently, and these distinctions are always within a genus set by the context of discourse. The genus can shrink or swell depending on the precision of the speaker. For a careless speaker, words have relatively little exclusionary force, whereas a careful and intelligent speaker engages many distinctions in what he says.

But is it true that predicates or categories must rest on distinctions that stand behind, sometimes show through, and are activated by predications? Are predications not simply built up through familiarity and repeated experience? Do we not see one brown thing, then another, and gradually develop by generalization the idea of brown? This appears to be an entirely positive process; does “brown” or any other term need negation and contrast to be what it is?

There is a level of experience and speech which admits of some

2 Ibid., pp. 956, 1032, 1119
generality, but in which the distinct exclusion of one kind from another has not yet set in. This is associative experience and speech, the sort used by children, by people strongly moved by emotion, or by careless speakers or agents, and since reason involves definite exclusions, this level of awareness and behavior is prerational. A child for example may be able to apply a term like “dog” or “white” to several individuals, but it is most unlikely that he would volunteer a phase like, “But a dog is not a horse.” The point of such a statement would be lost on a child. The child’s “predications” are really active involvements with things; he uses the word “dog” to call the animal or to further an action, not to assert something about it. He is not engaged in the relatively detached activity of making statements about dogs, and only when we enter into such activity would a rather theoretical remark like “dogs are not horses” be appropriate. The distinction is achieved in a contemplative act. It is a simple recognition of how things are and how they have to be. Even if it is uttered in an intensely active situation, the making of the distinction is a detached acknowledgment of necessity, not a further step in the course of action. It may register a necessity that we in our activity must pay attention to—“embezzlement is not borrowing,” “medical data is not medical care”—but it is not a move in the action. It has its detached, objective authority precisely because it steps out of the action and makes a distinction that is in the nature of things.

If a distinction is made in the midst of an excited scene, it is an attempt to bring the presence of mind to an emotionally charged situation. The distinction may be made in a brief phrase or it may be elaborated in a long argument, but the point is to make someone see

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3 What we describe as making and dwelling on distinctions is what Hannah Arendt calls “thinking.” She distinguishes such thinking from judging in _The Life of the Mind_, 2 vols (New York: Harcourt, 1977), 1: 92–97, 198. It would be interesting to relate the making of distinctions to the achievement of the logical structure of reversibility, which Piaget sees as essential to conceptual thought. Reversibility has two forms, negation (or inversion) and reciprocity, the first being used in concrete acts of classification, the second in concrete acts of relating. Only at the age of about eleven or twelve can children begin to combine both forms in logical operations; but making distinctions seems to engage both forms of reversibility. See Jean Piaget, _Genetic Epistemology_ (New York: Columbia University Press, 1970), pp. 22–30, 39–40; Barbel Inhelder and Jean Piaget, _The Growth of Logical Thinking from Childhood to Adolescence_ (New York: Basic Books, 1958), pp. 105, 133–34, 335. The “involved,” pragmatic use of language by children is described by Hans Furth in _Piaget for Teachers_ (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, 1970), pp. 56–71.
that there are two things where he presumes there to be only one. Presence of mind is to see two where many can feel only one. Letting a distinction assert itself can be a troubling process, and it can, if the issues are personal, take a very long time. And not everyone is capable of letting the distinction emerge, or of sustaining it once it has come forward. Our concern in this essay is not to make a distinction in such a situation, but to discuss what it is for a distinction to emerge and to be kept alive, and to discuss what one has to do to let the distinction come about.

Furthermore the achievement of a distinction is no guarantee that the distinction will be sustained. It is possible for the distinction to wobble, perhaps for an extended length of time, and finally to slip away, with the generic obscurity returning. Even if the distinction is authentically achieved, it is not easy to let it work its way into behavior, and there may be periods in which the required presence of mind fluctuates. The ability to formulate the distinction in words is no assurance that the grasp of its two elements as two and as necessarily exclusive is there. However if we do manage to get even the slightest hold on the distinction, or if it is allowed to get the slightest hold on us, it can serve as an orientation during the period of turbulence and indicate the direction toward which we should be moving. Remarks like, “She didn’t hate you; she loved him,” or “He’s not angry because you did it; he’s angry because it happened,” may not dissipate our distress at the moment they are stated, but they make a difference in the long run.

Finally if we have achieved a distinction and then lose it, we do not fall back into the condition we were in before we first made the distinction; the distinction we once made stays around to haunt us, but only as a shade of its former self. There is the memory of something we can and ought to remember. We anticipate recovering the distinction, we do not anticipate making it for the first time.

An emotional scene provides a good setting in which to examine the ability to make distinctions because we can notice how a distinction comes and goes in such a scene, and how it changes what is going on. But a distinction can also be conspicuously absent in carelessness, and in what we call by the harsh names of dullness or stupidity. Stupidity is not ignorance; it is an ignorance that cannot be overcome. It is the rather permanent inability to let appropriate distinctions occur. Someone may, for example, be unable to distinguish another person as a friend and as an official, and may be disappointed
because he does not get political favors from him. The failure to distinguish may be caused by some passion, like ambition or vanity, and then there is at least in principle the hope that the distinction might be made to break through; but the failure can also come from dullness, from the constitutional inability to cut one into two, and then there is no hope of differentiation. All one can do is dismiss that particular issue and approach the person through other ways, ways in which no corresponding discriminations have to be made.

The kind of verbal activity that can be found in children, in emotionally tense speakers, and in the careless or the dull, is a prejudgmental use of language, and it is prejudgmental because distinctions of kinds have not been made by such speakers and agents. We cannot place something under a category until the category is sufficiently determined. Making distinctions therefore comes “between” vagueness and distinct judging; it is the emergence of reason and thinking. But how are distinctions related to definitions? Distinctions may be prior to judgments, but are they also prior to definitions?

Before we can define something, like courage for example, we must have made some distinctions as initial demarcations of the topic; we must have registered that courage is not rashness, that courage is not greed, that courage is not hostility. We must have registered such distinctions as being necessary. These negations are not just coincidental facts; they belong to courage in itself, and some of them must come between the casual acquaintance we have with courage and the ability we may acquire to define what it is. The definition itself is a positive process, for we select the specific difference, within the genus, that determines what the object is; but the selection of the difference is possible only because the difference has been distinguished from its possible alternatives. The definition does not make the distinction, it presumes it.

But are there not exceptions to this? Are there not cases in which it is the definition that permits us to see the necessity of a distinction? For example, a literary theorist has distinguished between the bardic voice and the prophetic voice in poetry. To express this distinction, one might say, “a bard is not a prophet,” or “to be a bard is not to be a prophet.” Someone familiar in a general way with these terms might ask why this distinction is necessary. Why could not

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4 The distinction is made by Michael Gosman in an unpublished essay, “Ezra Pound’s Literary Theory and Poetic Techniques.”
prophets, as prophets, also be bards? The response consists in definitions: a bard is one who stands within a community and speaks its past; a prophet is one who takes a distance from his community, criticizes its past and present, and urges new behavior in the future. These definitional refinements are not mere stipulations; they bring out a sense that is vague but latent in the ordinary use of the terms. And once these definitions are made, we see that a bardic voice is necessarily not a prophetic voice. The distinction seems to rest on the definitions, not on its own evidence.

However the definitions themselves depend on other distinctions, such as “inside is not outside,” “criticism is not repetition,” and “the future is not the past.” One or other of these may in turn be explained by further definitions, but not all of them can be. We come finally to distinctions and exclusions that cannot be clarified by definitions of their terms, but must be seen as holding necessarily by the strength of the terms. Any attempt to define “inside” and “outside,” for example, would involve a surreptitious use of the distinction between inner and outer. Distinctions are the pegs from which definitions hang. To know that inside is necessarily not outside is more elementary than to know the definition of anything that involves being inside or outside.

