

Difference

Philosophical puzzlement

On the very first page of the picture book *Michael*, by Tony Ross and Tony Bradman, readers are informed that 'Michael was *different*'. The picture shows children dressed in school uniform, standing in rows, singing in assembly. It is easy to spot Michael. His shoes are green instead of brown, his trousers blue instead of grey, his tie askew, his hair dishevelled. He is not singing like everybody else and his mouth is turned down. As the story unfolds, we learn that Michael does not behave like the other children and does not do what he is asked or told to do. He pursues his own interests. He does not play with the others. In the end he constructs a spaceship that flies off in the direction of the stars. It seems that his 'difference' has led to success in this project, although he remains alone and we do not know whether his lack of interest in what school has to teach him leads him into any difficulties later on in life. Michael's determination to stick with his own agenda, rather than conform to the school's plan for him, results in considerable achievement but is this at the cost of friendship and approval from others?

In social terms, individual differences, whether physical (of size, face, hair, sex, skin colour, shape, ability, *etc*) or cultural (of language, dress, religion, social class, nationality, gender *etc*) seem to have an enormous influence on our sense of self and on the ways in which we can be treated by others. Societies seem to operate with dominant notions of what is 'normal' or 'average' and what is 'extreme' or 'other'. Do we internalise these social norms and stigmas, whether we choose to or not? At the same time as seeking to conform to the norms of the various groups to which we belong, do we simultaneously strive to distinguish ourselves as unique?

How different are we?

When we examine the substance of differences between individuals and groups by looking at what all human beings have in common, for example genetically, we find that the differences that are so often emphasised are actually very small. How different are we from others? How different are we from ourselves over time? One and the same person undergoes continuous change. We have a completely different body every seven years (with replacement of all our cells) but would it be possible to claim the same for mental change?

It seems to be the differences among people that both provoke conflicts and also lend meaning to our lives. The pressure to conform to social norms can be irresistible and we are often prepared to give up our individual sense of identity in order to be accepted into the group. We are prepared to wear a uniform, agree to rules, behave like others in the same group (*eg* put on a suit for work, drink alcohol though under age, break or keep to

speed limits, keep secrets, wear the colours of the favourite football team, go on mass protest marches). Yet for us all to be exactly the same would be unbearable.

'Insides' and 'outsides'

In an effort to try and 'pin down' differences, children have offered the distinction between the 'inside' and 'outside' of people. We differ on the outside, but not on the inside. Are we indeed the same on the 'inside'? What do we mean by 'inside'? Are we referring to our feelings perhaps, or our brains or personality? Perhaps even our organs or blood? Also, to what extent is the inside influenced by the outside? (*eg* when you are dressed like a boy, do you tend to behave more like a boy?) Do girls and boys differ in essence?

Describing the world to stay sane?

To function as humans we seem to need, on the one hand, to 'belong' or to be attached to others and, on the other hand, to believe that there is no other person quite like us. To function in the world we have devised elaborate and complex systems of classification and languages that can describe subtle nuances of similarity and difference.

Is conversation only possible because each of us occupies a particular time and space and because it is worth noting the constant changes that occur, the differences in the patterns of the stars, in the seasons, in world affairs, in our health, in our moods? On a universal scale, these minor shifts seem trivial. Are some differences invented?

Interpretations of 'difference'

It is worth exploring some meanings of the word 'difference'. The origin of the word is Latin and comes from 'dis', meaning 'apart' and 'ferre', meaning 'bear'. So, putting these root words together in 'differ,' we get the meaning 'to bear apart'. In modern usage we use the term in a number of ways. 'To differ' is to be dissimilar or to vary in quality or nature. 'To be different' also describes something that is out of the ordinary or unusual, a 'one-off'. We use the word 'differ' in a dispute to refer to disagreement: hence the expression 'let's agree to differ'. In mathematics, 'the difference' is the product that results when one sum is subtracted from another – in money terms, we sometimes talk of 'splitting the difference'. In physics and engineering, differentials are based on the difference between opposing effects, motions or forces, and can be seen in applications such as the gears on vehicles.

