



The Fine Line: Making Distinctions in Everyday Life

By Eviatar Zerubavel



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Eviatar Zerubavel argues that most of the distinctions we make in our daily lives and in our culture are social constructs. He questions the notion that a clear line can be drawn to separate one time or object or concept from another, and presents witty and provocative counterexamples in defense of ambiguity and anomaly.



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The Fine Line: Making Distinctions in Everyday Life By Eviatar Zerubavel Bibliography

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Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

People carve reality into discrete mental slices, "islands of meaning"; they categorize, classify and label. This tendency, according to Zerubavel, can lead to the rigid mind that detests ambiguity. Stereotypes are born as the rigid mind lumps together "the poor" or "Orientals." In a lucid, brilliantly original look at the way we compartmentalize reality, the author, a Rutgers sociology professor, uses fundamental insights into humans' boundary-drawing habits to illumine the sense of self, taboos, xenophobia, aversion to bodily discharges, sex, daily rituals, the need for privacy, humor and modern art's blurring of the distinction between art and life. Without using jargon, he crams in a wealth of phenomena, from wedding ceremonies to children's oceanic, fluid mindset which he places on a continuum with mythical thought and psychosis. Readers will edge closer toward attaining a "flexible mind" that avoids freezing reality into any one mental context. Illustrations.

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From Kirkus Reviews

A witty, tightly written, and well-integrated look at our eternal struggles between order and chaos and the need to find a practical medium. Since the time the Creator in Genesis divided light from dark, Zerubavel (Sociology/Rutgers) says, we have continued to follow His example by structuring our own lives into territories, partitions, classes, and other "discrete islands of meaning" that are both comforting and constricting. This is especially true when such demarcations as white and black, Gentile and Jew, or homosexual and heterosexual pose more trouble than they are worth. Growing up in Israel during the 1950's, Zerubavel witnessed firsthand humanity's "inordinate preoccupation with boundaries" that are often self-imposed illusions. Here, he suggests ways we can ease our common "fear of dissolving" by being more tolerant of ambiguities and striking a compromise "between the ocean and the bathtub." It therefore makes sense that his writing takes "quantum leaps across mental divides" with a "gelatinous" meld of psychology, theology, literature, theater, art, math, zoology, and even embryology in an attempt to help us open our "ossified mental cages." He examines, for example, the open-ended criteria separating man from ape, the ambiguous civil rights of fetuses, and the multiple meanings behind Freudian slips, and offers ingenious analyses of iconoclasts such as M.C. Escher, Jorge Luis Borges, and Lewis Carroll--all of whom, Zerubavel says, challenged the "solid entities" of time and space. A bright overview unafraid to glean the beauty in "blurred-edge essences" and to expose the hazards of the rigid mind when nature prefers "twilight zones." - Copyright ©1991, Kirkus Associates, LP. All rights reserved.

About the Author

Eviatar Zerubavel is professor of sociology at Rutgers University. Among his many books are *Terra Cognita* and *The Seven Day Circle*, published by the University of Chicago Press.

Users Review

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