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IT'S OKAY TO BE AN —IST

AN ARGUMENT AGAINST THE ABANDONMENT OF COHERENT SPEECH



I INTEND WITHIN THIS SHORT ESSAY TO DEFEND THE USE OF LABELS by disambiguating two ways of looking at them. On one hand, there are definitive labels—on the other, descriptive. The difference between the two is subtle, at first, but as we get to understand them more fully it is the difference between the sun and the stars.

The would-be lover from the parable above was being reactionary, although understandably so. Tired of being defined by society at large, he was afraid of replicating the alienation of rigid definition within himself. Any labels, even purportedly “liberatory” labels like Anarchist, seemed to have rules that dictate his behavior.

Such is the manner of definitive labels; they create a box one ought not act beyond.

Let us refer to the example of bioregionalism. In bioregionalist thought, the land is divided into bioregions, rather than states, nations and the like. There are rarely rigid boundaries in nature; one might claim to be from Appalachia if one is only from the foothills. West Virginia, by comparison, has clearly defined borders. West Virginia defines an area; Appalachia describes one.

If a definitive label sets boundaries that something can act within, a descriptive label works the other way around. I define myself as vegan, therefore I eat vegan food—vs—I eat vegan food, therefore I describe myself as vegan.

Why identify as one label or another at all? To roughly paraphrase Dan Savage [of Savage Love fame], we are going to be labeled; we can either label ourselves or wait for someone else to label us.

I'd rather be called an anarchist than a terrorist, thank you very much. It is also useful for simplicity's sake. To be able to summarize an element of your belief structure beats explaining it every time:

“Hey, you want to go sexually objectively some women?”
“No thanks, I'm a feminist.”
“How about setting up a global nation-state to protect the environment?”
“No thanks, I'm an anarchist.”

UNTIL MORE PEOPLE COME TO UNDERSTAND THE ALL-IMPORTANT DIFFERENCE between these two sorts of labels, we will have to bear some burden by choosing to label ourselves. “I'm vegan,” I find myself saying quite often, “but I'm not one of those vegans:”

A young couple walked into a restaurant, out on their first date. The first man pulled the chair out for the second man and they began to search their menus.

“Should we get the duck?” Asked the first man to the second.

“Oh no, I don’t eat meat.” The second man replied.

“My apologies. Then perhaps the pasta parmesan?”

“Hrmm... no... how about the pasta marinara, and no cheese?”

“Oh? Are you vegan then?”

“No, but I don’t eat animal products.”

“How is that different than vegan?” the first man inquired curiously.

“Because unlike some people, I don’t define myself based on my dietary choices.”

“I see.”

To be interested in an –ism or to be an –ist ought to be much the same. When I speak of the historical and present-day domination of women by men, I am advocating feminism. Perhaps I am a feminist. But this is an abstraction of the wrenching in my gut when I overhear domestic abuse, when I see the Girl’s Gone Wild tour bus drive up to a cheering crowd.

The slander against ever using an –ism or –ist is mind-boggling (and was first found among right-wing reactionaries!). I suggest that the next time you hear said slander, you ask whether they are opposed of all formation of nouns or adjectives from verbs, or merely those which trigger a defensive reaction due to the speaker’s inability to see a world that is not composed of boxes.

‘In the United States of the mid-nineteenth century, the phrase “the isms” was used as a collective derogatory term to lump together the radical social reform movements of the day (including as slavery abolitionism, feminism, and early socialism, among others.) [thanks wikipedia!]

Later that night the two were sitting on a rooftop in Brooklyn, watching the light pollution interact with the particulate pollution. They spoke of politics.

“Are you going to vote this November?” The first man inquired.

“I don’t believe in it,” the second man responded.

“Oh, are you an anarchist?” The first man was one, and sincerely hoped his date shared his anti-government views.

“No. I refuse labels like that. I don’t want to box myself in. I mean, I would never advocate a governmental solution to a problem, and I don’t believe in capitalist exchange...”

“Then why not call yourself an anarchist? Or anti-authoritarian, or autonomist, or something?”

“Because I refuse to be defined by labels.”

“Alright. What about queer?”

“Well, I only sleep with men, but...”

The relationship was not off to the best of starts.

“I’m an omnivore,” my friend admitted to me, “but I’m not one of those omnivores.” By this she meant that, although she ate meat, she did not define herself as being in opposition to vegetarianism.

Labels, like symbols and flags, are useful tools. The black flag is not sacred; step on it, refuse to fold it, let it touch the ground, no one cares. But raise it during a demonstration and we can find one another more easily.

Of course, it can be a slippery slope. If you start of describing yourself, you often end up defining yourself. A woman who prefers walking to biking might describe herself as a “ped punk”, to contrast herself from the “bike punks”; But she may start to walk to the exclusion of bicycling once she begins to do this. She needs to stay aware of her choices in labels—and to be constantly reevaluating how she describes herself—so that she can avoid artificially dictating her own behavior.

ADJECTIVES ARE AN IMPORTANT PART OF LANGUAGE. LANGUAGE IS A mediation of direct experience, to be certain, but it is an important one—through language we have gained access to abstract thought. We know that the adjective “blue” could be referring to any one of an infinite range of blues; the wise among us will recognize that the word “blue” is merely an abstraction of the actual color.