Making a difference

We also talk about 'making a difference' through our actions or choices. It is not unusual for those working in 'caring' professions to report that they have chosen their careers because they want to 'make a difference' to the lives of others. This is a curious statement in a way, because we can never get to the bottom of it. There isn't a way of finding out what would have happened (*ie* whether we really did make a difference) if we hadn't taken the actions we did – we just have to believe that whatever it would have been would have been something less

good. This belief can often motivate people to risk their own lives for others. In some cases, a person might not survive to discover the results of their actions. Does this suggest that it is the belief in ‘making a difference’ that is paramount, rather than either any empirical evidence that we can alter the course of events, or of our experience of them? In this case, both a desire for difference and the belief that difference is possible, seem necessary to avoid the bleakness of nihilism.

Difference in space and time

We can think about difference in terms of *space* - the world and the Objects within it being defined by the differences between them, by ideas about where each object begins and ends, and by ideas about where we, as Subjects, begin and end. It has been a great project in the development of human knowledge to identify and classify and group things in the world according to their properties of form in space, so that we are able to represent identity and difference. We can also think about difference in terms of *time*, incorporating changes, continuities and discontinuities in things in themselves and/or in our perceptions of the world and of our lives.

Truth and uncertainty

In the pursuit of knowledge, classification systems play a critical part. The values that underpin these classification systems are sometimes hidden and taken for granted. But these systems in themselves are open to question. How we define differences between things and how we describe the world is a matter of choice and a matter of language. And the terms and systems we use determine in turn the ways in which we think about the concepts. Often we classify things according to their function for us human beings (*eg* pets/other animals, edible mushrooms/poisonous mushrooms).

Difference and deconstruction

An investigation of what constitutes the idea of ‘difference’ is at the heart of the post- modern project of deconstruction in the work of philosophers such as Jacques Derrida. *‘Deconstruction names the movement or work which is opening institutions to the difference forgotten within them’* (Derrida, 1991). For example, post-modern films and novels force the reader or viewer to question fundamental assumptions about what constitutes a ‘narrative’. They quite often create a feeling of displacement or psychological disturbance too, in order to undermine our hold on ‘truth’ or ‘reality’. The recent film *Mulholland Drive*, by director David Lynch, is a good example of this.

In the French language, the verb *differer* incorporates both ‘differ’ and ‘defer’. Freud claims that a good example of this dual process of difference and deferral is a baby’s need, in order to grow up, both to distinguish (differ) herself from the objects around her and to delay (defer) gratification. Derrida uses the term ‘*differance*’ to maintain both of these senses and to deconstruct the metaphysical language that is defined by the structure of concepts such as form/matter; subject/object; rational/irrational. According to *differance*, such oppositions only

have meaning because of the posited difference between them, they do not have meaning in themselves (Holland 1997). So, it only makes sense to talk about 'rational' or 'subject,' for example, because of the fact that they have opposite concepts. The meaning of words can therefore only be examined by taking entire structures into account. Words don't mean anything just on their own. This argument makes 'difference' hard to pin down. Do we really know where it begins and ends?

Obedience and disobedience

In the twentieth century, social psychologists, amongst others, became very preoccupied with the need to research social conformity. If we understood conformity, they thought, it might help to prevent a repetition of cruel and inhumane behaviour in the future. Experimental studies sought to gain insight into the kinds of conditions that lead to individuals going along with the dominant social norms of the group, even when this involves violence towards others. What are the conditions in which 'ordinary' human beings become capable of torture? What makes some individuals hold on to their own beliefs or values in the face of a huge countervailing pressure? What makes resistance against powerful social movements possible for some individuals? In what circumstances do we disobey rules? When are we prepared to act 'abnormally' or otherwise?

Conformity and non-conformity

The extent to which difference through diversity is tolerated in a society depends on very many factors. Policy makers, community leaders and politicians may emphasise the multiculturalism that characterises many societies today. In English schools the curriculum provides for children to be taught about several different religious faiths. At the same time, the law insists that these same schools organise acts of collective worship of a broadly Christian character. There are proposals being put forward that refugees wishing to take up residence in Britain should undergo tests of their knowledge of English language and of British customs. Those wishing to take up American citizenship have to swear an oath of allegiance to the flag and constitution of the USA. How do such conditional requirements for people wishing to join a nation or live in a particular country square up with the talk of tolerance of differences, diversity and individual freedom?

