

about our conformity to this or that scheme or judgment, to use labels that honor us as though we've earned ourselves rather than chancing into them—but we forget that this is true of every single other, too. This forgetting is the first step of the so-called othering process: forget that we are bound together in irreducibility, forget that we ought to be humble in all things, and especially in our judgments of one another.

Robinson once more:

“Only lonesomeness allows one to experience this sort of radical singularity, one’s greatest dignity and privilege.”

Lonesomeness is what we're all fleeing at the greatest possible speed, what our media now concern themselves chiefly with eliminating alongside leisure. We thus forget our radical singularity, a personal tragedy, an erasure, a hollowing-out, and likewise the singularity of others, which is a tragedy more social and political in nature, and one which seems to me truly and literally horrifying. Because more than any shared “belief system” or political pose, it is the shared experience of radical singularity that unites us: the shared experience of inimitability and mortality. Anything which countermands our duty to recognize and honor the human in the other is a kind of evil, however just its original intention.

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Genera

Mills Baker
June 21st, 2014

I am an allergic and reactive person, most outraged by the sorts of intellectual atrocities I myself commit. To say this is merely to assert the personal applicability of the now-hoary Hermann Hesse adage:

“If you hate a person, you hate something in him that is part of yourself. What isn’t part of ourselves doesn’t disturb us.”

Hesse is a figure whom I regard with suspicion, and again: it seems to me likely that this is due to our mutual habits of appropriation, though whereas he recapitulates Eastern religious ideas in semi-novelistic form for his audience of early 20th-century European exoticists, I recapitulate in semi-essayistic form 20th-century European ideas from Kundera, Gombrowicz, Popper, and others. In this as in all cases, it is the form and not the content that matters.

To describe someone formally, we might say: “She is certain of her rightness, intolerant of those who disagree with her.” But to describe the content is necessarily to stray from the realm of the psychological—which is enduring, for the most part—into the realm of ephemera masquerading as philosophy: “She is for X, fighting against those who believe Y.” You and I have opinions about

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X and Y; we will judge her according to those opinions, even though in the fullness of time an opinion about X or Y will matter as much as the position of a farmer on the Huguenot question. History does not respect our axes and categories, although we believe as ever that they are of life-and-death import. History looks even less kindly on the sense of certainty which nearly all of us attain about our beliefs.

Art and understanding are concerned with forms; politics and judgement are concerned with content. I think of them algebraically: what can be described in variables has greater range, explanatory power, and reach than the specific arithmetic of some sad concluded homework problem.

Some of my smartest friends love Hesse. When I read him I am often struck by the familiarity of his ideas; I cannot tell whether I learned them through other authors who read him, through ambient culture, or through myself, my own reflections, but I know that they often seem to me to be apt instantiations of ideas nearly folklorish in nature, as is the case with the axiom quoted above. Perhaps it is simply that other moral principles lead to the same conclusion, so that Hesse seems as though he arrives at the end, rather than the middle, of the inquiry.

One such principle is well phrased by Marilynne Robinson in her essay "When I was a Child," in her collection *When I Was a Child I Read Books*:

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cannot be compelled to testify or even talk in our criminal justice system; there can be no penalty for being oneself, however odious we may find given selves or whole (imagined) classes of selves.

This very radical idea has an epistemological basis, not a purely moral one: *the self is a mystery*. Every self is a mystery. You cannot know what someone really is, what they are capable of, what transformations of belief or character they might undergo, in what their identity consists, what they've inherited or appropriated, what they'll abandon or reconsider; you cannot say *when* a person is who she is, at what point the "real" person exists or when a person's journey through selves has stopped. A person is not, we all know, his appearance; but do we all know that she is not her job? Or even her politics?

But totalizing rationalism is emphatic: either something is known or it is irrelevant. Thus: the mystery of the self is a myth; there is no mystery at all. A self is valid or invalid, useful or not, correct or incorrect, and if someone is sufficiently different from you, if their beliefs are sufficiently opposed to yours, their way of life alien enough, they are to be judged and detested. Everyone is a known quantity; simply look at their Twitter bio and despise.

