THE SELF AND THE OTHER:
THE PURPOSE OF DISTINCTION[1]

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"The end is in the beginning, and yet you go on." Samuel Beckett, Endgame [0].

ABSTRACT

In this paper, the nature of distinction drawing, in the sense of George Spencer Brown, is examined with special reference to the distinction between the self and the other. It is noted that a distinction, which must draw its self, also requires an other and a transfer distinction, both within a particular distinction and for that distinction to be part of, and that these can generate the purpose of the distinction as becoming, of, by and for itself.

BACKGROUND

For a long time, I have been concerned with the notion of distinction (in Spencer Brown's sense [1]), and with certain contradictions that appear in Spencer Brown's formulation. In attempts to resolve these problems, I have come to the conclusion that a distinction cannot cleave a space, and that its value must not be distinct from its mark, that is, a distinction distinguishes (is) itself [2]. This resolves the chicken and egg problem of Spencer Brown's "assumed piece of paper" upon which marks may be made (the unmarked cross), the problem of infinite regress that results from distinguishing the mark and the value (which Varela and I showed to generate formal re-entry in intenso and extenso [3]), and the distinction of the distinguisher (for to whom else does Spencer Brown address his dictum "Draw a Distinction"?) from the distinguished, the mark and value of which are being dis-

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[1] Some of the ideas presented here, especially concerning the symmetry and circularity of self and other, were first presented at an evening honouring the 60th birthday of Niklas Luhmann, professor of Sociology, at the University of Bielefeld, FRG. I am glad to have the opportunity of recording and developing these ideas.

tinguished (according to Spencer Brown) in the drawing of the distinction. Thus, the distinction of the self as its own mark / value unity should appear to be the ultimate distinction.

But is it?

ARGUMENT

"There are many ways in which the thing I am trying in vain to say may be tried in vain to be said." Samuel Beckett, "Bram van Velde" [4]

Let us take as given that

We construct our realities[1].

We do so by drawing distinctions[2].

We are not alone[3].

Let us consider that we can draw different types of distinction between, of and by

the self of the self.

the self of the other[4].

(In order to avoid some potential confusion here, which arises when we talk about selves and others (whose selves and others?), having to talk about the other's self, etc, we will use letters to indicate each self (including the other's self), with the convention that when we are talking about any "Object"[5] as a self, it will be indicated by upper case, while lower case will be used when talking about it as an other. These will appear as ordered strings. Thus

(A, A) indicates the self of A "observing" itself as a self

(A, b) indicates the self of A "observing" b as other, that is, b as another to A's self :::: etc.

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[1] I do not wish to argue about constructivism, realism and solipsism or idealism here. For an elegant argument that distinguishes between the three, and particularly between constructivism and solipsism see Heinz von Foerster's "On Constructing a Reality" [5].

[2] Accepting the modifications to Spencer Brown's original notions that I have indicated above.

[3] ie, that not everything is the self, and that we find it "useful" to distinguish between the self and a "world", or other. Without this, we distinguish nothing, for we cannot even know that we have distinguished our self (in opposition to what?).

[4] These are essentially different, for they exclude eachother in distinct ways: the self's view of the self is not the view of the self of another, which implies (qv) the self's view of the self and another's view of another.

[5] The term "Object" (with an initial upper case "O" is used to refer to a particular self-referential notion of the structures necessary to postulate in order that we may assume there are things to think about - ie, objects of attention - first developed by me in my PhD Thesis [6], and since elaborated as several EMSCR meetings (eg, [7]). The notions of circularity that are developed in this paper can be shown to be strictly analogous to such Objects.

Note that the self's distinction of the self (A, A), which is the generator of selfness, is circular: the self-referentiality of this generator-statement is what dissolves the chicken and egg problem. Thus, the question of how there can be a self (agent) in the first place, to distinguish the self of Spencer Brown's distinction is seen as meaningless (as are such questions as "What happened before the beginning?"): the process of self-distinction (as we come to see it as being) is a process of becoming: there is no way of knowing the before, and therefore, "What we cannot speak about, we must pass over in silence" [8].

This process of circularity, with the self's being as both (grammatical) subject and object of the action of distinguishing that is its self (self-distinguishing, self-distinguished) is the source of the analogy with Objects [6,7]. Through this analogy, certain established abilities (properties) of Objects may be subsumed in this discussion, and therefore not elaborated. Of these, the possibility of interrelationship and computation are the most important, for they explain allow the apparent nesting of Objects and hence distinctions drawn.