It may even be hard on occasion to say whether a particular distinction can or cannot be clarified, without circularity, by definitions. When we try, for example, to get behind “ignorance is not negligence,” we find ourselves using terms that are very much like those in the distinction we are trying to explain. However this uncertainty does not matter. There will be some cases in which definitions clearly establish the distinction, and there will be other cases in which the distinctions are clearly terminal, but there will be many cases in which it is hard to tell which has precedence. It is not the case that our language and our world are vividly divided into the terminal and the derivative; often enough we may not be able to get clear about a particular instance.

It might appear that the function of philosophy is to isolate those terminal, irreducible distinctions that can be identified, to explore the meaning of their terms, and to show how other definitions and distinctions stem from them. Philosophy, in this charting of being, would explore such fundamental categories as inner and outer, chance and necessity, before and after, and the like. Such a clarification is worth doing, but philosophy’s more important role is to talk about
distinctions as distinctions, about their terms as terms of distinctions, and about what permits distinctions to occur (the place of imagination, the role of the obscure matrix, the moment that calls for distinction). The study of the forms of manifestation at work in distinctions is more significant philosophically than the project of drawing up a catalogue of the basic items that show up in the distinctions. Because philosophy's more urgent concern is with the formal structure of presentation, it can tolerate uncertainty about whether a particular distinction, like that between ignorance and negligence, is terminal or not. In fact we come to see, philosophically, that some uncertainty about the terminal character of distinctions is unavoidable.

III

The urge to distinguish is prior to distinctions. Can we isolate the formal, syncategorematic element involved in making distinctions? In predication we can differentiate the formal structure "__ is ..." from the material or core content; what is the corresponding frame in distinctions? On a superficial level, it is something like "__ ≠ ...". What sort of operation is symbolized by "≠"? Clearly, it is an activity of separating or excluding two terms. But that is not all; in order that the terms be excludable, they must first be brought together, so there is also the activity of bringing together, along with the annulment of their being together. Making a distinction is the activity of articulating two terms and registering them as separate, as two, as not one; but all this involves the two terms' having been brought together. Otherwise they could not have been excluded from one another.

Would it then be correct to say that ≡ precedes ≠, that the fusion of two as one precedes the distinction? It would not be correct to say so, because the unification symbolized by "≡" and illustrated by a statement like, "But patriotism is loyalty," is itself realized in contrast to the possible exclusion expressed by "≠." The non-d distinction does not come before the distinction. It is not as though we first get used to being able to hold two things as one for a certain period, say between the ages of two and four, and then acquire the power of negating their union. Instead, the ability to hold two as one comes along with the ability to hold two together as distinguished: holding two together as one is holding them precisely as not distinguishable. The possibility of their being distinguished, and the
denial of this possibility, is part of holding them as one. Before
the possibility of distinction arises, we live simply in assimilation
and do not see the one as one. The activity “≡” is correlated to the
activity “≠.” Neither comes before the other.

Then what does come “before” the two of them? We can isolate
a more basic activity that precedes, categorically, = and ≠. It is the
gesture of bringing out two or bringing two together to decide whether
they are two or one. The activities “≡” and “≠” are closures, and
the more basic activity is what they close. It is the raising of the
issue, “One or two?” in a concrete case. It is like the solicitation of
affirmation or denial. Let us call this more basic activity the “urge”
to distinguish or to identify, and let us symbolize this categoriality
by “(X)” Urgence, in this sense, precedes both = and ≠, but it is
not to be distinguished from them as they are to be distinguished
from one another. Identification and distinction are determined by
each not being the other, whereas the urge we speak of enters
into either identification or distinction. It is like the tension that
gets resolved by one or the other.

In fact, it is rather loose talk to say that identification and dis-
tinction are “distinguished” from one another, because distinction
takes place inside one of these terms, inside ≠. What occurs in ≠
cannot be applied to the difference between = and ≠. All we can do
in our philosophical analysis is make further refinements and contrasts
that will bring out what is special about the difference between =
and ≠, refinements that will show how each of these is different
from the urgency (X) that precedes both. Distinctions and identifica-
tions do not apply to themselves, reflexively, in the same way they
apply to things we normally distinguish, like ignorance and negli-
gence, counseling and commandment, or medical data and medical
care. This should not be a cause for panic, but should simply prompt
us to recognize the special character of philosophical discourse, vocab-
ulary, and syntax.

Still another way of isolating (X) is the following. When we
make a distinction, like “kindness is not fondness,” our attention is
focused on the terms distinguished, on kindness and fondness, and

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5 In a letter to Boswell, Johnson writes, “His disposition towards you
was undoubtedly that of a kind, though not of a fond father. Kindness,
at least actual, is in our power, but fondness is not; and if by negligence
or imprudence you had extinguished his fondness, he could not at will re-
kindle it.” Boswell, Life of Johnson, p. 1012.
we have to make a reflective turn to focus on the distinction, ≠, that lets these terms come forward as distinct. Now when we speak about = and ≠ as categorial forms, we are again caught in a kind of naivety analogous to that which prevailed when we were busy with kindness and fondness. Again we have to make a special reflective turn to that which permits = and ≠ to come forward as options “differentiated” from one another. What do we turn to? We turn to that which comes “before” and “between” = and ≠, to the urgency (X), to the raising of the issue whether = or ≠ holds between A and B, between kindness and fondness.

But now that we have gotten at this urgency (X), what can be said about it? The urgency occurs within the generic obscurity that calls for a distinction, and it takes place with the help of the imagination. The urgency occurs when we become dissatisfied with the generic and feel that some sort of distinction (or identification) needs to be made. It is the state of tipping into thought. A person who is dull does not sense this urgency, even when someone else tries to provoke it in him. A person who is dull fails not primarily in being unable to appreciate a completed distinction; he fails primarily in not sensing that there is an issue for distinction. He lives quite contentedly in the generic obscurity even though words pulling beyond the obscurity float around him. What can be exasperating in such a person is not his inability to grasp a distinction, but his failure to see the need for one.

The urgency toward distinction involves the imagination and it occurs not as a clash of abstract ideas but concretely. It involves a split between two concrete things presented to us. It can involve a perception against which an imagination is contrasted, or it can involve an imagination against which another imagination is contrasted. To return to one of our first examples, while Jack was engaged in collecting and presenting medical information, the possibility of engaging in medical care occurs to him in a concrete form (because of what the doctor said to him), and this imagined projection resists being assimilated into what he has been doing. It would be to do something else. Here we have a contrast between perception and imagination. If you, the reader, merely read the story about Jack and imagine him collecting data, your appreciation of the distinction is based just on imagination, with one imaginative projection played off against another. In either case the conceptual distinction is rooted in a concrete and preconceptual, urgent sensing.
of a difference. Without this imaginative power the abstract distinc-
tion would not register for us; it would be a distinction without
a difference. Hence we often say that someone who is dull lacks
imagination, the capacity for engendering and sensing concrete
differences.

Of course the concrete cases are perceived and imagined as cases
of a certain kind, but the category under which they fall does not
come into prominence until we seal the distinction into an abstract
formula. Sometimes we are given the distinction not in an abstract
formula, like “ignorance is not negligence,” but in a story or legend
or parable or illustration. The story may hold the truth for us in an
urgent, concrete form; we know a distinction of general import is at
work in the story and preserved in it, but it may not be possible
to state abstractly what the terms of the distinction are. Often what
is at issue is more richly possessed in the concrete recital rather
than in the abstract statement; and always the abstract statement
needs to be nourished by cases if it is to be more than an idle, merely
linguistic distinction. An abstract formula like “counseling is not
commandment” has force and urgency because it is played off against
the concrete case we perceive or imagine with the formula, the con-
crete case in which the obscurity that calls for the distinction is
preserved.

