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I Think Therefore You Are

When one witnesses someone else acting in a way that they believe to be wrong or irrational, they often instinctually pass judgment on that person. Whether it be for who they vote for, how they raise their children, or how they present themselves (their clothes, their watch, their car), everyone thinks that they have the right formula on how to live. They see someone acting in a way that violates their morals, and think to themselves how terrible it must be to live such a life, or how bad of a person they have become. Many of these judgments stem from the values their parents gave them and the experiences they have had in their life, and ignores any possibility that people who think differently can also be good and just people. Classifying a person based on their actions or beliefs presents a great deal of ignorance, and proclaims “if anyone lives or thinks differently from me, they are wrong.” This leads to a great deal of animosity towards people, and proclaims that they possess the correct code of morals. People should avoid judging because it eliminates the possibility of understanding why people act differently, unjustly classifies people based on only a few aspects of that person, as well as distracts one from their own problems.

Take, for example, a suicide bomber. The extreme majority of Americans would view suicide bombing as a wrongful practice, and would harshly judge anyone who does so in a very negative way. Whether or not suicide bombing is a “good” or “bad” practice becomes irrelevant, and to judge all suicide bombers based on their actions creates a state of mind that views suicide bombers as inferior people. Most cultures other have agreed that murder should be punished harshly, however, Muslim extremists do not share these morals, and justify killing people in large numbers. Westerners simply cannot understand why someone would take their own life in such a manner, as well as the lives of others. By saying that suicide bombing, they disregard the notion that other people think differently then them. To the suicide bomber, their mission makes perfect sense. They know the reason for taking their own life, and what the repercussions of their actions will be. For one to say that they are wrong in their beliefs puts them on a higher moral ground; they believe they own the correct moral compass. Assuming suicide bombers do not engaging in self-deception, they act as rationally as when we put on our button-down shirts and ties to go to work.

One might ask why judgment of people thousands of miles away actually matters. What we actually think of suicide bombers obviously has not deterred them any, and no sane person will believe that coming out against suicide bombing will have any effect on the practice. However, the idea that someone can be unequivocally better then another person because of only one aspect of his or her being becomes irrational. Is a suicide bomber who loves his family and gives to charity better then a doctor who saves lives but hates everyone around him and lashes out on people? Of course, the right answer to that question does not exist, but it puts into perspective what right and wrong actually looks like. People have millions of different parts to them, and judging someone by one part of them disregards all other parts. One would probably view the doctor as a superior person then the suicide bomber, but they would not have explored the entirety of both people. No one can ever know the full extent of someone else’s being. Judgment of other people only leads to separation of people and feelings of distrust and hatred, which could be entirely avoided by accepting that people have different codes of conduct that they follow. This does not mean that we should accept suicide bombing as ok, but should be understanding of why people choose to end their lives in such a way.

Understanding why other people make the decisions they make opens up the scary possibility that we may understand why suicide bombers kill hundreds of people. Judgment quickly and easily makes sure that we never look further then exterior and easily visible traits. While one may never understand directly why someone would take their own life and the lives of others, one may empathize with trying to please their God, or making a huge sacrifice for the good of others, or any of the other reasons that may be presented. They make the decisions they believe to make the most sense, and attempt to make the world perfect in their eyes. Like previously stated, the morality of suicide bombing becomes irrelevant. Americans view suicide bombers as evil people, which, of course, has legitimate reasons. Just as suicide bombing can be just justified by saying that everyone has their own moral code, the attempt to stop suicide bombers can be justified, because as a society we have decided to stop something we believe to be detrimental. We do not try to stop people from thinking in a certain way, but instead try to stop an activity that we see as unjust. The most import distinction here becomes saying that someone appears bad according to my morals compared to saying outright that someone exists as an indisputably evil human. Realizing the dichotomy presents the difference between understanding why people do things we find repulsive and not giving people we dislike a chance to be understood just because they violate our code of ethics

