

## *The Knife and the One*

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To cut is to understand. Class, gender, and ethnicity are distinct cuts of the social One. Phylum, genus, and species are inclusive cuts of the biological One. Algebra, analysis, and geometry are cross-cutting expressions of the mathematical One. The social, biological and mathematical are varied cuts—distinct, inclusive, *and* cross-cutting—of the general One. We are always slicing single reality conceptually in order to understand it, interact with it productively, and find ways to change it. We carve reality even without noticing: music is composed of distinct notes and silence; language consists of syntax (grammatical rules and exceptions), semantics (meanings and their ambiguities and articulations), and phonetics (distinguishable minimal pairs of sounds); colors of the different parts of the rainbow. Conscious or unconscious *distinction-making* – this is our basic tool in thinking, analysis, and abstraction.

This essay is a little philosophical exercise. How is distinction-making central to our existence and survival? Which generalizations can we make about this activity? Is it always productive, or does it have a shadow side?

Philosophy and literature often provide complementary paths to the same goal: *know thyself*. Two brief passages from Robert Pirsig's philosophical novel *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* provide a vivid metaphor for distinction-making:

...there is a knife moving here. A very deadly one; an intellectual scalpel so swift and so sharp you sometimes don't see it moving. You get the illusion that all those parts [of the motorcycle] are just there and are being named as they exist. But they can be named quite differently and organized quite differently depending on how the knife moves.

...

Phædrus was a master with this knife, and used it with dexterity and a sense of power. With a single stroke of analytic thought he split the whole world into parts of his own choosing, split the parts and split the fragments of the parts, finer and finer and finer until he had reduced it to what he wanted it to be.

Phædrus is the narrator's earlier self. He has astounding logical and analytical capacities. These are essential to the "classical" approach. In contrast, the "romantic" perspective highlights aesthetic value, the act of synthesizing, and finding broad patterns and unity. Pirsig's novel attempts to find grounds allowing for the acceptance and implementation of the classical and romantic points of view, simultaneously. Can distinction-making be done correctly, adequately, and, ultimately, beautifully? (Hint: Phædrus went crazy trying to answer this question.) Beauty—or rather Quality—is the ultimate judge of the logical knife's propriety and utility.

The questions about the nature, history, and purposes of our analytic knife are practically endless. Let us focus on three: (1) How clean is each cut? (2) Do the knife's cuts follow preexisting fault lines in reality, in the single One? Or, as is more commonly asked: "do we carve nature at its joints?" (3) Who owns the knife, and how did they build it?

Once a cut is made, it remains vulnerable. Was the cut sufficiently deep, long, and neat to stand the test of time? Or might there eventually be regions of the cut that heal and close up, or parts of the One that move too fast, or are too complex, to even be subject to our knife? Less metaphorically, might there be divisions that were once pertinent, but no longer are – e.g., phlegmatic vs. choleric patients (the medical typology of "humors" of Galen, second century CE physician)? Especially as paradigms and overarching frameworks change, or we move from one country to another, the relevance and utility of whole families of cuts shift too. In technical language: are our *classifications* time- and context-dependent? Moreover, might there be complex cases (e.g., transsexuals or bisexuals) that are too rich to not fall into any of the classes distinguished by our knife cut – e.g., "female" or "male"? Particularly in the complex biological and social worlds, it is fairly easy to find cases that do not seem to fit under standard, and in the main useful, classifications. In technical language: do some classifications fail to be either mutually exclusive or collectively exhaustive, or both? Our first generalization about distinction-making is thus: *each cut is an educated guess, a biased imposition, a hope, on how to successfully work with(in) our complex world.* Our vulnerable cuts can sometimes be clean. But frameworks also shift, and the One often undergoes a transformation (which we ourselves may have helped usher in).

