

Deciding what's what: classification from A to Z

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Our lives are constructed in terms of classes: fatal or non-fatal diseases, spoken words indicating affirmative or negative, urgent and not-so-urgent emails, trains which will get us there on time versus those which will not, and so on endlessly. But these classifications themselves come in two classes: those which are forced upon us, and those which we force upon nature. I explore this difference, examining classification ideas in many different domains, showing how the discovery of classes has led to scientific breakthroughs and how the imposition of classes has enabled progress. I also examine formal methods for producing classifications, and see how these have evolved since a moratorium on the development of new mathematical methods was proposed (but generally ignored) in the 1980s.