

Categories are fundamental to how we define the world and ourselves in it. Categories are so integral to how we think that we rarely reflect on them and how they define our relationship to the world. One of the most basic errors one can make in philosophy is a “category mistake.”^[1]

The taxonomy of categories as we learn them in Western cultures typically starts with very high level summary categories such as “animal, vegetable, mineral,” and those then branch down into various possible divisions. Under “animal” there might be “human, non-human”. “Dog” branches into “shelty, spaniel, terrier” and so forth, and spaniel might branch into “cocker, springer” and so on. There are countless such starting points for classifying and categorizing things, but they give an idea just how very basic they are in defining animate beings and inanimate things (note how the commonly used categorization of “beings” and “things” is determined), and thus how we relate to the world.

Other categories define non-physical categories. Considered politically, “human” might classify as “Male, Female,” or as “Spanish, Italian, French, American,” The category “American” might branch into the political categories of “Democrat, Republican, Libertarian, ...”; one could further branch Democrat into “Progressive, Moderate, Centrist,” American could also branch into “Michigander, Iowan, Texan, Arizonan, Georgian, ...” or “Black, Brown, White,” These are of course associated together, such that one might be a “White Male Republican Michigander”, a “White Female Progressive Oregonian,” or a “Black Female Centrist Democrat Mississippian.”

How we categorize others is not neutral; this is particularly clear in ever more polarized political arenas. To many Republicans and Democrats, the other is an enemy to be mocked and trounced. An American might classify an immigrant from Mexico, or a continental European an immigrant from Africa, as “legal” or “illegal.” These are not neutral legal categories; they evoke profound responses of empathy, animosity, or outright hatred.

At Jesus’ resurrection, a new cosmic era was initiated. He became the first person of a new creation that will ultimately result in the renewal of the entire cosmos, the promised “new heaven and new earth.” As Thomas Torrance expressed it: “The resurrection of Jesus was not to a state of affairs in the old order of things but to a new state of affairs entailing the redemptive transformation of the old order”; this new state of affairs is “absolutely new: a reality which is not only entirely unknown to us but entirely unknowable in terms of what we already know or think we know, *and only knowable through a radical reconstruction of our prior knowledge*”^[2]

The new creation in Jesus, which is already a reality and awaits its consummation at his return, totally redefines all human categories, because eschatological reality itself is already totally redefined. Presumably rocks continue to be rocks, but people are no longer categorized, united, or divided by value-laden categories such as ethnicity, nationality, color, or any other distinction.

Consider Paul’s list of annulled categories in Galatians 3:28: “There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, *for you are all one in Christ Jesus.*” The Jew/Gentile (or Jew/Greek) distinction was for them *the* basic defining and dividing social category; those foundational categories by which they defined their world were utterly negated by their becoming kingdom citizens.

The central category to the second greatest commandment, to love one’s neighbor as oneself, is

“Neighbor,” raising the question “Who is my neighbor?” (Luke 10:25–37). If I define “neighbor” according to national, political, and/or legal categories, I adopt categories that are not those of Jesus. The one who was stripped, beaten, and left half-dead had no identifying clothes or possessions; he was simply a nameless person in dire need. In the words of the expert in the law, that man’s neighbor was “The one who had mercy on him.” Jesus’ only categories in Matthew 25:31–46 are “hungry,” “thirsty,” “stranger,” “naked,” “sick,” and “prisoner.”

Some years ago I had a brief discussion with the manager of a large Christian radio station in a very large Southern city. I mentioned that the local paper had run an article about a discussion of illegal immigration, posing the question whether one could love one’s neighbor and deport him. His response startled me: “For him to be my neighbor he must be near me, and he isn’t supposed to be near me.” For him, American immigration law categorized such a person as “Illegal,” and consequently as an American he had no responsibility for such a person’s welfare.

He was not thinking in kingdom categories, but in the political categories of an order that is coming to an end (1 Cor 2:6; 7:31). The divisive color, legal, political, and national categories of “Brown Illegal Mexican” or “White Republican American” are annulled by the categories of the kingdom of God, just as were the categories of Jew and Greek, slave and free, male and female. In the current order, as accidents of birth we live and function as male and female, citizens of a given nation-state, or brown, black, and white, but in the order to come – the order of the new creation under the rule of God – the categories of this order are of no account, *because the new creation established at Jesus’ resurrection already redefines everything.*

God’s people, as citizens of the new creation, are called to wholly abandon the categories of the current order – “what is old has passed away” – and live by the categories of the new creation, as best we can understand them this side of its fulfillment. Paul explained why:

And he died for all so that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them and was raised. So then from now on *we acknowledge no one from an outward human point of view* [e.g. nationality, ethnicity, skin color]. Even though we have known Christ from such a human point of view, now we do not know him in that way any longer. So then, *if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation*; what is old has passed away – look, what is new has come [e.g. a new set of categories by which to view everyone and everything]! And all these things are from God who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and who has given us the ministry of reconciliation. In other words, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting people’s trespasses against them, and *he has given us the message of reconciliation.* (2 Cor 5:15–19; emphasis and insets [...] mine)

This is essential in how we think of ourselves and others; we are no longer Americans or Mexicans, Malaysians or Uruguayans; we are Christians, which carries an import far beyond how most think of being 'Christian' within their local cultural, economic, and political environments. As Christians, we already live in the new creation by the Holy Spirit - "what is new has come" - and we are to see and treat each others by the categories of God's new order.

God wants to reconcile all people to himself and with each other, and that cannot happen when we categorize and separate people by nationality, ethnicity, language, skin color, and so forth. If we continue to treat people by those categories of this world, we set ourselves in opposition to God's purposes - not a good place to be. As an example, the Pharisees saw a prostitute anointing Jesus' feet; Jesus saw a woman who knew herself to be a sinner responding in profound gratitude to his love and mercy, and he told her that her sins were forgiven and that her faith had saved her (Lk 7:36-50).

Paul succinctly stated "Do not be conformed to this present world, *but be transformed by the renewing of your mind*, so that you may test and approve what is the will of God—what is good and well-pleasing and perfect" (Romans 12:2; emphasis mine). Renewing our minds, renewing how we think, includes re-categorizing everything under the rubrics of God's kingdom. Until we begin to learn and think in the categories of the kingdom, we cannot begin to understand God's will.

References

1. For further reading on categories in philosophy, one might start with the SEP discussion: <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/categories/>. [↵]
2. Thomas Torrance, *Space, Time and Resurrection*, 1976, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 175. Emphasis mine. [↵]