

The IS of identity

Along time ago you undoubtedly heard that two and two IS four. When you wrote it out mathematically, you wrote

$$2 + 2 = 4.$$

You would have said 2 plus 2 equals four. Both sides of the equation equate to each other. We pretend that we can substitute 'is' for 'equals'.

If you pick up an object that we call a ball, and say, "This is a ball," we can then theoretically write it as

$$\text{Object} = \text{a ball.}$$

However, if we study the above statement, we find it absurd. The 'Object', (a real thing) cannot equal a *ball*, (a verbal label). Yet, most of us find ourselves speaking that way.

A major problem arises when we use the same construct to equate a person, place, or thing to a general category. We immediately state what might be called a lie, because it misleads us, and also misleads those who hear or read our statement.

If we say, "Margo is a Republican," or "Margo" = "a Republican," then Margo must have every trait of a Republican, and *Republican* must equal Margo. The statement cannot have any truth to it. Rather, we could say,

"Margo belongs to the Republican Party."

"Margo accepts Republican Party principals."

Margo remains Margo, and Republican remains Republican. The two cannot equate. Now you undoubtedly hear statements like "Margo is a Republican" frequently, and you think you know just what the statement means. But when someone says, "Fred is a liberal (or conservative)," especially if someone places some unflattering adjectives in front of the words *liberal* or *conservative*, do you really know much about Fred..

Worse yet, language tempts us to perform syllogisms like the following.

Terrorists are Muslims.

Abdul is a Muslim

Therefore Abdul is a Terrorist.

Suppose your friend Pete decided to embrace the Muslim faith and joined a Mosque.

Terrorists are Muslims.

Pete is a Muslim.

Would you say Pete is a terrorist? Why or why not? What does this suggest about the “is of identity” used in the statement about Muslims and Abdul? Logic based on the “is of identity” does not equate with the truth.

In all probability, your reluctance to generalize about Pete comes from knowing him as an individual. Eliminating the “is of identity” might just force us to look at people and nations in a different manner. Internationally, insisting on using this linking of individuals with classes or groups-- without allowing for the uniqueness of the individuals in the class or group-- has deadly effects:

Bosnian/Serb
Turk/Greek
Israeli/Palestinian
Etc.

We need not look to the international scene to see the effects of this deadly use of “IS”. How many fights, arguments, and general unpleasantness occur in your school over statements like, “You are a (racial or ethnic slur)?”

You can decrease the unpleasantness in the world by recognizing the truth of this exercise, and not using the “is of identity.” Further, avoid responding to others, not as well educated as you, who direct statements of this nature toward you.