



EDGES

NOEL GRAY



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Edges

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EDITOR'S NOTE

Edges is the third book in a series that covers a period of twenty-five or so years of academic writing by the author. Some of the essays in this series have previously appeared as book chapters in other scholars' publications, while several have appeared as articles in numerous American, Australasian, Middle Eastern, and European academic journals. Other essays originated as conference papers, and several as invited responses to keynote and conference speakers; a few have been re-drafted from guest lectures given by the author. The last in the series, *Screens*, is a scaled-down version of the author's doctoral thesis in which he initially developed his early ideas concerning the philosophy of geometry. Other elements from the thesis also appear throughout the rest of the series.

The themes included in the entire series range from philosophy to geometry, from aesthetics to cultural studies, and from science to fine arts. Many have either as a central or as a cursory element the role that geometry, and by extension, the image, play in the production and construction of meaning in both the sciences and the humanities. Others touch on the truth claims made by various disciplines, while a few seek to examine in an oblique fashion the

porous nature of what many disciplines consider their boundaries. The role and mercurial nature of specific metaphors is also a recurring theme in many of the essays.

In most cases, the texts have been wholly or partially trimmed of their original academic format in the hope of making their contents more appealing to a wider audience.

Laura Fabbris

Series Editor

FOREWORD

Among his countless other attributions, the messenger Hermes (Mercury) is also the god of transitions and boundaries. The second youngest of all the gods, he is the only one who can travel through the three realms of existence: Olympus, Earth, and Hades. As the god of borders, (literally and figuratively), and the carrier of souls to the underworld, he can breach the divide between the material and spiritual dominions. On one occasion he dons the famed cap of invisibility, enabling him to cross enemy lines undetected and slay a formidable foe of his father, Zeus. Hermes' multi-faceted, mercurial personality, alloyed to his love of trickery, inventiveness, deceitfulness, and confidentiality earned him the sobriquet, the god of contradictions. An apt appellation, for the symbol of this fleetest of all ancient divinities is the unhurried tortoise. An irony further enhanced by the fact that this amphibian creature can exist both inside and outside its own skeletal boundary, at one and the same time. It therefore seems an ideal image to portray the one force that can violate all borders yet leave them intact: the incalculable speed of simultaneity, the duration of which, as the Greeks well knew, is best imagined divinely, best left to the Gods.

Certain ideas are axiomatic to navigating and defining existence. As necessary markers they are generally considered to be unproblematic in their everyday use and understanding. This is rightly so, because any unbridled and ceaseless challenge to their obvious necessity would result in a constantly stalled experience of existence. This danger is no more graphically illustrated than in the Centipede's Dilemma:

*A centipede was happy – quite!
Until a toad in fun
Said, "Pray, which leg comes after which?"
Which threw her mind in such a pitch,
She lay bewildered in the ditch
Considering how to run.*

As aptly indicated, abilities that become automatic often cease to function in an effortless manner when brought back to the conscious level. This is also true of certain formative ideas that govern the comprehension of existence. As the renowned scientist, Arthur Eddington, once amusingly said: *I know perfectly well what time is until I try to explain it to someone else.*

One other such experiential necessity, and perhaps even the most important one at the level of the everyday, is that of the *Edge*. All concepts of difference, from the ethereal to the material, from the ideal to the empirical, from words

to things, from desires to actions, from past to present to future, demand some form of border in order to differentiate each from each, this from that. Acting to both define and separate, when these edges are challenged or even erased, then the resounding clash often generates an unavoidable sense of uncertainty and instability. It is therefore not overly ridiculous to say that the assuredness of our existence is edge-dependant. Indeed, as some continental scholars have noted, the very production of meaning can be understood as the play of differences, as generated by and inhabiting the spaces between what are initially deemed to be differences. Hence, no edge then no difference - no difference then no meaning. Equally, no difference then no edge – no meaning then no difference.