When we do rest with the concrete recital, we still realize that
it holds a distinction (or an identification) that goes beyond the par-
ticulars of this instance; it urges beyond itself and wants a distinc-
tion (or identification). The story of Cinderella, for example, tends
toward some such distinction as “to be held in disdain by small-
minded people is not to be worthless,” or perhaps “excellence now
unrecognized is not excellence forever unrecognized.” The story
has import because it urges us toward such knowledge. Then there
is Aesop’s fable of the dog who had a piece of meat in his mouth,
saw his own reflection in the water, tried to get the other piece of
meat, and lost the one he had; this fable tends toward an obvious
identification such as, “to covet can be to lose what you have,” and it
plays also on a more subtle, almost ominous distinction of appear-
ances, something like “your own image is not someone else.” The
stories are obviously better than my clumsy abstractions, and stories
often seem profound because they urge a distinction but do not make
it obvious what the distinction is. What, for example, could express
the distinctions and identifications at work in von Hofmannsthal’s
Die Frau ohne Schatten, Poe's The Purloined Letter, and Shakespeare's The Tempest? But even if the concrete is in such cases better than the abstract, the concrete is good only because it urges toward the abstract.

IV

Ways in which distinctions go wrong. There are two important ways in which distinctions can go wrong: (1) we may fail to make a distinction that we ought to make; and (2) we may make a distinction that does not really exist. In the first we underdistinguish, in the second we overdistinguish.

(1) It is quite legitimate to distinguish kindness from fondness, but we can easily imagine someone who cannot appreciate kindness from another person unless it is also fondness; whether it be because of a romantic understanding of human relationships, or because of emotional involvement and tension, or simply because of a lack of experience in what is possible and in what can be expected from people. Because of the failure to distinguish, the kindness exercised may not be recognized as kindness but deciphered into condescension or flattery or insinuation. And not only the recipient but even the one who performs the kindness may be confused and distressed in what he is trying to do if he cannot make the required distinction.

Because the appropriate division of kinds is not made, an instance of one of the kinds is not allowed to be itself. It is not just the abstract distinction that fails to occur; because the distinction fails, a concrete situation is misinterpreted. Kindness and fondness are confused or "poured together," and since in the concrete occurrence there is no fondness, it is assumed that there could not be kindness, so that which is going on becomes interpreted as something else. The failure of an abstract distinction has a disorienting and dissolving effect on a particular occurrence: we do not accept the plain sense of what is before us, and try to read it as something other that it might be. "It could not be kindness, even though it looks like kindness, so it must be something else." And it must be something dissimulative, because the apparent sense has to be dismissed.

One species (kindness) can therefore fail to be distinguished from another species (fondness). One species is confused with and hence conceals another. But the structure of such confusion is even more complex. The confusion reaches into the genus from which both spe-
cies arise. Suppose that something like benevolence is the genus for kindness and fondness; a person who confuses kindness and fondness also confuses benevolence with fondness, and hence assumes that if there is to be benevolence there must also be fondness. He does not see that benevolence can also “be,” as kindness, even if there is no fondness. The making of a distinction preserves the genus. If the distinction is not made, the genus of benevolence is deciphered as something else, such as clever self-seeking, and benevolence is not allowed to be itself. The failure to make an appropriate distinction again forces us to reject an obvious presence and to interpret it as a disguise. The manifest becomes something that conceals.

This play between the failure to make a distinction and the refusal to accept something obvious can make it exasperating for someone who has to explain to someone else what is going on; if a person cannot get the distinctions between, say, kindness and fondness, loyalty and obsequiousness, diligence and compulsion; or if he cannot appreciate distinctions like those made by John Henry Newman when he writes, “But attachment is not trust, nor is to obey the same as to look up to, and to rely upon”; it will be practically impossible for him to understand the plain sense of what is going on around him. He will instead tend to fall back on a few favorite decipherments of behavior, explaining things in terms of concealed greed or self-interest, sublimated desires, or clever moves to obtain influence. One is driven into reductionism when one is not cultivated to possess an array of distinctions rich enough to let things be what they are. In contrast, making the decisive distinction has an illuminating and liberating effect because it lets the concrete occurrence stand forth for what it is. We understand it not in terms of a decipherment, but on its own terms.

The bias of education and general opinion now is clearly toward explanation by decipherment rather than explanation by distinction. Astronomy, physics, genetics, economics, psychology, and sociology have inclined us to interpret what we directly experience in terms of things we do not directly encounter, like nuclear particles, fields, genes, unconscious desires, and concealed laws of money, exchange, labor, and demand. Because such hidden things are taken as the truth of what appears, the distinctions that structure the world of

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direct appearance are taken to be merely conventional or ideological. We tend to feel, consequently, that there is little value in making and clarifying manifest distinctions, and equally little value in teaching others such distinctions and in helping them to make distinctions themselves; it seems better to teach them "the true theory" that tells what is behind the things that appear. This preference for the hidden is a bias; it overlooks the fact that the things described or constructed in science are dependent on distinctions and identifications made in the world in which we live. But it is not a harmless bias, because someone "educated" to neglect distinctions like those between teaching and indoctrination, liberty and license, politics and advertising, or production and action, will not be able to live and act rationally. In public affairs he will be as disoriented as the person who, in private matters, cannot see the difference between kindness and fondness. Our present uncertainty about what should be taught in the humanities stems from the belief that making basic distinctions in the world we inhabit is not a form of knowledge and understanding.7

(2) If we limit ourselves to repeating standard distinctions, it might appear that there are a precise number of distinctions and "trees" of distinctions, going from the generic down to specific kinds. The world appears to break down, in Porphyrian fashion, into definite series of genera and species. But once we move into less familiar distinctions, like those between trust and attachment, kindness and fondness, "that which is most important and that which is most talked about," and medical data and medical care, we realize that distinctions are not so definitely ordered. There are, it is true, many distinctions that any intelligent and educated person should know, but it is equally important that such a person should be able to go and do likewise, to make further distinctions on his own. It would be impossible to collect beforehand enough categories and trees of categories to cover any contingency; the thoughtful observer must be able himself to make the incisive distinction that fits and clarifies what is occurring before him, and such a distinction may not be capable of being ordered into a systematic plan.

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7 See Robert Sokolowski, "Humanistic Studies in the Social Work Curriculum," Social Thought 4 (1978): 39–43. The craft of a teacher consists in presenting and controlling imaginary cases in such a way that a strategic distinction is achieved by the students who listen to him. The immediate context is important in such teaching; one cannot safely rely on mechanical means, on records, videotapes, or even on writing, to make distinctions.
But just as it is possible for us to fail to make an appropriate distinction, is it not possible for us to go too far and, like Taylor in *The Looking Glass War*, engage in "emphasizing a distinction which did not exist"? What would it be like to do this? We are not talking about a distinction that is valid but just happens not to be relevant to a case before us; nor are we talking about a distinction between nonsense terms; we are talking about an apparent division of kinds which is not truly a division of kinds. How can something look like a distinction, and even be taken as a distinction by many people, and yet not really be one? To clarify this possibility is more significant for the problem of truth and falsity than is the treatment of less fundamental untruth, such as that which occurs in lies or in simply false statements or in ignorance.

It is hard to imagine an example of an unreal distinction, because the distinction must be plausible if we are to take it seriously; but how can it be plausible if we know it is unreal? Perhaps it would be best to take a controversial instance. Many writers have written about a virtue which they call authenticity. I do not think that such a virtue, as described by these writers, exists. I think authenticity is a philosophical construct, that it can only be understood as the historical result of the development of certain philosophical ideas, and that the term "authenticity" does not name a moral phenomenon. I invite you, the reader, to entertain my position. Then we will both imagine someone who thinks authenticity is real, and we will imagine him trying to distinguish authenticity from other things. This will provide us with a convincing example to work with in describing what happens when one "makes" a distinction that does not exist.

