

ISM OR ISN'TM: LABEL OR BEHAVIOR?

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If we are to judge others, let it be, *not* upon one's self-proclaimed or societally-assigned identity or label, but upon their behavior.

When I was a teenager, around 1966, I read Bertrand Russell's *Why I Am Not a Christian*, positing his beliefs in disfavor of *any* organized religion. It is difficult to reconcile "Thou shall not kill" with millions of people killed in the name of Christianity and other religions. With estimates of over 4,000 religions in the world today, claims of knowing "The Way" are highly subjective. Even the world's oldest religion, Hinduism, at about 4,000 years, as well as three younger religions, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, may be seen as the religions *du jour*, as the march of humanity is estimated to exceed 300,000 years. Hard to predict the prominent religions a millennia or two from now.

In graduate school for psychology, I recall an assignment in spring of 1973, tasked to present on the current psychiatric nomenclatures. There were two: The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM) and the International Classification of Diseases (ICD). At that time, the DSM-II had 365 diagnostic labels listed. Apart from the stigma caused assigning such labels, there was and still is the problem of inter-rater reliability: What are the odds, say, a panel of five or even three clinicians would come up with the same diagnosis for the patient? Moreover, even if they did, what are the odds that the recommended intervention would be the same? I proposed, instead, if we were to use labels, let it be of the more accurately verifiable *treatment* the person was receiving. A person receiving cognitive behavioral therapy and psychoactive medications would be a "CBT+chemotherapee," with their medication so noted.

The political maelstrom of the 1960s and 70s, filled with antiwar, civil rights, and women's rights protests, the clamor for greater LGBTQTI rights following the Stonewall riot, and the politico-racial assassinations of John Kennedy, Robert Kennedy, and Martin Luther King, Jr. left one wondering if there will ever be a day when people "will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character."

A half-century later now, we witnessed a growing schism in our politics, with a greater brazenness to display the coarser side of one's base ("id"?) impulses, as exemplified by the insurrection upon our country's Capitol (2021). Were politics to focus on the welfare of the society it represents, would "Democrat," "Republican," or "Independent" be necessary? If candidates were chosen on the basis of their platforms, priorities, and problem-solving abilities, the D, R, or I after their name would not matter. If, for example, a candidate indicated they would like to protect children from the greatest

cause of child deaths (CDC report 2020), who would disagree? If the candidate noted that, if adult deaths of the same cause were added to child deaths, and totaled over 40,000 a year, while the same cause contributed to only 76 deaths in Japan, and proposed bringing the best minds together, regardless of political affiliation or country, to recommend how we might best reduce such tragedies, who would disagree? When that cause of death is revealed, firearms, some people are “up in arms,” and lose sight of the original concern: “simply” reducing child deaths.

In 1972 Bhutan promoted its country focus, not on Gross National Product, but on Gross National Happiness. The United Nations, forty years later, published its first annual *The World Happiness Report* (2012), taking into account six major contributing variables, and rank-ordering now 149 countries. Aristotle said, “Happiness is the meaning and purpose of life, the whole aim and end of human existence.” If that is the case, I believe we stand a better chance of promoting world, national, inter- and intra-personal happiness to the degree we reduce “other-ing” with labels, and focus more on behavior.

In his inaugural speech, President Abraham Lincoln offered, “We are not enemies, but friends. We must not be enemies. Though passion may have strained, it must not break our bonds of affection. The mystic chords of memory will swell when again touched, as surely they will be, by the better angels of our nature.” Whatever our “nature” may be, whatever the “content of our character” may be, I believe it is best reflected, not in our labeling, but in our observable behavior. If we can “Be nice,” I think those angels would approve. (2/11/22)

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