With such a weight of responsibility placed on what will count as an edge it comes as no surprise that there is a counter range of concepts that suggest edges are *inherently* unstable in any fixed, absolute manner. Ideas such as interface, porosity, seepage, schizophrenia, inter-connectivity, net-working, to name but a few, set a challenge to the bastion of conceiving the edge as inviolate. In a more hysterical vein, the horrors-of-horrors for those whose philosophical fare favours determinism is that edges, to paraphrase Humpty-Dumpty, may mean what we choose them to mean, neither more nor less. With that flexibility in mind, the following essays will discuss in one or two ways this spectre of relativity as it incessantly attaches itself to the necessary yet ever elusive concept of the edge, and its co-

rollary, the act of edging.

THE MIRRORED EDGE

At its most prosaic level, the question of what is an edge is a relatively easy one to answer when we are only meaning to determine, say, the particular boundaries of this or that inanimate object (putting aside for another occasion the revelations of Quantum Physics concerning the uncertainty principle). However, when speaking about something as significant as culture for instance, then what constitutes an edge becomes a matter of some importance and conjecture. Certainly, whatever we decide represents the edge of a culture is always going to be a volatile and contested matter, for to mark where one culture ends and another begins has enormous political ramifications, as does not to mark it; (this also applies to defining the conceptual and physical limits of subjectivity, identity, etc.).

Furthermore, as the term edge has in everyday language a strong material sense about it, it therefore seems at first blush to be inappropriate when used in conjunction with the ethereal and subjective character of culture. Equally, however, the concept of culture does not of itself exclude the material. Quite obviously culture has a material face;

although the entire question of a culture's edge would perhaps be redundant if all there was to culture was its materiality. It is therefore important to keep in mind that giving an edge to something like culture is not simply a matter of ascribing some physical boundary to visible activities. It also involves ephemeral elements that underpin customs, beliefs, rites, and habits, and so on: elements that are, ironically, often already considered to be universally transcendent, and therefore over and above all cultures.

Regrettably, this ghost of humanism is a persistent force in western culture's attempts at defining its own and other cultures' domains. In its most virulent form it relegates diverse cultures to being merely different versions of the same, relegates them to being patches on a single cloak of many colours. In other words, difference is defined as variations on a theme, one based on a range of characteristics-qualities-attributes-desires-values that are presumed to be shared by all humans throughout time. Clearly, in this reductive model the power to declare what *are* these universal human traits rests with whatever culture is in the ascendant on the global stage.

It follows that this schema lends itself to formulating a hierarchy based on the degree to which these characteristics are adhered to (and applied) by this or that culture. Furthermore, to retain coherency, this view establishes culture as something that comes *after* early wandering hominids decided to coalesce into larger, stationary groups. Conversely, the idea of culture being simultaneous with

the initial emergence of hominids is clearly not theoretically plausible in this viewpoint

That latter challenge aside, as might be expected there are some wonderfully imagined theories about what triggered this quantum leap from pre-culture to culture. My favourite is the invention of fire. This discovery is said to have led in time to a more centralised, shared, and stored cuisine. This proto supermarket afforded these pre-culturalists more time to turn their fledgling intelligence to inventing systematised language and other accoutrements. From there the journey towards creating cultures becomes incremental and inevitable. Any variations that may exist in the resulting plethora of cultures are explained as functions of disparate conditions prevailing at the time (mental, physical, climatic, environmental, etc.). In essence, all cultures are said to share common features that are deemed indisputably obvious. Unfortunately, for adherents to this view, this obviousness might not be quite as obvious as it first appears.

Keeping in mind this quiver-in-certainty, and using it as a starting point, how might we think the edge of something as mercurial as culture? Think the edge of something that in a sense we presuppose by asking the question in the first place. More exactly, if, contrary to the humanist position, we accept that we are inexorably embedded in and ever inseparable from the very thing that we are seeking to determine the edge of, then what sort of edge would we be describing? Will it be an edge that we can, once it has been

firmly established, blithely step over and in so doing come to know another culture as it knows itself? Or are we in fact merely constructing a mirrored wall that reflects the limits of our own culture?