There are some acceptable distinctions one can make regarding authenticity. One can say "authenticity is not stubbornness," or "authenticity is not selfishness." However the legitimacy of such distinctions is derived from genera stacked above authenticity: au-

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9 Lionel Trilling examines the literary and historical development of this new moral "appearance" in *Sincerity and Authenticity* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1971). The development of the notion is related, of course, to social and political, as well as ideological changes, and at the deepest level it is related to shifts in being, in presencing and representation. Chapter 2 of part 1 of Sartre's *Being and Nothingness* discusses authenticity and bad faith; see also Schubert M. Ogden, *The Reality of God* (New York: Harper and Row, 1963), p. 11.
thenticity is taken to be a virtue in the generic area of seriousness and honesty, and it is really this genus that is being contrasted with stubbornness. Likewise, something like “benevolence” is a genus above authenticity, and is the genus which we contrast with selfishness. The insubstantiality of authenticity becomes manifest when we try to make distinctions that are more specific to this putative virtue. For example, Plato describes a kind of moral dissimulation in book 2 of the Republic: a man is depicted who in fact does bad things, but who achieves a reputation for being good (359B–362C). The contrast is between his actions which are bad and his reputation which is good; this is a legitimate moral issue. Now in the issue of authenticity we are supposed to be able to perform good actions, and yet not actually be good. This is the vice, the “bad faith,” that authenticity is opposed to. The contrast is not between our reputation and our actions, but between our actions and something that, in principle, never shows up as an action. Now someone who thinks “authenticity” names a moral phenomenon must, at some time, be able to make the distinction, “authenticity is not the moral honesty discussed in the Republic.” But if I am right in my suspicion of authenticity, we can show that authenticity is not to be distinguished from the honesty Plato deals with; authenticity is a confused extension of that honesty, brought about by subsequent historical interpretations.

Another phenomenon that authenticity, if it were real, ought to be distinguished from is self-understanding, the ability to appreciate that we are, for example, jealous or envious or generous or modest when we act in certain ways. Still another “kind” that authenticity ought to be distinguished from are the theological virtues of faith, hope, and charity, as they were described by medieval Christian theologians. My contention is that when someone tries, as he must try, to distinguish authenticity from moral honesty, from self-understanding, from a secularized version of the theological virtues, and from other kinds of virtues as well, authenticity cannot stand up in the distinction; it becomes absorbed into things it should be distinguishable from. As we clarify what we mean by these various kinds, authenticity is seen gradually to dissolve into them. A sort of layered sedimentation and overlap of ideas has made us think there was a new moral phenomenon to be named, but it was only an illusion created by the ideational medium through which our actions are seen; and the illusion is disclosed as an illusion when we show
that the putative species, authenticity, is dissolvable without remainder into other species from which, if it were real, it should be distinguished. A true kind resists such absorption; its distinctions hold up.

A similar dissolution could be carried out for terms like “creativity” and “relevance,” as they are commonly used, and for other words without substance, words which seem to name but do not. The unreality of such words is more clearly recognized in their inability to be distinguished than in the ambiguity and uncertainty we experience when we try to apply them to anything. The point of our discussion is, of course, not to prove the claim that “authenticity” is an insubstantial term, but to illustrate what happens when we make a distinction that does not exist. The distinction does not exist because one or both of the terms of the distinction do not exist, even though many people may think that they are real. And correlatively, and perhaps on a deeper level, one or both of the terms of the distinction do not exist because the distinction itself “is” not, as we shall now demonstrate.  

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10 One might say that most philosophical arguments are not about the reality or unreality of a particular term or thing (like “the world” or “a priori categories of the mind”), but about whether or not a particular distinction should be “entered” at all. We have stated that historical developments may lead to unreal distinctions, but certainly not all historical developments do so. Some are legitimate; some distinctions can be reached only after others have been made. How do we distinguish “true” from “false” developments? This is the issue of the historicity of distinctions. A historicist interpretation of distinctions would simply rest with the fact that certain distinctions are held by certain people at a certain time; it would not try to judge between those that “are” and those that “are not.” Or at best it would say that some distinctions found in the past are still maintained by us, so they still “are,” while others are not accepted; however we ourselves are merely the inhabitants of another historical period. Clearly such a historicist reading does not treat distinctions adequately. We cannot discuss the historicity of distinctions in this essay, but would observe that the problem of distinctions is a fruitful way through which to approach hermeneutics. It provides more resources, and engages more directly the issue of truth, than does the use of meaning or language alone.

11 Besides overdistinguishing and underdistinguishing, we might also err by making an irrelevant distinction. The terms distinguished do not apply to the issue before us, or they apply to one of the genera located above the species we are confronted with. However, irrelevant distinctions are not as interesting philosophically as the two ways of erring we examine in the text. And just to add a brain-teaser to our analysis, the following distinction is not so obviously true, nor are its terms so clearly opposed to each other, as might appear at first sight: “fruits are not vegetables.”
True distinctions as genuine, not correct  Unreal distinctions can be clarified by an examination of acceptable or true distinctions. It might appear that after we have made a distinction that seems to be decisive, there still remains the task of showing somehow that the terms of the distinction do exist. It might be thought that the distinction may be “only dialectical” or “only a matter of words,” and that we must bring further evidence to show that it has something one might call “existential import.” A suspicion of this sort betrays a misunderstanding of how words are related to being. There is an ontological force to distinctions as such. When we make distinctions we are not just determining language in isolation from being. In determining language we are also articulating being, not as two activities that only happen to be conjoined, but as a single activity that has two aspects which may, on special occasions, be separated from one another, but which normally are what they are only by being together. Determining language and articulating being is a hendiadys. Consequently a distinction does not normally have to be followed by a proof that its terms exist.

If we start off with the strong conviction that there is a special domain of language, meaning, dialectics, or the conceptual, and that this domain subsists quite independently of what is real, it seems like the most obvious thing in the world to say that distinctions first occur in the mental domain and then must be given some sort of ontological confirmation to be admitted as true. But this is letting our convictions dictate what the phenomena ought to be. If we instead look at how distinctions actually occur, we find that they are practically always immersed in both language and being. When we distinguish between ignorance and negligence, the bard and the prophet, kindness and fondness, or medical data and medical care, we do not feel compelled to go on to show that the terms of such distinctions are real. There is a kind of obvious reality to the disjuncted terms, and their reality seems somehow warranted by the possibility of distinguishing them. Even when we want to argue about the legitimacy of a particular distinction, or about the reality of one of its terms, we appeal ultimately to other distinctions, and the very achievement of these distinctions seems to make manifest the reality of what is distinguished. Can we clarify how distinctions are able to warrant the reality of the terms distinguished?
Before we enter into distinctions, we are immersed in simple familiarity with a particular type of thing. But when we have to distinguish that kind of thing from other kinds, what we were familiar with emerges as necessarily excluding something, something that was also around in our experience. Our vague, familiar experience is a matrix which permits an exclusion to occur, and each of the terms distinguished becomes manifest as real precisely because it is, necessarily, not something else. The simple familiarity that precedes a distinction does not provide this sense of being real; only a distinction between things establishes it. The distinction provides each term with a sense of definiteness and with a sense of otherness: the thing is itself, and it is not this other; it is other than this other thing. This presence of sameness and otherness occurs on the basis of a distinction. The definiteness and exclusion are not first recognized as “attributes” of the things we are familiar with; they are not first recognized in the things and then subsequently related to other things and expressed in a distinction. The being distinguished is the registration, the disclosure of sameness and otherness, and it is the emergence of each term as some thing.

Of course familiarity has to come before the distinction, and it contributes to the sense of reality of both terms. If we distinguished terms we were totally unacquainted with, the distinction would not in fact take place. We need familiarity with kindness and with fondness before the distinction between them can occur. But the distinction is not just a yoking of two completed beings; until the terms have entered into distinctions, they are in a kind of mist in which the difference between the real and the apparent has not taken effect. Something has to exclude something, and to exclude something specific in its genus, if it is to be real. It has to be able not just to be presented, but to be presented as distinguished, and it is so presented in a distinction. And all this is not just a matter of language, for what we are familiar with as kindness, for example, cannot be said to be until it emerges as distinguished from something else.