Let us, then, consider the relationship between the distinction, by the self, of the self (A, A) and of the other (A, b). In a sense, this is an even more fundamental distinction than the distinction of the self, for what value is the (autistic) distinction of the self which does no more than distinguish itself, without even realising that, in distinguishing itself, it has also distinguished that there is a "not-itself" and which fails to realise that the self not only implies the other, but is validated by that other[6]. Yet, of course, there can, equally, be no distinction of the self, without the self. Thus, the fundamental distinction between self and other cannot be more fundamental than the distinction of the self, nor can it be less so: another circularity, another reduction of hierarchy (see my "Levels and Boundaries of Problems" [9]).

Thus, the distinction between self and other implies the distinction of the self, and the distinction of the self implies the distinction between self and other [10]. And, because the roles of what are called the self and the other are, in effect, to each of them as a self, the same, and because each "validates the other", it is necessary that that which the so-called self refers to as the other, is, to its self, a self in its own right: ie, it distinguishes itself, and is thus distinguishable to another (the original self): again the circularity. Thus , we acquire an (aesthetic) symmetry.

We can summarise this thus:

The self distinguishes the self (A, A)

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[6] This is not the law of the excluded middle: merely the law of the excluded: in asserting one thing, I am, equally, not asserting (asserting not) various other things.

In distinguishing the self (A), the self distinguishes another (A, b)

The other distinguishes itself as itself (B, B)

The other distinguishes the self as an other (B, a)

Whether or not an other can distinguish an (other) other as an other, it appears we may not know, for we can never be another. Thus, (a, b) and (b, a) seem, for the moment, to be meaningless statements.

We may indicate this:

$$\text{(A, (A, A)) \} } \quad \begin{matrix} \} & \text{(A, b)} & \{ \\ & & \\ \} & \text{(B, a)} & \{ \end{matrix} \quad \text{\{(B, (B, B))}$$

Yet, the distinction between the self and the other and vv is, itself, a distinction. Let us call this distinction C. In order for the self (of the first instance) to distinguish the other (A, b), and the other (of the first instance) to distinguish the self (B, a), they do so by drawing a distinction, itself a self to itself (C, C). So, for instance, the distinction between the self and the other (A, b), is made by drawing the distinction that distinguishes them, C - that is (C, C) - which, although a distinction like any other distinction, has the role of distinguishing between the self A (A, A), and the other B (B, B) as other (b) to the self (A), which, thus allows the transfer across: the making of the self of the other available as an other to the other self: that is, C (C, C) transforms B (B, B), for A (A, A), into b so that (A (A, A), b), and, reciprocally, (B (B, B), a). The role of the distinction C is that it allows a self to say of an other that it is an other.

It may be taken, thus, that the purpose of the distinction C, for A and B, is that it permits / creates this role change, this transfer.

Yet, this distinction, C, is to both A and B, itself an other. Thus, to A, C is c (A, c), and, similarly, to B, (B, c). We once again need a role transforming distinction, another distinction, D (D, D), and so on: the regression is apparently clear, although, as Varela and I have indicated [3], this formal regression leads to a logical re-entry, and so is not quite so daunting as it might normally be.

Or is this so?

We have insisted that, in the first instance, self-distinction (A, A) implies the self distinction of an other (B, B), and thus that this implied the self-distinction of a third dis-

tinction (C, C) that allowed the appearance of the roles self and other (A, b), (B, a), which permits observation (communication) between these selves[7] .

Yet, since all three are necessary to each other, and since there is already a reciprocity between the original self and other of the argument, and since there is no difference in level (all, equally, require eachother), it is possible to think of them as all forming one distinction, within which they define their selves, and eachother, thus retaining the regress within this further distinction, which also has the same form, giving rise to the assumption that the two others in the triple observe eachother. Thus,

(A (A, A), b), (A (A, A), c), (b (B (B, B), c), c (C (C, C), b)), and, in a more condensed notation

(B, c), (B, a), (c (C, a), a (A, c)), and, yet more tersely

(C, a), (C, b), (a, b)[8].

(These notations are expansions / contractions of eachother.)

This triple makes up another distinction, D (D, D) ({A / B / C}), where { } indicate any of the three expansions as above (depending upon the long-windedness appropriate), in terms of A, B and C.

