

The Morality Trap: The Problem With Having a Strong Identity

There is no good label to describe Jiddu Krishnamurti, and that's perhaps how it should be.

In his early life, he was groomed by the Theosophical Society (a religious movement) to become what they called the World Teacher. As he matured, however, Krishnamurti returned all donations and dissolved the group to move away from any and all ideological affiliations.

For decades, he traveled the world giving lectures about human psychology, social change, and the importance of understanding the mind as individuals rather than through authority.

Some people consider him a religious leader, but given the modern connotation of the term, that's not accurate. Others refer to him as a mystic, which is perhaps a better label, but even so, it doesn't feel complete. Calling him a natural philosopher would arguably be most apt.

The thing about Krishnamurti is that he had a way of communicating the abstract in such a penetrating way that it would shock you into rethinking something you thought you knew.

He had a lot to say about the nature of the human mind and its relation to the world, but most of all, he made it abundantly clear that no matter what he said, it should not be taken as truth. Only you, the individual, can come to that conclusion based on your own inquiry.

Similarly, as his approach indicates, he distrusted all labels and distinctions between people. And in his usual way, he showed the reasoning of this with something he once shared in a lecture:

“When you call yourself an Indian or a Muslim or a Christian or a European, or anything else, you are being violent. Do you see why it is violent? Because you are separating yourself from the rest of mankind. When you separate yourself by belief, by nationality, by tradition, it breeds violence. So a man who is seeking to understand violence does not belong to any country, to any religion, to any political party or partial system; he is concerned with the total understanding of mankind.”

The Paradox of Living Ideologically

There are two reasonable ways to respond to this claim by Krishnamurti: the first is to put the pieces together and see that, yes, at a core level, identity and violence are connected; the second is to, again, see that, but argue even if it is true, these separations are necessary.

What you can't say, however, is that this claim is false, because in order to have violence, you need distinctions, and most violence is born from the ideological distinctions we create.

If you take a long view of history, over the course of thousands and thousands of years, every major conflict can be brought down to an ideological battle of us versus them. More interestingly? Almost every side will have claimed that their side is doing the right thing.

Everybody thinks that they stand against something—something bad—whether that be the evil manifested by the devil or the injustice that they see committed by others in the world.

What starts as noble, however, gets clouded by labels and irrational tribal affiliations that we begin to treat as facts, something that we implicitly assume to be attached to some objective part of reality, a process which then gives us the moral high-ground to commit atrocities.

It's easy to argue—in theory—that it's harmless to attach a strong national affiliation to who you are, or to proudly and boldly wear your belief system as a badge of honor, and in your case, it may well be harmless, but the broader phenomena—in practice—is never harmless.

At the end of the day, humans are animals; highly evolved animals, but animals nonetheless. That means that these identities (borne from our tribal affiliations) are a part of our nature.

But to deny you are not participating in violence, however indirect, due to your ideological association is to absolve yourself when you don't have the right to absolve yourself.

You can even try to claim a moral high-ground and say that this level of violence is necessary because the other side is bad, but if you take a closer look at history, you'll see that the mere labeling of people, regardless of good and bad, has led to more suffering in the world than the actual bad committed by the people you are so fervently against.

A More Integrated Understanding

This reasoning can seem cynical, and it can lead to a warped concept of what things like justice and morality are, but there is a solution; at least a partial one, if that's your concern.

This solution hides in a couple of terms borrowed from the study of game theory: zero-sum games and positive-sum games. The former are competitive, while the latter are cooperative.

In a world of hard identity labels, you can't help but play a zero-sum game, where the goal is for you to win and the other side to lose; where you are the good guy defeating the bad guy.

If you do away with labels that define your identity, however, and instead understand that different people have different life histories, shaped by different genetic and environmental factors, you can try and align your two different subjective worlds by playing a positive-sum game.

It might be true that it's in our nature to be tribal, thus identity distinctions, in some ways, are not something we can completely get rid of, but at the same time, we have also evolved to cooperate, and if we change the boundary of who we include in our tribe from just "us" who are against "them" to simply everyone, it's not inconceivable that we find durable solutions.

When we think in identities, we create a one-dimensional world. We reduce the complexity of the universe down to something we can easily wrap our head around. This has its use, but it leads to false dichotomies of good and bad, us and them, and right and wrong.

Reality, of course, has more dimensions than just one, and when dealing with it, we can't think in dichotomies, because these dichotomies don't exist. There is no rigid separation.

When you are arguing on the internet, the best way to describe who you are talking to in this one-dimensional world may well be liberal or conservative or American or Chinese, but in reality, they are just like you; people with families, friends, doing the best they can to get by.

A world in which we only play positive-sum games, where every player gains something, may not yet be a world within reach, but at least aiming for a more integrated understanding of different people and their realities is surely a better solution than the violence.

The Takeaway

There is no easy way to summarize what Krishnamurti saw in the world or what his vision of the future was, but one thing is clear: he knew that social change begins with an individual.

Before you are a label, you are a person, just like whoever it is that serves as an antagonist to your chosen label. Any groups or ideologies that reverse this distinction create violence.

Almost everybody has some sort of an attachment to some sort of an identity that conforms to generalized rules of operation. Even when we don't explicitly state it, we do often live it.

For the most part, these identities and attachments are harmless, but that doesn't mean that we are absolved from the second and third-order effects that come into the world because we like the comfort and the pride and the community that comes with creating distinctions.

And while it's tempting to think that your ideology is the right one, the one that should be enforced on others, the chances are that this belief is borne more from a self-centeredness you are not even aware of than the fact that you have an objective, moral high-ground.

There is no way to get out of this zero-sum game if you begin from a position of establishing dichotomies. The only way to truly win is to understand: What makes others different from you? What cultural forces are you not accounting for? How do we better integrate each side?

None of this is to say that differences, hierarchies, and distinctions of some kind don't exist in the real world. Neither is the point to suggest that it's fully feasible to drop all nationalities, religions, and tribal boundaries tomorrow so we can suddenly live in a world of peace.

The point is only that we always have a choice: Do we continue taking the easy way out, playing zero-sum games, or do we make an honest effort to create positive-sum games?