When we say a distinction is a “true” distinction, we mean that it is genuinely a distinction, we do not mean that it is a correct distinction, one that can match something outside itself. Truth as being genuine is different from truth as being correct. Gold can be said to be true gold, and love can be said to be true love, in the sense that they are what they seem to be. But a judgment can be said to be a true judgment in the sense that it can be brought up against
something outside itself, a state of affairs, which the judgment must match in order to be true. We go outside the judgment to determine its truth of correctness; the truth of correctness implies an external standard by which whatever is true is determined as true. But in the truth of genuineness we do not go outside the thing to measure its truth; we simply determine the thing as being truly what it seems to be. Any “going outside” in the case of genuineness is merely going to illusions or to false appearances to deny that the thing is any such falsehood or counterfeit.

Now when we think that a distinction has somehow to be brought to things to be certified as true, we are supposing that distinctions are like judgments and that they have to be made to correspond to “states of affairs” to be qualified as true. But there is no way to possess any “objective correlate” for a distinction except in the distinction itself. There is no way to verify a distinction except by making it. There is nothing beyond a distinction for it to correspond to. Distinctions are not like judgments. Hence the truth of a distinction is truth in the sense of being genuine, not in the sense of being correct. There can be false distinctions, but they are false in the way “false gold” or “fool’s gold” or “false love” are false, not in the way a false opinion is wrong. A false judgment can be a genuine judgment even though it is false, but false distinctions just are not distinctions. They seem to be distinctions but they are not. And the genuine thinking that must occur in true distinctions is a more fundamental kind of thinking than what we do when we make judgments, entertain opinions, and try to determine whether what we or others say is correct or not. Distinctions are prior to judgments and to definitions.

There will probably always be a lingering feeling that distinctions can somehow be only conceptual and that they stand in need of being brought to the things themselves in some sort of verification. But what does “going to see the things themselves” signify in the case of distinctions? When we go to experience, we still have to engage our imagination in order to make the true distinction. The same true distinction can be made whether we are in the middle of the experience of things or in an imaginative dwelling with them; in either case the imagination is needed as an element in letting the distinction come forward. And if we only carry over someone else’s words when we pretend to distinguish but do not really understand what we say, we do not have a genuine distinction at all; it is not the case that
we have a genuine distinction that is false because it does not match a state of affairs. There is no way of getting around distinctions to have the things distinguished, apart from making the distinction itself.

VI

The mind that achieves distinctions. In discussing distinctions we have not so far said much about the persons who make the distinctions, the datives to whom the distinctions appear. We have proceeded as if the agent of distinctions were more or less an uninvolved spectator, someone who clearly possessed his own self and, as a kind of supplement, managed to make or failed to make appropriate distinctions. But the articulation of the self is a factor in the making of distinctions. We become capable of making distinctions in things because of distinctions that take place in regard to our selves; and we can accept those distinctions that give the sense of the self only because distinctions generally can occur in and for us.

We begin everything by assimilation; not only the absorption of new kinds of objects, which are first brought in for us associatively as like the things we are already familiar with, but also the development of our own styles of behavior and the determination of who and what we are. We achieve self-identification, and correlative self-differentiation from others, at all stages of life, early and late. For example, if someone falls into a state of emotional distress and, in a rather sustained way, loses his nerve, one way of being helped is to associate with someone else: to be with and to act with someone whose patterns of behavior he can assimilate. Sometimes people pick up mannerisms in such association, but more profoundly they pick up a more confident or more relaxed or more optimistic pattern of behavior. They handle issues imitatively at first, then gradually handle them more and more on their own. They do not become duplicates of those they imitate, but threads and patterns of what they imitate do become woven into their own way of doing things: “We cannot be taught self-esteem; we absorb it. Similarly, conscious learning plays no part in the acquisition of defense mechanisms; rather the response of people outside of us—not just events—shapes our modes of adaptation. A great violinist’s style owes as much to his incorporation of dedicated and gifted teachers as it does to his own innate talents and idiosyncrasies or to his rote learning of notes and
scales.”

We can only identify with others by being around them and by acting with them. Assimilation happens, it is not deliberate; it is like getting warm. We can put ourselves in a position where it may happen, but we cannot choose the assimilation itself. We have to let it occur. And sooner or later conflicts must arise, as the associative and imitative pull is stronger, along one direction or another, than we are able to absorb or than we want to absorb. Amid the assimilation, the urge to distinguish asserts itself, and this urgency is concerned not with objects we deal with but with our own selves.

This assimilation and distinction is always going on. In the very early years of life it occurs in a massive way in regard to fundamental issues: eating, laughing and crying, smiling, becoming angry, undergoing loss and recovery, movement, babbling and initial speech, and the like. The patterns we pick up then underlie all subsequent assimilations and are preceded by practically no prior assimilated behavior. But then of course distinctions have to be made in this associative matrix, and they are the early adjustments we make as we come to know “I am not you” and “we are not that” and “mine is not thine.” The child does not formulate these distinctions, he knows them in their urgent form. Even when we state them now, we realize that the verbal formulation is as nothing compared to the concrete difference that underlies the abstract distinction; and yet the concrete difference has its force precisely because it urges toward distinction. As we grow older, all the identities the self achieves through the stages of life are simply the other side of differentiations it accomplishes within assimilations it has been undergoing.

Not all assimilation is profound. There are light touches of style and gesture that we get from acquaintances, from the way people generally do things, and from prominent figures. And when we are said to assimilate the behavior of others, we do not merely imitate but also react on our own to a tone and pattern they set, and then

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13 T. S. Eliot observes that “there is a close analogy between the sort of experience which develops a man and the sort of experience which develops a writer,” and describes the identification that can occur between a writer and an author from the past. In this experience, a young writer “may be changed, metamorphosed almost, within a few weeks even, from a bundle of second-hand sentiments into a person.” “Reflections on Contemporary Poetry,” *Egoist* 6 (July 1919): 39.
we see how they react to our reaction. In this give and take we internalize other people. But the time always comes when we have to differentiate ourselves from what we assimilate; what we differentiate as ourselves contains, in turn, what we differentiated earlier in other assimilative matrices, and the style of earlier distinctions persists in modifying the tone of those we are making now.

We must have made some of these self-differentiations in order to "be there" at all to make distinctions about things other than ourselves. The distinction-making process establishes us as makers of distinctions. But we can never eliminate the obscure matrix that stands at our back; it can be hard for some to distinguish themselves even from rather superficial assimilations like those of style of dress or passing mannerisms, but it is impossible to unravel completely the matting at the base of what we are; those "parts" are not distinguishable. And it must be noted that the very power to let distinctions and identifications come about, in ourselves and in things we encounter, is not picked up as a pattern from others. It is ours by nature; it lets us pick up patterns and differentiate within them, it is not one of the patterns we absorb.

A central role in bringing about the self-differentiations that are possible and necessary for us is played by the imagination. As Husserl and others have stressed, the imagination is not a power of examining internal images; it is a possibility of displacement, of Versetzung, which helps actualize the self. In imagination we become distinguished into an imagined self and an imagining self; we

14 Vaillant, Adaptation to Life: "But our adaptive mechanisms are given to us by our biological makeup, by internalization of people who loved us, and from other sources as yet unidentified" (p. 28). "The importance of internalized people seemed to outweigh sociological factors" (p. 70). Vaillant speaks of the "by-product of successful identifications with other people" and "suitable models for identification" (pp. 88–89). See also William F. Lynch, Images of Hope. Imagination as Healer of the Hopeless (Notre Dame: Notre Dame University Press, 1974), p. 61: "An essential problem of all human life is to become separated-out (to become myself) without separation."

imagine ourselves doing something, even if the activity is something so contemplative as perceiving a scene of some sort. We appreciate ourselves (as imagined) at some distance to ourselves (as imagining), and “the self” is that which is the same in both dimensions, the imagining and the imagined. The same structural displacement occurs in memory, except that repetition instead of projection dominates. We continually mix memory and desire, of course, as recollection blends with imagination, but the same displacement remains through both. This displacement of the self is itself a distinction and an achievement; there are early stages in life in which the distinction “fantasy is not reality” has not yet come about for us, and there may be periods, like the times of dreams and of emotional illness, in which the distinction is overcome.