The law itself makes provision for individuals to be treated quite differently according to things like their age, sexuality, mental health, marital status. So are all citizens equal and the same? When do we call someone a citizen? Is a baby a citizen?

Is interest in difference a matter of culture?

To what extent is the concern for difference a matter of culture? In Western culture, fashion can only exist by continuously reinventing what is considered attractive or cool. So we have to keep changing how we look and what we wear to remain fashionable. At the same time, there is an idea of 'standing out from the crowd'. The truly 'cool' person does not dress like everyone else but is unusual in some way, or out of the ordinary.

The need for difference is something that could be said to feed the consumerism that drives our western economies and our social lives too. At the same time, the desire to be different is kept within the boundaries of the normal. We want to be different, but not too much!

This can also be seen to apply to family life and relationships. Again in contemporary western culture, each generation is invited to distinguish itself from the previous one. We have constructed a rift between generations. This rift influences relationships between adults and young people. This seems to be particularly marked in Britain, where youngsters under 18 are often separated and treated differently in public places such as shops, restaurants, pubs.

In many families in Britain, and in other parts of Europe, young people are not segregated in this way. The desire for cohesion in the family as a whole appears to be given greater importance and family members choose to consider the family as a whole in making major life decisions such as who to marry or where to live. How universally human is our desire to be different, or can we see clear differences culturally or historically?

Do opposites attract?

According to physics, the force of gravity attracts all objects in the earth's orbital space towards the earth's core, magnetic force attracts objects made of iron and steel, and the forces that push in different directions create friction.

In love and friendship, we are often drawn towards those we perceive to have different qualities to ours, those differences, perhaps, creating a sense of balance. We also look for things that we have in common, that can be shared. For a marriage or partnership to be successful, some would suggest that complementarity is essential; the couple must achieve a balance of skills, qualities and strengths between them. Others argue that it is the differences between individuals that provide energy and excitement in the relationship. Marriage vows include the suggestion that certain individual differences will be given up in the interests of the union. This might involve giving up your surname, your religion, your nationality, your bank account, a room of your own. Do marriages and long-term partnerships erase or blur the distinct identities of each person? Is this part of the reason why separation and divorce are often traumatic and drawn out over quite a long time?

Familiarity and strangeness

Working out that we are separate (different?) beings from our mothers is a pre-requisite for having a sense of self. In our emotional lives we have to deal with attachment and detachment and these define the difference between what is intimate and familiar and what is separate and strange. In British society at the moment, we seem to be teaching children that trustworthiness is something that is determined by whether a person is familiar or strange. In an effort to protect children, the 'stranger danger' campaign gives them the message that it is

people they do not know that pose the greatest risks to their safety. This is in stark contrast to heroic legends and some of the most well known stories in the Christian tradition that emphasise the virtue of people helping others, even those they do not know. Do meetings with strangers also offer opportunities for escape and redemption?

Yin and yang

The Chinese *Yin-Yang* concept is largely misunderstood as representing ‘difference’ in terms of opposites. This is quite wrong. Yin and Yang are two aspects of one unity. Each contains within it the seed of the other. Where one increases the other decreases, when one reaches its peak, the other emerges.

Yin-Yang refers to two opposing yet complementary aspects of everything in the universe. They are symbols that serve as a metaphorical scaffold on which to build understanding and aid description. They are not found ‘out there’. For example, Yang is a paradigm of a theoretical maleness – and Yin of femaleness – which, in their pure form, do not exist in nature. Chinese philosophers (especially Taoists) regard such a dualistic perspective as a gross human error. Perhaps the dualistic mistakes on which so many differences are based are due to the human error of basing concepts on the metaphorical language they have invented to describe phenomena, rather than basing them on empirical observation of those same phenomena.