Thus, of a distinction, it may be said that it is itself, yet it may be considered as being decomposable into a triple of formally identical distinctions, and that its drawing implies that it is part of a triple, a further intenso / extenso formal re-entry. Although it is not necessary to break down or build up such a (set of) distinction (s) - this is a result of the roving questioning that will not be satisfied until it finds the final answer (see "reflection"). This triple, of the roles of the self, the other and the means of transfer, is, once again, directly analogous to the three elements of an (indivisible) Object: the self observing, the self observed, and the Model Facility. The need for the minimal triple is, equally, a formal analogue of Pask's minimal unit of the knowable (a topic) [12], that is derivable, in the minimal case, in a closed circle of three elements, of which it is one.

Insofar as we have solved any questions here (I prefer the terms resolved and dissolved, both of which seem more appropriate to a constructivist view in general, and most particularly in this paper), we have avoided one which is of particular concern to me.

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[7] I think the role of this distinction is to fulfil the "needs both" requirement that Loefgren suggests in a complementaristic approach to the business of self and other [11].

[8] For those who wish to find a use for the contents of this paper apart from (I hope) conceptual and mental beauty, I suggest that this recursive, self-referential formulation is a statement of the minimum assertable decomposition of a whole for intelligent computation - of any sort, be it electronic, mechanical, intellectual, social.

The question is how can a distinction come about. This is not an attempt to look back before the beginning: this is why I use the word "becoming".

Every distinction can be considered a triple of (fomally identical) distinctions, just as every distinction can be seen to imply that it is part of a triple that is a distinction.

In these triples, there is a self distinction, an other distinction, and a transfer distinction between the two. The purpose of the transfer distinction is to allow the different roles of the self and the other distinctions (both of which are, to themselves, self distinctions), and to do so without recourse to any observer outside (for how would THAT other come into existence, in the first place?). Yet, in the triple, each distinction takes on, with regard to the other distinctions, each role: that is, each of the three distinctions is a transfer distinction to the other two. Thus, each has the purpose of distinguishing the self from the other[9]. Without this transfer, there would be no self distinction, and vv. The three are interdependent, and each provides the purpose for / of the other two. Thus, the purpose, in a distinction, is not external, but is within the distinction itself (in this respect it is like the whitened Black Box [13]. It is to distinguish between the self and the other, that is, to make distinction possible. Therefore

<u>All distinctions are both constituted of triples and are parts of triples.</u>
<u>The purpose of a distinction is to make (draw) itself.</u>
<u>A distinction is its own motivation, without which it would not become, or, continuing becoming, be. The distinctions' purpose is itself: its own becoming.</u>

REFLECTION

"...if you could finish it...you could rest...sleep...not before...oh I know...the ones I've finished...thousands and one...all I ever did...in my life...with my life...saying to myself...finish this one...it's the right one...then rest...sleep...no more stories...no more words...and finished it...and not the right ones..." Samuel Beckett, "Cascando" [14]

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[9] I am aware of the multiple uses of the words self and other in this paper. I find this unavoidable, but hope I have not used them sloppily, in order to make a point. This is a problem I often encounter (as, for instance, in the word object, the many meanings of which are all intended in my technical term Object). This is why I have introduced a notation in the paper: but, as can be seen in its last appearance above, it soon becomes convoluted, and possibly ambiguous! For an example of such self's and others, see R.D.Laing's "Knots" [14] (he was also author of the psychological classic, "Self and Other").

I have always hoped, forlornly, to have drawn the last distinction, always with temporary success, which turns out to be ill founded. I don't know why I am surprised at this, for my own "The Nature of Fundamentals, applied to the Fundamentals of Nature" [16] demonstrates that (and why) this is not possible[10]. We know we cannot have final, irrefutable, fundamental knowledge (even such diehards as Popper [17] are telling us this), yet we seem to need "to go on". Why do we not just stop, and say, "this is far enough". Why do we always ask the questions that we are as sure as we can be sure of anything will undermine us. Why must we break the circle? Why not just rest content. Perhaps I shall stop here, satisfied not to ask questions, or at least to avoid trying to answer them. For the search for the fundamental and fixed is pointless, and will be fruitless. This is one fundamental truth, I suppose. Or perhaps I shall just accept that this searching is the fundamental, and that what it produces, the so called knowledge, is necessarily unconnected with the truth, just as knowledge is an unsatisfactory token for knowing. This is the designerly way.

"....I don't know, I'll never know, in the silence you don't know, you must go on, I can't go on, I'll go on." Samuel Beckett, "The Unnamable" [18]

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[10] Just as we can never know that we will not be able to reduce that currently irreducible string that is what we take, mathematically, to be random.

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[11] Officially known as "A Cybernetic Development of Theories of Epistemology and Observation, with Reference to Space and Time, (as seen in Architecture)"