Because of its projective character, imagination is especially significant for differentiating the self from patterns it has imitatively assimilated. While we are in one condition and while we carry on one behavior, we can imagine ourselves in another. This occurs in simple daydreams, but it also occurs when we are trying to determine “a way out,” a way of being and acting that resolves something painful and confusing. Such confusions occur only in the concrete, and only the imagination of a concrete possibility can resolve them: and such an imagination is precisely what we have called the urgency of a distinction. If for example we are in the vicious double bind in which fondness is enjoined but made impossible, and if we are accused—or accuse ourselves—of cruelty or of indifference, the only resolution is to have the power to imagine a behavior, always in the concrete, which we could call something like kindness or concern, something distinguished from cruelty and from indifference, without yet being fondness, and to perform this behavior. We might be able to formulate the distinction in words, “kindness is not fondness,” or “concern is not fondness,” but the formulation is not very important; what is important is the imaginative urgency that breaks the bind and releases the difference; without the concrete imagination the verbal distinction is hollow. Because the concrete circumstances and the concrete possibilities of action are so complex, we might be able to imagine and execute an action which fits under no standard category: not fondness, but something between kindness and concern with perhaps a touch of a reprimand—but certainly not cruelty and not indifference. We need to be insightful, prudent, and virtuous to be able to imagine what we can and ought to do in the complexities
of actual situations that call for action, and if we succeed it will be obvious to anyone who appreciates what is going on that what we did was the right thing to do, whether or not the right term can be found to name what we did.

The imaginative projection of an action works not only in private, personal relationships but also in how we solve problems and how we change things and institutions. We may imagine a new development in livestock or in plants and proceed to breed it, we may realize that a public institution should be adjusted along certain lines to respond better to its present situation, or we may figure out how to handle a sudden change in the things we deal with ("The ship is sinking; what shall we do?"). If we think at all in such circumstances, if we do not just respond automatically, we engage our imagination, and it must be an imagination in touch with the things as they actually exist.\textsuperscript{16} We carry out an imaginative projection in which the thing we are dealing with can remain itself in a new condition. Some people fail in such challenges because they are too inflexible and have no imagination; they can do things only the way they have always been done, and circumstances may now make such performance impossible. Because of a failure to distinguish, the thing is destroyed. Other people fail because their imaginations run wild; anyone can imagine different ways of doing things, but it takes insight to imagine the different ways that will preserve the identity of what is at issue. It is a matter of making the strategic distinction that preserves the genus by letting it continue to be under the form of one of its species, when its existence under the form of the other species is threatened.\textsuperscript{17}

\textsuperscript{16} The need to be in contact with concrete circumstances is what makes it so difficult to try to deal with problems at a distance or far in the future; we feel we should do something, but cannot imagine what ought to be done.

\textsuperscript{17} See Robert Murphy, \textit{Diplomat among Warriors} (New York: Doubleday, 1964), p. 432: "Perhaps history will demonstrate that the free world could have intervened to give the Hungarians the liberty they sought, but none of us in the State Department had the skill or the imagination to devise a way." An example of the other extreme, of an excess of imagination, can be found in the case of General Giraud, who was brought out of Vichy France to help in the Allied invasion of northern Africa. Eisenhower reports, "It was quickly apparent that he had come out of France laboring under the grave misapprehension that he was immediately to assume command of the whole Allied expedition." \textit{Crusade in Europe} (New York: Doubleday, 1948), pp. 99–100. Giraud also thought there should be an immediate invasion of the French mainland. Clearly, he had spent time projecting these possibilities, imaginatively, before he left France to meet Eisenhower.
Imagination and eidetic distinctions. The uses of imagination that we have just surveyed deal with the projection of behavior and with bringing about changes. There is another use of imagination that deals with things that we cannot change, things in regard to which a projection of possible new behavior makes no sense. We can use the imagination to bring out identities and distinctions that belong to what Husserl calls the *eidos* or the pure essence of things. Husserl calls this usage “free variation.” In it we do not limit ourselves to what we have actually experienced or even to what we can possibly experience; we are to imagine all sorts of changes that can occur only in fantasy, and we are to see whether these imaginative projections do or do not leave intact the kind of thing we are dealing with. If our imaginative variation causes the thing to shatter—when we try to project a material body without the possibility of exercising or undergoing causation, for example—we know we have removed an element that belongs to the *eidos* of the thing; if not, we have removed something that is not eidetically necessary. Our imaginative variation is supposed to yield eidetic intuitions.

Imaginative variation and eidetic intuition are related to making distinctions. They make up a process that is far more complex and mysterious than Husserl's rather summary descriptions of it would suggest. It is a process, furthermore, that is carried on by all writers when they perform what we call “thought experiments” in order to bring out what one would call “conceptual necessities” if one were more or less nominalistic in taste, or “essential necessities” if one

Michael Oakeshott, in *On Human Conduct* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1975), gives “imagining a satisfaction” (p. 34) an important role in human action. He speaks of an agent “who is able to imagine [his situation] different from what it is and can recognize it to be alterable by some action or utterance of his own; and when alternatives present themselves to his imagination, he must be able to choose between them” (p. 36). “Deliberating is not merely reflecting in order to choose, it is also imagining alternatives between which to choose” (p. 43). He speaks of ranges of choice in which an agent is “limited only by the virtuosity of his imagination” (p. 43).

were a realist. What eidetic intuitions do is to bring out distinctions in all their necessity, and to bring out, consequently, the identities that are the other side of distinctions.

To get a sense of how imaginative variation and eidetic intuition work, we may examine Yves Simon’s analysis of authority. 19 Simon asks whether authority can “be” if there are no people who have to be ruled for their own good, such as the vicious and the deficient. He says authority is often equated with substitutional authority, and it is said that if everyone were mature and decent, authority could be dispensed with. Simon then imagines a society made up of mature and virtuous people, and shows that there is still a need for authority to determine how that society should act when it acts as a whole. He develops the notion of the common good, the relationship of means to end, the necessity that there will be difference of opinion regarding the means, and the necessity that there will be some strain between the common good and private goods even in a society made up of ideally perfect people.

In pursuing his argument, Simon shows that the generic matrix, authority, is confused with one of its species, substitutional authority, and hence is not allowed to be itself. His resolution is to show that substitutional authority is only one species of authority and that it is not equivalent to the whole; and he does this by making the distinction between substitutional and what he calls “essential” authority, the kind or species that would be around even in a society of ideally perfect people. Simon makes this distinction by imagining something that can never, empirically, be found, a society of perfectly intelligent and virtuous people. And although his topic, authority, is related to human action, his use of imagination is not a projection of possible action. It is purely discursive and contemplative, not practical. He wants to bring out the borders, the definition, of a concept or a nature. We cannot do anything about the fact that there are essential and substitutional forms of authority, that authority “is” under both these species. It is important for us to know this distinction so that we can live in the real world, avoid confusion, and escape all the binds that confusion brings; but nothing we can do will change the truth that authority can be both substitutional and essential. To think that we can change the nature of authority because we can

imagine a society of ideally perfect human beings would be to confuse the practical with the theoretical use of imagination. The theoretical imagination is restrained only by conceivability, whereas the practical imagination has to be restrained by many contingencies.