Shift focus from the cut to the One. What is the nature and regularities of the One? Of what is it composed? How and to what extent has it changed over its history? Of course the use of "the One" is metaphorical. My intention is to refer to that opaque and unruly *Reality* that many of us (politicians, economists, intellectuals, doctors...) constantly refer to and think about in our daily discourse and activities. Some see reality as fixed, eternal, and fairly simple, whereas others view it as dynamic, deeply historical, and complex. Some understand the One as independent of human activity and desires, whereas others comprehend "it" as inextricably dependent on our influence and on the fact that we are parts of reality. Who is right? This essay is not an arbiter, it is at best a springboard for discussion. I suggest that the One is complex, but so complex that part of it is even simple and human-independent. Consider the world of mathematics and perhaps even the fundamental laws of physics. Are the truths of mathematical functions and relations (e.g., distinctions such as the natural numbers, or specific definitions of "circle", "Euclidean geometry" or "integral") dependent on human interaction? Few working mathematicians would answer this in the affirmative. But, in contrast, are the categories of social organization (e.g., social class or profession) not themselves consequences of human activity and theorizing? In technical language: the distinctions in mathematics refer to natural kinds, those in sociology to human kinds. We have now reached our second generalization about distinction-making: *cuts sometimes—and to some extent—carve nature at its joints; at other times, the One is itself the subject of—and changed by—our knife's motions.* The One is complex.

Shift focus again, from the One to the owner of the knife. Who holds it, and how did they build the knife? The distinction-making knife is of course not a single entity, nor is it static. (That is, the metaphor of a "reified knife" guides our thinking, but it can mislead

you, me, and Pirsig if we are not careful.) Theories, paradigms, and concepts are input into formulating our many distinctions. So are our assumptions, prejudices, and expectations. Practice (e.g., experimental and laboratory activities), social and historical traditions (e.g., the intellectual framework(s) we grew up in), and prior technologies and materials are also used. The *agent*—an individual or a community—building and wielding the analytical knife is thus an object of varied influences. Note the third and last generalization about distinction-making: *the owner of the knife is an agent, subject to variegated input*. The knife-wielder is a bottleneck of diverse input.

Why does it matter whether cuts are clean, what the nature and history of the One is, or who owns the knife? Because we use and make distinctions all the time, whether we see it or not, like it or not. Distinction-making is almost definitional of reasoning, analysis, and abstraction. So, *let us take responsibility for our analytical knife*. Given the impact of our behaviors on our surroundings, it practically becomes an ethical imperative for us to notice the employment, and the consequences, of the categories, classifications and boxes we articulate with our knife. Why? Because our knives ultimately determine how each one of us distributes power and care, and what we choose to focus our attention on and what we choose to ignore. Let us become conscious of the *promises and shadow side of distinction-making*. Philosophy can help. It assists us in becoming aware and critical of the nature, history, and purposes of our knife. It provides the background for an *assumption archeology* in which we (metaphorically) dig and discover the assumptions—broadly construed—of the resources that go into making the knife with which we cut the One. The three generalizations noted in this essay are input into developing such an archeology. So are training in logic and inference, discourse analysis and semiotics, and principled evaluation of the right (ethics) and the beautiful (aesthetics).

I conclude with a return to Phædrus' attempt to reformulate the grounds of the classical/romantic split. My assumption archeology is itself a classical *and* a romantic perspective on the entrenched and ubiquitous practice of distinction-making. With our *mind* we articulate the logic of our knives. We analyze. We take apart the One (given by previous syntheses), in order to understand it. The classical perspective. In contrast, with our *heart* we comprehend the consequences and dangers of dividing the One, in particular ways. Our heart reminds us that we are part of a larger synthetic whole and that we must not lose sight of the coherence and rights of the One (or of its elements). We synthesize. We rebuild the One (given by repeated and simultaneous analyses), in order to understand it better. The romantic perspective.

Mind and heart. Logical analysis and wise synthesis. Classical and romantic approaches.

We should neither relinquish logical rigor nor moral empathy. We should not forego the gift of our cerebral cortex and its knife-wielding capacities. But perhaps we can use our heart to guide our mind *to turn its analysis on analysis itself* – to take apart and understand, in a wise way, the very construction of the Knife? Perhaps current science and technology, politics and economics, focuses on our cerebral cortex at the expense of the heart's skills and promises?