Boundaries — From Politics to Metaphysics (and Back)

There is a basic distinction, in geography, between “natural” boundaries (borders, frontiers) and “artificial” ones. The former are just the physical boundaries of old, such as mountain ranges, coastlines, river banks, etc. The latter are exemplified especially by boundaries induced through human decisions and conventions and lie skew to any physical differentiations in the underlying territory, as with the frontier between Mexico and the United States, the borders of Wyoming, or the imaginary lines separating the US portion of Lake Erie from the Canadian portion. As we shall see, there is a lot to be said about the important role of this distinction in the history and dynamics of our political culture. But we can say more. For boundaries are not a prerogative of geography. They are at work in articulating every aspect of the world around us. Boundaries stand out in every map we draw, from the contents of perception to the scientific modeling of reality in terms of objects, kinds, and properties, and this ubiquity of boundaries goes hand in hand with the natural/artificial opposition. Indeed, once the opposition has been recognized, it can be drawn across the board: not merely in relation to boundaries but also in relation to those entities that have boundaries. If something enjoys a natural boundary, its existence and identity conditions appear to be independent of us; it is a bona fide, mind-independent entity of its own. By contrast, if its boundary is of the artificial sort, then the entity itself is to some degree a fiat, a construct, a product of our worldmaking. In short, the natural/artificial distinction betokens the general opposition between what is found or discovered and what is made or created, and this takes us straight to the metaphysical debate between realism and antirealism. Here we shall be especially interested in the antirealist stance corresponding to the limit case: What if there were no natural boundaries? What if all boundaries—hence all entities—were on closer look and to some extent the result of a fiat articulation reflecting our cognitive biases and our social practices and conventions?

Requirements

E-credit: Attendance + a short seminar presentation + a final paper
R-credit: Attendance + a short seminar presentation
TOPICS AND READINGS (very tentative)

1. Introduction


2. Boundary concepts


3. Contact and Ownership

4. **Ontological Antirealism**


5. **Natural vs artificial boundaries 1: Geography & Politics**

- Friedrich Ratzel (1897) *Politische Geographie*, Berlin, Oldenbourg, Part VI (“Die Grenzen”)

6. **Natural vs artificial boundaries 2: Natural Sciences**


7. **Natural vs artificial boundaries 3: Metaphysics**


8. **Metaphysical Antirealism**


9. **Conventions and Social Objects**


10. ‘Race’ and Other Categories


11. Vagueness