A line from an old blues song says it all – *I bin down so long, it looks like ‘up’ to me*. When we talk about ‘up’ (which is yang) this is meaningful only when we relate it to ‘down’ (yin). ‘Up’ and ‘down’ are two opposing yet complementary aspects of space, which give meaning to each other. If there were no ‘down’ there would be no ‘up’. According to *Yin-Yang*, the same can be said of all universal phenomena since the ‘Big Bang’, and to ideas such as *good/bad* and *right/wrong*.

Agreeing to differ

In philosophical discussion and in critical thinking and dialogue, the identification of distinctions is central to the analysis of concepts and to developing logical arguments. In the community of enquiry, participants work to observe and articulate the differences in their experiences, their interpretations and their points of view. This effort is part of the search for truths and for meanings. Is difference therefore central to the conduct of any kind of enquiry and to the development of knowledge? Do we have to have disagreement in order to have any sense of progress? Or have we invented this activity in order to make sense of our lives?

- Opposites?** You can get the children to do this alone or in pairs and groups. Ask them to put the following items under the headings: BIG or SMALL. In a plenary session compare lists and discuss.
Tooth, bee, paper-clip, ant, bee, raisin, eyelash, fingernail, wasp, flea, peppercorn, pin, fly.
- Explain** This activity is most suitable for pupils in KS2. Invite children to work in pairs and to explain the *differences* between the following pairs of words:
hot/warm • danger/risk • kind/gentle • mature/old
- Beginnings and endings** Ask the children, working in the same pairs as above, to think about where the following begin and end:
finger/hand • day/night • potato/crisp • hair/head • love/like • foot/leg
- Criteria** Ask the children to work in small groups and to work out some *criteria* that would enable a decision to be made as to who/what belongs in these categories:
Family • Neighbourhood • Community • Friend • Stranger • Nation
- Strange and familiar** Ask children to draw a *conceptline* (see chapter *Ethical Enquiry and Citizenship* in *Thinking through Stories* section and *Good & Bad* for another example of a conceptline) and put the words ‘strange’ at one end and ‘familiar’ at the other. Ask them to work with a partner and to locate, as they see fit, the following words/phrases at different points along the conceptline. Some examples are:
Mum, grandma, cousin, myself, neighbour, shopkeeper, policewoman, doctor, teacher, classmate, visitor, mum’s workmates, head teacher, the prime minister, favourite pop star, children’s TV presenter.
- Me and others** Ask the children to take a large piece of paper and put their name in the middle. Next they should draw a circle round their name with lines coming out of it like the sun (about ten long lines). At the end of each line they should write the name of someone in the class. Ask them to write along the top of each line some things they have in common with the person named at the end of it. Underneath the line they should write some things that are different.
- Yin and Yang** Bring in a yin/yang symbol (*eg* on some jewellery or in a picture) and invite the children to find out what they can about its meaning. Put all their findings together and discuss.

Some picture books you could use

The Mountains of Tibet
by Mordecai Gerstein

This picture book is perfect for exploring difference and other themes (see also *Animals* in the *Web of Intriguing Ideas*). In this story for all ages, a Tibetan boy grows up to be a woodcutter who lives and dies in a small village without ever leaving his valley. When he is dead, a voice presents him with a series of choices. First of all, he has to choose between becoming part of the endless universe (which some call heaven) or living another life. When he chooses to live again, he then has to choose in which galaxy, in which planet, as what kind of creature, in which culture, in which geographical location, with which parents, and of which gender. Presenting children with similar choices triggers rich discussions amongst themselves.

Frog and the Stranger
by Max Velthuys

In *Frog and the Stranger* Pig discovers a stranger camping at the edge of the woods. He looks like a 'filthy dirty rat', Pig says. Duck warns that rats 'are a thieving lot.' Frog is not so sure and questions how they know that. He decides to find out for himself and spies on the stranger during the night. When he reports back that the stranger seems a nice fellow, Pig is not easily convinced – after all, he is a rat and rats are cheeky and lazy. Eventually, after having visited Rat and talked to him, Pig and Duck insist that he must leave. Hare disagrees: 'He may be different from us, but he's not doing anything wrong and the wood belongs to everyone.' From that day on, Frog visits Rat regularly. Pig disapproves of Frog, because he is 'different from us'. 'But we are all different,' replies Frog. Rat proves to be always happy and has many exciting stories to tell and is always there when someone needs help. Gradually, he is accepted by everyone. When he does at last decide to leave and move on he is sadly missed by all!