But this is nonsense. In truth, the only intellectually defensible posture is one of humility: all beliefs are misconceptions; all knowledge is contingent, temporary, erroneous; and no self is knowable, not truly, not to another. We can perhaps sense this in ourselves —although I worry that many of us are too happy to brag

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I want to maintain my capacity to view each as a mystery, as a human in full, whose interiority I cannot know. I want not to be full of hatred, so I seek to confess that my hatred is self-hatred: shame at the state of my intellectual reactivity and decay. I worry deeply that our systematizing is inevitable because when we are online we are in public: that these fora *mandate* performance, and worse, the kind of performance that asserts its naturalness, like the grotesquely beautiful actor who says, “*Oh, me? I just roll out of bed in the morning and wear whatever I find lying about*” as he smiles a smile so practiced it could calibrate the atomic clock. Every online utterance is an angling for approval; we write in the style of speeches: exhorting an audience, haranguing enemies, lauding the choir. People “remind” no one in particular of the correct ways to think, the correct opinions to hold. When I see us speaking like op-ed columnists, I feel embarrassed: it is like watching a lunatic relative address passers-by using the “royal we,” and, I feel, it is pitifully imitative. Whom are we imitating? Those who live in public: politicians, celebrities, “personalities.”

There is no honesty without privacy, and privacy is not being forbidden so much as rendered irrelevant; privacy is an invented concept, after all, and like all inventions must contend with waves of successive technologies or be made obsolete. The basis of privacy is the idea that judgment should pertain only to public acts —acts involving other persons and society— and not the interior spaces of the self. Society has no right to judge one’s mind; society hasn’t even the right to inquire about one’s mind. The ballot is secret; one

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“It may be mere historical conditioning, but when I see a man or a woman alone, he or she looks mysterious to me, which is only to say that for a moment I see another human being clearly.”

The idea that a human seen clearly is a *mystery* is anathema to a culture of judgment —such as ours— which rests on a simple premise: humans can be understood by means of simple schema that map their beliefs or actions to moral categories. Moreover, because there are usually relatively few of these categories, and few important issues of discernment —our range of political concerns being startlingly narrow, after all— humans can be understood and judged at high speed in large, generalized groups: Democrats, Republicans, women, men, people of color, whites, Muslims, Christians, the rich, the poor, Generation X, millennials, Baby Boomers, and so on.

It should but does not go without saying that none of those terms describes anything with sufficient precision to support the kinds of observations people flatter themselves making. Generalization is rarely sound. No serious analysis, no serious effort to understand, describe, or change anything can contain much generalization, as every aggregation of persons introduces error. One can hardly describe a person in full, let alone a family, a city, a class, a state, a race. Yet we persist in doing so, myself included.

Robinson continues:

“Tightly knit communities in which members look to one another for identity, and to establish meaning and value, are disabled and

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often dangerous, however polished their veneer. The opposition frequently made between individualism on the one hand and responsibility to society on the other is a false opposition as we all know. Those who look at things from a little distance can never be valued sufficiently. But arguments from utility will never produce true individualism. The cult of the individual is properly aesthetic and religious. The significance of every human destiny is absolute and equal. The transactions of conscience, doubt, acceptance, rebellion are privileged and unknowable...

There is a kind of specious semi-rationalism involved in what she calls "utility": the rationalism that is not simply concerned with logical operations and sound evidentiary processes but also with excluding anything it does not circumscribe. That is to say: the totalizing rationalism that denies a human is anything more than her utility, be it political or economic or whatever. Such rationalism seems intellectually sound until one, say, falls in love, or first encounters something that resists knowing, or reads about the early days of the Soviet Union: when putatively "scientifically known historical laws of development" led directly to massacres we can just barely admit were a kind of error, mostly because murder seems unsavory (even if murderously hostile judgment remains as appealing to us as ever).

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"The will to a system is a lack of integrity."

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But to systematize is our first reaction to life in a society of scale, and our first experiment as literate or educated or even just "grown-up" persons with powers of apprehension, cogitation, and rhetoric. What would a person be online if he lacked a system in which phenomena could be traced to the constellation of ideas which constituted his firmament? What is life but the daily diagnosis of this or that bit of news as "yet another example of" an overarching system of *absolutely correct* beliefs? To have a system is proof of one's seriousness, it seems —our profiles so often little lists of what we "believe," or what we "are"— and we coalesce around our systems of thought just as our parents did around their political parties, though we of course consider ourselves mere rationalists following the evidence. Not surprisingly, the evidence always leads to the conclusion that *many people in the world are horrible, stupid, even evil; and we are smart, wise, and good*. It should be amusing, but it is not.

I hate this because I am doing this right now. I detest generalization because when I scan Twitter I generalize about what I see: "people today," or "our generation," I think, even though the people of today are as all people always have been, even though they are all just like me. I resent their judgments because I feel reduced by them and feel reality is reduced, so I reduce them with my own judgments: shallow thinkers who lack, I mutter, the integrity not to systematize. And I put fingers to keys to note this system of analysis, lacking all integrity, mocking my very position.

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