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Label: An Approximation

One of the most commonly heard life advice is to “follow your own path”. But since it is human’s natural tendency to seek patterns, we cannot help but put labels on each other and make assumptions accordingly. It is how we simplify our understanding of people around us, in this increasingly chaotic universe. And so instead of a loquacious description, we simplify our understanding of things and concepts by putting labels on them.

According to the Merriam-Webster Dictionary, a label is conceptually “a descriptive or identifying word or phrase”, “a brand of commercial recordings issued under a usually trademarked name”, or “the brand name of a retail store selling clothing, a clothing manufacturer, or a fashion designer”. By these definitions, a label can help us identify and attain the information we need to know about something and pass the information to others. We can see how labels are helping us to identify and solve problems. In diving class for example, we learn that if we want to dive by a sea port, the universal convention is that we must put up a yellow triangular flag floating on the surface indicating that there are divers underneath, and we must not go to a place perpendicularly further than 15m from the flag. The sailors learn a different protocol about what to do when they see the flag. Therefore the flag is used as a label and a means of communication.

But is what is written in the dictionary the true definition of label? How well can we trust the dictionary labeling the word? Author Roxane Gay suggested that a label can have alternative

definitions than its common interpretation. In her article *Bad Feminism*, she argues that there is an "ongoing and pervasive" issue of gender roles, that there is an "essential" definition of feminism that needs to be reconsidered. She references Judith Butler's essay *Performative Acts and Gender Constitution* that "Performing one's gender wrong initiates a set of punishments both obvious and indirect, and performing it well provides the reassurance that there is an essentialism of gender identity after all." (Butler) However, when looking at how people define feminist, Gay find it difficult to expand on what she describes the "pointed and succinct" definition, she explains that "the most significant problem with essential feminism is how it doesn't allow for the complexities of human experience or individuality." (Gay) Because the label of feminism is commonly interpreted as essential, there are people who want to advocate for gender equality that feel discouraged to do so because the essential feminist definition of the label reject them. The essentialist idea of gender identity establishes a binary standard that limits who can "be feminists".

The binary nature of labels makes us imagine the alternatives. Imagine a cancer patient being told after many months in bed that he or she does not have cancer. The label of cancer would be taken away, along with essences attached to the label: hospital, death, despair... Instead of lying on his or her death bed, the patient can now go live with family, have more opportunities to excel in career and explore the world. The alternative life makes the world of difference to people.

The thought of the possibility of being utterly different from our present makes us question the accuracy of labeling. In his article, Malcolm Gladwell discusses how I.Q. tests are being conducted to result in inaccuracies of the measurements. He references on the "Flynn Effect" that "those measuring general knowledge, say, or vocabulary or the ability to do basic

arithmetic have risen only modestly over time. The big gains on the WISC(Wechsler Intelligence Scale for Children) are largely in the category known as ‘similarities’ where you get questions such as ‘in what way are dogs and rabbits alike?’”Because the questions asked on the I.Q. tests require people’s understanding of pop culture, the results are influenced by the timing of testing. The test is modified every couple of years even though the shift in culture is constant, thus creating “cycles” of when the tests are easy and difficult. We often consider I.Q. scores as the number that characterize people’s intelligence, but Gladwell demonstrates that it is more complicated. When the I.Q. score goes below a threshold, a person would be considered mentally disabled. This is problematic because they have to receive special treatment which changes his or her life, even though they would have passed the test if they had taken them at another time. And what about people who only got score slightly above the cutoff? Is it fair that by the chance of timing that they do not get the treatment that they could have gotten? After all, intelligence is not a binary measurement, but a multi-dimensional gradient that can only be approximated by I.Q. score.

It is important to note that some labels have more impact on people’s lives than others. The Association for Natural Psychology points out that “another thought to consider with persons who have or who have had mental illness (unlike other types of illness such as cancer) is that labels stick. Even after a person may have recovered from bouts of serious mental illness, the label may have a long-lasting impact on others' perceptions of him or her.” (Association for Natural Psychology) Because labels like these become people’s identities, they guide people to act in certain ways. Therefore when we use those labels, we need to be extra cautious of what the impacts. Recently, music, films, and TV programs attempt to glorify or make people sympathize with those who suffer from mental illnesses, but they are faced with criticisms because the labels

of mental illnesses are defined as damaging. There is no right way to fix the causality of these labels other than that denying its existence.

Gay writes in her article that “Essential feminism suggests anger, humorlessness, militancy, unwavering principles, and a prescribed set of rules for how to be a proper feminist woman, or at least a proper white, heterosexual, feminist woman—hate pornography, unilaterally decry the objectification of women, don’t cater to the male gaze, hate men, hate sex, focus on career, don’t shave.” While the label of feminism usually start with one person’s awareness that he or she cares about the issue, there is an aggregate social force that stems from and continues to shape the on-going conversations in the society. These conversations exist in places like broadcasts, online blogs, publications and so on by the “intelligent” people, in an attempt to simplify issues such as feminism. But as people discuss about the simplification, more ideas and information emerge to be simplified. This will continue to happen unless people do not accept how many others define the labels. It is when people depend too much on the universal expectation of labels that people like Gay can no longer use the labels with their own interpretations. In this sense, conversations in the society are not liberating, because labeling has taken away the power of using as words that express the minds of the speakers. There is most likely no solution to this problematic issue, the discussion of this topic is creating yet another label that hinders our understanding. Yet we still need words to speak, even if they have become labels. All we can do is to pair explanations to the labels for an infinite approximation, and to remember is that we are using labeled words with compensations for accuracy.

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