The two uses of imagination also differ in that the theoretical must reach an explicit verbal formulation of the distinction, whereas the practical can rest in the concrete urge. In action the important thing is to determine what ought to be done, and finding the right words to describe exactly what we are doing, when it is possible at all, is more an adornment than a necessity. But in theoretical distinctions the formulation is everything. Until we find the words to state the distinctions, we have not achieved what we are after; an inkling of a distinction is not enough.

Husserl describes imaginative variation as though we simply let our imaginations wander freely, but it is much more a directed exercise than that. We sense a confusion within a particular genus, and we want to lance it; we sense the obscurity as obscurity and want to dispel it. The genus is sensed as obscure and as ripe for a distinction, it begins to come forward as a genus or an origin, when it seems to be pushed and pulled in two directions at once: it is somehow both affirmed and rejected. Authority, for example, is said to belong only when there are imperfect persons, but then it does not seem right to constrict it in this way. It does not matter where this pushing and pulling comes from: from conflicting opinions, from opinions of others and our own experience, from different experiences we have had, from musing on what we have perceived. When we sense this urge we put our imagination to work (the random wandering of the imagination does not generate the urge). We try to imagine what would happen if the genus were equated with this particular form, if authority were only substitutional: we make the equation explicit and try to determine what would then be excluded as impossible. We find that some things get excluded that we know must belong to the genus, for example that common action for the common good would be excluded; and we see that this remainder has to be collected into another species of authority, another species.

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20 See Plato, Republic 7, 522C-525A; the finger can be seen as both large and small, or soft and hard, and this existence in opposition is what summons the intellect to determine what the large and the small, or the soft and the hard, are; but they can be defined only after their opposition is recognized as necessary.
from which what we now call substitutional authority is to be distinguished.

We have to appeal to the imagination, not to perception, in this process because we try to project something that cannot exist: authority as being only substitutional. We must have the insight that this cannot be, that authority must also be able to be what Simon calls "essential," and that therefore we must be able to say "substitutinal authority is not essential authority" and "authority is not necessarily substitutional authority" (or, in the other cases, "ignorance is not negligence," and "counseling is not commandment"). Only imagination can bring this play of negations to light, because it is the power to project beyond what we have experienced, and also the power to remain with concrete cases, with the lived obscurity of something that calls for a distinction. This imaginative dimension operates on the margin when we make distinctions in the midst of lived experiences, when for example Jack realizes, while dealing with his physician, that medical data is not medical care. Jack realizes that this distinction is not just a matter of fact that he has not attended to, but a distinction that he could not imagine being otherwise.

The imagination gives us flexibility in both acting and thinking. We are not locked into what we have been and what we have experienced, but are able to test borders and in some cases move beyond them. In other cases however our projection rebounds and we find that what we, confusedly, might have thought to be possible is in fact impossible: authority, for example, cannot be equated with substitutional authority, and it cannot be eliminated from human affairs. To exercise our imagination in such free variation, we must have achieved the distinction between ourselves as imagining and ourselves as imagined. The flexibility we need to disclose eidetic necessities and to bring essentials to light depends on a flexibility and distance that we must have in regard to ourselves. The imagination displaces the self into the conversationalists that carry on the discourse of the soul with itself that Plato calls thinking (Theaetetus 189E–190A, Sophist 263E–264A).21

21 At the risk of specifying these relationships too exactly, we might say that it is the imagined me that makes the tentative confinement of the genus to one of its species, and the imagining me that realizes that such a confinement cannot be carried out because it cannot be integrated with what I have experienced (the "I" is what is the same in both the imagining and the imagined me). In dreams or in emotional distress this con-
We have used Yves Simon's remarks about authority as a concrete example of making distinctions, but other examples can be found everywhere in philosophical writing. Saul Kripke imagines a situation in which the things we call cats are really demons, Peter Strawson tries to imagine a world without space and without material bodies but with reidentifiable particulars, Gilbert Ryle imagines a doll actually smiling at a little girl, and imagines imagination as the internal viewing of picture-phantasms, Richard Rorty imagines "the possibility that the trees and the bats and the butterflies and the stars all have their various untranslatable languages in which they are busily expressing their beliefs and desires to one another," Hannah Arendt imagines a society in which there can be no forgiveness, Plato imagines a community in which no one knows who his parents and relatives are, Aristotle imagines tools that accomplish their work by themselves. Such things are imagined to show that they are really unimaginable and impossible, that they involve the confusion of a genus with one of its species, and hence the confusion of one species with another; and they are imagined in order to bring out the crucial distinction that dissipates the confusion. The imagination is used to disclose how things have to be.


23 The use of imaginative variation is found everywhere in philosophical writing because philosophy is generally concerned with bringing out necessities. An appropriate way of doing "metaphilosophy" is to determine what genus the imaginative variation is trying to sustain, what confusion it is trying to overcome, and what species are being distinguished in order to avoid the concentration of the genus into only one of its species. Among the examples cited in the last footnote, for instance, Arendt is engaged in showing that the genus "reaction to others' actions" has to encompass both "holding them to what they have done" and "releasing them from what they have done." She does this by imaginatively constricting the genus to the first species and showing that the uncertainty that accompanies all
When we make the distinction that prevents the assimilation of a genus into only one of its species, we set up the opposition between the two species ("essential authority is not substitutional authority"). The two opposite, distinguished species then serve as the parameters for cases that fall between them. Most of the cases we experience will be intermediate and will involve elements from both extremes; hence the determination of the two species in their pure opposition will seem to be a move into an abstract unreality. But the empirical instance could not be recognized in its intermediate and ambiguous state if the pure extremes were not articulated and if the distinction between them were not made.

VIII

Aristotle, Plato, and Husserl on making distinctions. The process of making distinctions is discussed by Aristotle in a polemic against some thinkers, presumably Plato and the Platonists, who thought that the division of kinds was able to prove, somehow, the definitions of things (Pr. An. 1. 31). Aristotle concedes that the process of division can help us formulate a definition; it helps us organize the various attributes of a thing and it helps us be sure that we have not omitted any features (Po. An. 2. 13, 96b25–97a6). But, he insists, a division of kinds is not a syllogism, not a coming-together of several assertions that establish a conclusion: "But still [division] is not a syllogism, but if it makes us know, it does so through another way" (Po. An. 2. 5, 91b32–34). The point of Aristotle's remarks is that a distinction does not serve to prove anything beyond itself, but there is another implication to what he says: if a distinction of
kinds is not a syllogism, the distinction itself is not the conclusion of a syllogism, that is, the distinction cannot be established by statements beyond itself. A distinction is immediate and shows its necessity on its face; it is not proved by any assertion apart from itself.

Aristotle also speaks about a form of immediate knowing in *Metaphysics* 9. 10, where he describes knowledge that does not involve the composition of subject and attribute. Such knowing, he says, is more like touching something, and the objects it knows or touches are also incomposite (*asyntheta*, 1051b17–25). Commentators disagree as to what these incomposites can be, but it is possible to interpret them as the terms that emerge when a distinction is made. Each term in a distinction is taken simply, even though it may be found, when we examine it further, to be composed. At the point of distinction, “inside” is seen to be simple in its opposition to “outside,” for example, and “bard” is seen as simple in contrast to “prophet.” Aristotle brings us to focus on one of the terms, like “inside” or “bard,” he observes that this “grasp” of a simple term is uncomposed, and he says that the thing grasped is uncomposed too. But he neglects to bring out the process of distinguishing that lets each term come forward in its simplicity. Aristotle adds that this sort of “touching” knowledge involves a special notion of truth and falsity (1051b22–23).