Such an extreme example does not have to be explored to illustrate how judging people unjustly classifies them. Right here at home, we come across many situations in which people regard judgment as normal, when in fact avoiding that judgment could lead to a better living environment. In his 2005 speech to Kenyon College, David Foster Wallace discusses the faults with judging people. Wallace presents the example of a person stuck in traffic next to a gas-guzzling Hummer. One immediately might view the driver in the Hummer as an arrogant, self-gratifying scum. This judgment immediately dismisses this person’s entire character and defines it simply by their choice of vehicle. Perhaps the first impression of the other driver turns out to be true, but then again perhaps it does not. Either way, the way that they conduct themselves does not make them a good or bad person, as the difference between the two becomes ambiguous. Wallace explains how the person in the Hummer may have been in an accident, and that they have become scared to be in anything but a large vehicle. Even if one met the driver of the Hummer, judgment of their personality would not be accurate. Perhaps they put on a façade to try and hide their insecurity, or they wish to destroy the earth in anyway way that they can. Whatever the reason may be, assuming that the person in the Hummer genuinely believes that the best course of action is to own a Hummer, then any judgment against them classifies them as a bad person, when in reality they act in a way they see as good. Thinking of a person as inferior creates anger and spite that does not have to exist. Perhaps the man in the Hummer owns one because of a reason nobody else thought of, or maybe they need one for their family. However, one would not even imagine any reason that someone would violate their own personal moral code until they eliminated judgment and put themselves in the stranger’s shoes.

Again, the question of why this judgment matters must be answered. One will most likely never run into the driver of said Hummer again. However, this judgment creates a mindset in which people are not equal. Why would one stop at judging someone for the car they drive? Putting others down for personal gratification serves to distract one from his or her own personal problems. Perhaps the one judging the driver of the Hummer dislikes his own car, and hates how beat up and dirty it is. He has been told that people who drive Hummers are bad, so he takes this as a fact. He distracts himself from what he really feels because thinking about his own situation makes causes him anguish and anger. A content person will not worry himself with what he believes to be wrong with other people. He believes that all people must take the path of finding what they truly believe. No one has gone through life in exactly the same way, and no one will ever live the same life that someone has already lived. The content person knows that what he knows to be true may be false to somebody else. He has found his own way, and one that works perfectly for him. Although he could always learn from other people, he knows that he needs to learn for himself what he desires. Judging others for their choices takes him away from himself, and causes him to grow angry about something that he cannot change.

One of the more compelling reason to avoid judgment has become the phenomenon known as the Half Life of Knowledge, meaning the amount of time it takes for half of the facts and knowledge in a given field to be proven false or obsolete. The times for this differ greatly from field to field, but some fields have a half-life of only five years. The fact that half of everything we knew five years as a people in a certain subject has been proven wrong puts things in perspective. What we “know” today, could very easily be proven wrong tomorrow. A few thousand years ago, we knew that the earth was flat and that the sun went around the earth. One hundred and fifty years ago, we know that man would never fly. As little as sixty years ago, we knew that black men would always be separated from white men. If someone went back to those times and attempted to explain these occurrences, they would probably be locked up for insanity. Yet these so-called facts have been proven false. The times do dictate the situation, and the facts of life always change. Accepting the possibility that ones’ opinions and way of life can be obsolete and wrong brings along a certain kind of humility. If our entire way of life proves to be the butt of history’s joke book, what will we have to say for ourselves? We thin that we properly live our lives, but the possibility of error in our way of life has become too great to ignore. Leaving judgment behind embraces the possibility that the life that we know now does not directly coincide with what the future looks like.

Overall, judgment takes away from what the world could look like. This elimination of judgment does not create some sort of utopia, in which people all love and cherish each other while they live in peace and harmony. However, it does create a world where people are not angry at each other. Attempting to understand other people can lead to great realizations about what it means to be human, and how we can improve as a species. People will not always agree, but understating peoples rational or at least accepting it becomes the cornerstone for happiness among people with differing opinions This may seem like a pipe dream to have this kind of world, and of course changing the world certainty presents itself as one. However, escaping judgment creates a world where people attempt to understand each other, making for a better, tighter, and happier world.