Moon Man by Tomi Ungerer

In another masterpiece by Tomi Ungerer, the man in the moon watches people on earth dancing and having fun. He is bored and filled with envy. He decided to travel to earth, but when a shooting star takes him down there, the police are informed and government officials call him an invader and put him in prison. Like the moon itself, the Moon Man's size changes during each month. He doesn't have to wait very long before he is thin enough to squeeze himself through the bars of the prison window. He then disappears. About three weeks later, he reaches his full size again, and thoroughly enjoys his freedom, but his happiness is short-lived. His music disturbs a grumpy neighbour and the police are called. He narrowly escapes and a long-forgotten scientist helps him to get back to the moon. The Moon Man realises that he will never find peace on earth.

The Tunnel by Anthony Browne

In *The Tunnel* a brother and sister are different in every possible way. Browne's depiction of them in both pictures and text has a subdued force. The separate archetypes of the feminine and the masculine are represented, respectively, by Rose (who is always reading and dreaming) and Jack (who is always shouting and kicking). One day Jack dares Rose to crawl through a tunnel.

Despite her fears, she has no choice but to follow her brother, first through a slimy tunnel then into a wood inhabited by famous and infamous creatures from fairy-tales until at last she comes out into a clearing where Jack has been turned to stone. Through her embrace and warm tears, Jack slowly de-stones. They smile at each other. Her book and his football now appear next to each other on the same page instead of being on opposite pages, as they appeared at the beginning of the book.

Whadayamean by John
Burningham

God invites a boy and a girl to look at the world. God doesn't like what he sees; the seas are filthy, the air is polluted, species are extinct, and ice is melting. The children report their lack of power to change things. After all, they are only small. God asks them to tell the grown-ups that they should change the way they live, and promises to return when the world is a better place. Eventually the adults of different religions, countries and social classes start to listen.

Why? by Nikolai Popov's
& **War and Peas** by
Michael Foreman

Differences often cause war and two excellent picture books for exploring war are Nikolai Popov's *Why?* and 'War and Peas' by Michael Foreman. In *Why?* a mouse decides he wants the particular flower that a frog is holding, even though he has flowers of the very same kind growing all round him that he could have instead. Other frogs come to the rescue of their fellow frog and chase away the mouse. He then returns in what was once a boot, but is now a tank. A battle follows, involving many frogs and many mice. Following the battle all that is left behind is a very grey battlefield with no life and no flowers, but just a mouse and a frog. This picture book has no text.

In *War and Peas*, King Lion decides to ask his rich neighbour for help with feeding his people. When visiting the city – which is cunningly made to resemble New York despite being made entirely of cakes, milkshakes and jars of biscuits – the Fat King arrests them. King Lion manages to escape, but the entire Fat Army gives chase. Fortunately for King Lion and his people, the soldiers are so fat that the poor horses collapse, the tanks cannot be steered properly and the tyres on the trucks burst. After having won the war by chucking loads of peas at the Fat Army, King Lion accuses the Fat King of being mean and of supplying armies instead of helping the poor with food. But without meaning to, the Fat King and his army have helped after all; the tracks of their army vehicles have ploughed the land and the birds drop hundreds of seeds upon it so that there will be plenty of food for everyone soon. The Lion King suggests peace, but the Fat King has never heard of it and asks for the recipe! The illustrations in this highly original book are mouthwatering...

Sources. Deleuze Gilles (1994) *Difference and Repetition*. London: The Athlone Press
Derrida Jacques (1991) *Between the Blinds: A Derrida Reader*.
Holland Nancy J. (Ed) (1994) *Feminist Interpretations of Jacques Derrida*. Pennsylvania State University Press

What is a stranger?

Name:

Class:

What does a stranger look like?

Make a drawing, painting or model of what *you* think a stranger looks like. You can use the space below.

Discuss (in small groups first):

1. Could someone you know be a stranger?
2. Can you be a stranger to yourself?
3. When does a stranger become someone you know?