Culture's Edge

The western culture is the most influential, invasive, and intrusive force in the world today, one that is unrivalled throughout time in its scope and self-proclaimed destiny. It is engaged in defining almost everything, not least of all the nature and character of other cultures. Its invention of systematise anthropology has enabled it to catalogue, describe, define, and grade every other culture on the planet. This wealth of formulated and detailed information has been a major influence on a wide range of enterprises: from global politics to globalisation, from waging wars to defining the motivations informing terrorism, from international law to international treaties and alliances, and even down to the prosaic levels of entertainment and fashion, etc. The result of this ubiquitous influence is seen by many as nothing less than an anthropologically inspired form of cultural imperialism, one that leads inexorably to a herding of uniquely separate differences into the corral of global history/affairs.

However, buried within western anthropology's intellectual foundations is a crucial principle that is axiomatic to the discipline's entire coherency: namely, that event and meaning can be separated. This principle, identical to the

one that grounds science, goes under the rubric: objective reality, sometimes referred to as, *aboriginal reality*. It follows that any challenge to this principle would threaten the entire edifice; more specifically, forge a tremor in the veracity of the claim that anthropology speaks objectively about the nature of other cultures. For instance, the following two examples spring to mind:

a) The Sinking Dilemma:

A member of a remote tribal fishing community is working on a canoe. The craft has a hole in its side.

On seeing this event, our initial assumption is that the man is repairing the canoe so when he puts it in the water it will not sink. What are the processes involved in this reasoning? The first is the elevation of perception to being a sense that is universal. We see the hole, the man sees the hole; we know a boat sinks if it has a hole, ergo, the man knows the same thing – hence he is repairing the boat to stop it from sinking. For this reasoning to retain coherence we first assume that the man sees what we see and for us it logically follows that the motive for his actions, in the simple pragmatic sense, would be the same as ours were we doing what we see him doing.

At first there appears to be no separation of event and meaning - the easy assumption of universality (holey boats sink) masks a separation of event and meaning, because we assume that the meaning (holey boats sink) is so obvious

that the man must also be thinking the same thing, in one form or another. He is, after all, fixing the boat that we see, so the event we see proves the assumption of universality we mentally construe. We assume he sees the hole as a hole, and accordingly patches it.

However, the separation of event and meaning has already taken place before we encounter the scene; namely, that perception transcends culture, is supra cultural. In this model, the process of seeing is not in and of itself initially shackled to any cultural meaning. Everybody can see, hence the act of seeing is universal and precedes any meaning we may ascribe to whatever it is that is seen. It is at this point that a conceptual slight-of-hand takes place.

The logic entailed in the concept of an aboriginal reality is at first blush seemingly obvious. Trees remain trees; boats remain boats, ad infinitum, even if everybody on the planet stopped looking at them. Hence, the tree-ness of trees (e.g., Plato's ideal forms) is basically unaffected by whatever meaning we may later ascribe to the object in our gaze. The conceptual slight-of-hand is that the concept of an aboriginal reality also embodies the concept of an aboriginal meaning, i.e., tree-ness (directly accessible or not). Therefore differences, (different cultural meanings), are at best second-order truths (*mere* representations in the Platonic schema) generated by a conscious or unconscious awareness that every part of reality possesses a unique and universal "thingy-ness" prior to any cultural ascription of meaning to said part or whole.

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Dr. Noel Gray is an independent, international scholar and freelance writer. He has written extensively on the philosophy of geometry, the kaleidoscope, and numerous other subjects relating to science and technology. His fictional works often blend together several literary genres: magical realism, fables, mythology, science fiction, and crime. He is also a pioneer in the new genres: Fy-Sy, and Sotto Realism. He is currently compiling, *The Deranged Dictionary of Fictive Science*. He lives in Italy.

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As necessary markers they are generally considered to be unproblematic in their everyday use and understanding. This is rightly so, because any unbridled and ceaseless challenge to their obvious necessity would result in a constantly stalled experience of existence. One other such experiential necessity, and perhaps even the most important one at the level of the everyday, is that of the Edge. All concepts of difference, from the ethereal to the material, from the ideal to the empirical, from words to things, from desires to actions, from past to present to future, demand some form of border in order to differentiate each from each, this from that.