Assignment #1 — The Epistemology of Everyday Classification

A · Background

Every time something is named or categorized, a large set of assumptions and commitments can be seen to have driven or guided the decision. Sometimes these assumptions and commitments are *explicit*—for example in some commercial and institutional categorization practices, such as when objects are catalogued according to a formal system. More often, though—and especially in the mundane classification practices that underwrite our ordinary, day-to-day life—the underlying assumptions and commitments remain *implicit,* operating in the background, in subtle and implicit ways not apparent in the names or categories themselves.

 The aim of this assignment is to have you: (i) think critically about the ways in which objects in your everyday life are organized; (ii) describe—explicitly!—the commitments and assumptions betrayed in their organization; (iii) imagine how those objects might have been differently organized, if they were based on a different set of assumptions and commitments.

 While you should use the readings assigned in Part I of the course as much as you find them valuable, this first assignment is not directed explicitly at the readings (that will be more true of assignments #2 and #3). Rather, the purpose of this exercise is for you to identify a ROCM issue of a sort that you expect to encounter in your profession or career, and to begin to spell out the underlying aspects of the issue, in ways that we will address in more detail in the rest of the course. As the course proceeds, you should keep the issue you have identified here in mind, and constantly ask yourself "How does this point bear on the example that I wrote about in the first assignment?"

B · Assignment

Choose a *specific moderately complex object* of a sort that you expect to encounter in your personal or professional life—e.g., a database, a cell phone, an ATM kiosk, the layout of a museum, a buffet, an art gallery, a department store, a grocery store, a children's library, a menu, a store catalogue, an open-source project, etc. Call this object **P**. Write a paper about **P** consisting of the following five parts (on whose relative length you should decide):

1. Describe the physical or conceptual organization of **P**.

2. Identify the underlying ontological, epistemological, and social commitments and assumptions that have led to **P**'s being organized in the way that it is, and show—in as much detail as you can—how and why they have influenced **P**'s organization and/or structure.

3. Note the extent to which you were able to determine the commitments and/or assumptions underlying **P**, as discussed in part 2:

   a. Directly (for example, because the creators explicitly documented them);

   b. Indirectly, by deducing those commitments and assumptions from an analysis of the classificatory structure of **P** itself; and

   c. Indirectly, by analysing the
      i. Social and/or cultural context of **P**,
      ii. Purposes for which **P** is used,

      iii. Communities towards which **P** is aimed,

      iv. Etc.

4. Propose an *alternative set of commitments and assumptions*, and describe a context in which these new assumptions would be more suitable than the original.

5. Propose an *alternative organization/classification* of the same complex entity **P** that would follow from the alternative set of commitments and assumptions described in Part 4. Your proposal should be sensible, realistic, and principled—even if its suggestions are unlikely or impracticable given current socio-economic arrangements. Explore the real-world consequences that would follow from **P**'s being organized in this new way, differently from how it was originally configured.

C · Details

1. Length: 2,000–3,000 words.

2. Due: Tuesday Feb 7, 2012.

3. To be submitted in accord with the <u>submission requirements</u>[1] specified in the online INF1002 syllabus.

4. You are welcome to discuss your thoughts and arguments with your classmates or other interlocutors, but your submitted paper should be written in your own words.

5. Papers will be graded in line with the Faculty of Information's <u>Grade Interpretation Guidelines</u>.[2] In particular, your work will be:

> "…evaluated on criteria of accuracy, clarity, organization, depth, originality, understanding of relevant issues, scholarship (the extent to which assigned readings and other literature are incorporated into discussion and analysis), and precision in following directions. Written work will also be graded on quality of writing, as the Faculty believes that excellent communication skills are essential characteristics of graduate education. Work that is not well written and grammatically correct will not generally be considered eligible for a grade in the A range, regardless of its quality in other respects."

You should keep these grade interpretation guidelines constantly in mind, while completing this and other INF1002 assignments. Note in particular the descriptions given there of what is required for each version of each letter grade.

Two notes:

a. As noted in §B, issues of scholarship are not especially relevant to Assignment #1—though to the extent you are able to reinforce your arguments with citations to relevant literatures that will make your paper that much stronger.

b. Although no marks will be granted for form, marks will be deducted if your paper fails to meet usual academic standards of grammar, presentation, citation, etc.

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[1]See http://individual.utoronto.ca/jemai/1002-2012/syllabus.html#assignments
[2]Available at <u>http://www.ischool.utoronto.ca/grade-interpretation</u>