Unlike predications, which must conform to things if they are to be true, the grasp of simples either occurs or it does not occur; there is no way for it to fail to conform to something. In the formulations we have used earlier in this essay, a distinction is true not by matching a pair of terms beyond itself, but by being a genuine distinction. “Truth” in the case of distinctions is like the truth of “true gold” or “true friendship,” not like that of a true statement; it is truth in the sense of being genuine, not truth in the sense of correspondence. Aristotle also says that ignorance in regard to such simple things is not total blindness; it is not the total deprivation of the power to think (1052a3). In our formulation, this would mean that a failure to achieve a distinction and to identify one of its terms is not total unfamiliarity with the thing we want to “touch,” but the vague, associative awareness that does not succeed in achieving a contrastive in-

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sight. If we interpret Aristotle’s remarks on the grasp of simple things this way, as related to the making of distinctions, we can avoid making him postulate a mysterious, unstructured, atomic intuition at the basis of our knowledge.

Plato’s most extensive treatment of division occurs in the *Sophist*. He rehearses the process of dividing when he tries to show what an angler is, then he uses the process in trying to pin down the nature of the sophist. Plato’s procedure looks like a simple cascade of divisions: we begin with a very “high” distinction, like “man with an art” versus “man without an art” (*technitēs* versus *atechnos*, 219A). The distinction, presumably, comes out of the genus “man,” although Plato does not make this explicit. The first distinction then gives way to succeeding distinctions, as one of the terms distinguished becomes, in its turn, a generic matrix for another division of kinds: the art possessed by a man, for example, becomes the genus for the distinction into productive and acquisitive arts. Distinctions occur within what other distinctions have brought forward.

However this procedure is not merely the unrolling of one distinction after another, because the process begins with a target. We begin by looking for, and looking at, the angler. When we establish “man with an art” as a very remote matrix, we select this matrix because it is clear to us that the angler stands inside it. We have a genus, but we also have a “this” within the genus. The genus is a genus only because it stands behind and surrounds the target we are after. And then it does what every genus ought to do, if it is true to its etymological sense of giving birth: it gives rise to distinctions within itself, distinctions which narrow the space around the target until no further narrowing is necessary; that is, until the target has been effectively distinguished from that which is its proper and specific other. When we have come to that critical distinction, we know what the target is. We have defined it.

Plato’s example of the angler does not work in the same way as the examples we have been using in this essay to illustrate the process of making distinctions. The angler is already identified or targeted as a kind. The Stranger and Theaetetus in the *Sophist* are not talking about something obscure which is immediately confronting them when they speak about the angler; they begin with a kind of thing that they merely talk about in its absence, not with something that is intruding on them, puzzling them, and concealing from them what kind of thing it is. They know they want to define
the angler, and their problem is to go from the remote genus to the
definite kind that they wish to determine. But in the examples we
have been using, we begin with an obscure issue that needs to be
identified in its kind. We begin with something that vexes because
it is obscure and because its kind is undetermined; we begin with
something we can merely indicate as “this.” It is true that in our
examples a genus arises behind the “this,” but the target itself is
not determined in its kind. We begin, for example, with “medical
activity” in general for what Jack is doing, but we do not, at the
start, have anything like “the angler” to name specifically what Jack
does. “Medical data” and “medical care” have to emerge as the final
kinds appropriate to what Jack is doing; it would be as though the
Stranger and Theaetetus were watching someone fish and one of them
were to say, “Angling is not spearing,” or, working on an issue higher
up the scale, “Catching something is certainly different from having
to make something.” There is a target in the examples we have
been using in this essay, but the target is something we can only
indicate; we cannot yet classify it.

Furthermore, we have emphasized the strategic role of a single
crucial distinction rather than the orderly arrangement of a series
of distinctions. We have tried to describe the dawning of a distinc-
tion, the event that occurs over and over again in Plato’s descending
sequence as the Stranger leads Theaetetus to glimpse one distinction
after another until the target is reached. Plato is concerned with
the ordering and we have been concerned with the event that yields
items to be ordered. There is something academic about Plato’s
procedure; it is the thoughtful arrangement of things discussed in
their absence, when they do not urge themselves on us. It is as though
one wanted to make arrangements to handle obscurities in advance.
But if we look to the perplexing situations in which a distinction
urgently needs to be made, we find we need the single critical division
that resolves the issue (“kindness is not fondness”), not the cascade
of divisions that discloses more relationships than we at the moment
want. The cascade of divisions does however remind us that any
distinction is nested inside many other distinctions, and that any one
resolution of an issue can give way to perplexity on another level.

Plato does get inside the event of a distinction when he intro-
duces the theme of the greatest or highest kinds: being, sameness
and otherness, and rest and motion (254C–255C). Things are dis-
tinguishable from other things because sameness and otherness are
at work in them; a thing is what it is by being other than some specific other things. Being, sameness and otherness, and rest and motion are not the greatest kinds in the sense of being the supreme matrices, the highest genera, out of which all distinctions descend; they work immediately in everything because any thing can be distinguished from other things, and any thing "is" by being so distinguishable. And when Plato examines rest and motion, he discusses them not in terms of sheer matter, but in terms of the rests and motions of knowing and being known, the work of the mind, the work which occurs most vividly in the division of kinds (248D–249C).

We also find in Husserl an interesting use of the process of making distinctions. In his earliest published work, The Philosophy of Arithmetic, Husserl mentions that there are simple concepts that cannot be defined: "One can define only that which is logically composite. Once we run up against the final, elementary concepts, all defining comes to an end. No one can define concepts like quality, intensity, place, time, and the like."25 What are we to do if we want to clarify such concepts? "One can only show the concrete phenomena from which they are abstracted, and make clear the form of this process of abstraction." All this is a simple appeal to intuition. But Husserl goes on to add something else we might do: "When it appears necessary, one can sharply delimit (umgrenzen) the related concepts and so avoid confusing them with concepts that are akin to them." This final possibility of working out distinctions seems like an afterthought to the more central activity of showing the phenomena from which a concept is abstracted, but it is not a harmless supplement. It is the other side of clarifying what is presented. Husserl does not introduce this theme of distinctions with much fanfare, and he probably always thought of it as somewhat secondary, but it always tags along as part of the philosophical enterprise that he proposes. In Ideas I, for instance, when he formulates his "principle of all principles," he asserts that he will just accept what is presented directly in intuitions, but he then adds, "but only within the limits (Schranken) in which it presents itself."26 He frequently says that part of his philosophical task is to eliminate equivocations and to distinguish

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overlapping concepts: in Ideas I #66 he says he will fix the meanings of the words he uses by bringing them to the things they are supposed to name, but also by cancelling out ambiguities that are attached to such words, that is, by making distinctions; and in *Formal and Transcendental Logic* he often mentions that he must avoid equivocations and the confusions brought about by “associational overlappings.”\(^{27}\) In fact *Formal and Transcendental Logic*, Husserl’s most elegant work, is really a book of distinctions, distinctions made in an almost musical dependence on one another. In Husserl’s writings, making philosophical distinctions is not something extra added to the phenomenon to be analyzed, but an intrinsic element in the process of bringing the phenomenon forward; how, for example, can the transcendental ego be made plain except by being distinguished from the psychological self? The distinction does not follow an identification, it helps achieve it.

Philosophy itself, no matter by whom it is carried on, is established as an enterprise only when a crucial distinction is made, a distinction that has been variously named as the difference between the psychological and the transcendental ego, or that between *Seiendes* and *Sein*, or that between being and being as being. So long as this distinction does not function, philosophy remains confused with psychology or myth or natural science or ideology.

If philosophy thinks about differentiation and distinction, and if it is itself established by a special kind of distinction, it must be supplemented by a further kind of thinking that takes up the oneness and the dyadic divergence that permit distinctions to occur.\(^{28}\) Distinctions exemplify sameness and otherness and rest and motion, so the thinking that tries to get inside, under, and beyond distinctions must qualify the normal inclusions and exclusions that occur in our speech, and it must cautiously slip toward its topic rather than try to approach it frontally.

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\(^{28}\) See Sokolowski, *Presence and Absence*, chap. 15. I wish to thank Thomas Prufer for comments on this essay.