Logan Jones

24 May 2024

# Label Me

Kwame Anthony Appiah's "Go Ahead Speak For Yourself" claims that identifying yourself as part of an in-group does not inherently add credibility to a statement but can rather introduce stereotyping and invite bias. With a list of accolades as exhaustive as his–philosopher at Cornell, Yale, Harvard, Princeton, and New York University just to name a few–surely, we can put some weight to his ideas, right? Maybe, but Appiah would prefer to see us approach what he and others propagate, devoid of the preconceived notions that are tied to shared identities. When Appiah queries "What does it signify when people use this now ubiquitous formula ("As a such-and-such, I …") to affix an identity to an observation?" (114). He is setting the stage for the rest of his essay. Not only to settle this question but to inform, and persuade the reader to take a more mindful approach to these self or group prescribed identities.

Appiah thinks that "Having an identity doesn't, by itself, authorize you to speak on behalf of everyone of that identity" (114). While we know that titles can add credibility and be helpful in certain instances–like for deciding who is allowed to use a scalpel in the operating theater–Appiah shows that it is too easy to fall into the trap of speaking "As a" when it does not in and of itself authenticate the message. Appiah affirms, "what matters, surely, isn't whether the person is gay but whether the policies are sensible" (115). He wants ideas to be judged worthy, of their own merit, regardless of the speaker's membership in this coterie or another.

Appiah aims to shift the focus off of categories with all their nuanced connotations and onto the specific proposal at hand. Appiah makes his case for this when he describes a gay man who is opposed to same sex marriage. He states that “your ‘as a’ doesn’t settle anything” (Appiah 116). This implies that people within a shared category can come to contradictory conclusions, resulting in multiple dissonant ideas under one overarching label. Given the demographic for readers of the New York Times, this is likely to strike an emotional chord of agreement. Choosing an example from a group identity that he himself openly subscribes to bolsters his line of reasoning. By avoiding a label external to his own identity, Appiah shrugs off a possible critique. Namely, any who would question the fairness of drawing conclusions about a group for which he is not a member.

Appiah's article was originally distributed by the New York Times. When contemplating who he wrote this article for, this is a major tell. Historically newspaper consumers in the United States tend to be well educated, wealthy, and male. The New York Times is no exception and while there are outliers, the majority of its viewers fall under what would typically be expected, with liberal leaning and white thrown into the mix. Appiah demonstrates that he knew this and tailored it to his writing when, in his opening four words he quotes Joe saying “As a white man” (114). Appiah understood that in divisive times like ours, this short phrase would draw his readership in while stimulating an emotional response. He primes the reader by inciting their unconscious bias in a way that he later reveals to the reader, “Let’s go back to Joe, with his NPR mug and his man bun. (Or are you picturing a ‘Make America Great Again’ tank top and a high-and-tight?)” (Appiah 114).

Appiah pulls from a variety of external sources ranging from other academics to the world of comedy and theater. His obvious research, deep familiarity with the subject matter, and high-level communication skills lead to a well formulated and polished article. Appiah achieved this while occasionally applying a somewhat playful or lighthearted tone, such as when he quips "gay men were *très chic*: You couldn't have a serious party without some of us scattered around like throw pillows" (115). This adds to the emotional draw of the text. In general, close proximity to the subject matter can introduce a more pessimistic, defensive or biased approach to an argument. Appiah avoided these pitfalls and remained objective as a–here we go again with the labels–openly gay, black, first-generation immigrant. The underlying logic is easy for the reader to follow and he includes smooth transitions from one point to the next.

The argument that encompasses much of Appiah's reasoning is summarized by his saying, "The speaking-as-a convention isn't going anywhere; in truth, it often serves a purpose. But here's another phrase you might try on for size: 'Speaking for myself…'" (116). Take notice that when he says to try out speaking for yourself, he is implicitly arguing that we should avoid relying on, or hiding behind these stereotypes. Appiah leaves the impression that he wants you, the discerning reader, to come away with a better understanding of how speaking as a member of a group can detract from what's really important; the ability to spot a good idea. Why should we care about good ideas? Appiah is proposing that we would all benefit from a measured analysis of what is being said, who is saying it, and who it is being said to. When we can delineate the idea itself, from the purveyors of said idea, we better position ourselves to evaluate the information, and draw accurate conclusions given what we have learned.

# Works Cited

Appiah, Kwame Anthony. "Go Ahead, Speak for Yourself." *Current Issues and Enduring Questions: A Guide to Critical Thinking and Argument, with Readings.* Bedford/St. Martins, 2020, pp. 114-116.