

THE PSYCHOLOGY OF PREJUDICE

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PREJUDICE IS a fixed unchangeable opinion which is not based on knowledge, information or experience. The prejudiced individual is generally unwilling to look at evidence which may contradict his views. For example, the colour black often has unpleasant associations for those from the Western hemisphere, associations with dirt and darkness, gloom and badness. Black people have therefore frequently been regarded as dirty and evil, especially by those who have no contact with them.

We thus attribute to a vast proportion of humankind characteristics which may exist largely in our own imaginations, and irrespective of the enormous variations between black people coming from different parts of the world.

Prejudice may be about individuals or groups which differ in some way from our own. The less knowledge we have about the other, the stranger, the more we are inclined to attribute to him evil, nasty, undesirable characteristics. This means that we can define him as an 'enemy'. An enemy can be anyone who does not share our views on religion, politics, scientific discoveries, customs, food and a whole range of other matters we feel strongly about.

There are of course, many people who feel enriched by the experience of otherness and difference, but there are many who feel almost attacked and affronted by it. We have only to remember the violence with which many of us react to any deviation from our way of carrying out religious ritual, for achieving a particular political goal or a balance between the needs of the nations and those of the individual.

Having defined the other as the outside or enemy, we do not have to treat him as a neighbour to be loved, someone like ourselves who deserves care and compassion. As the enemy who disturbs our equilibrium and is experienced as a threat, we feel entitled to scapegoat, attack or even annihilate him.

In talking of 'we' I am not trying to suggest that we all behave like this all the time. That would be stereotyping humankind.

These tendencies are nevertheless common enough to justify the generalization. I would like to give some examples to illustrate this.

Example 1: Some time ago I was writing a paper on stereotyping and prejudice. My secretary said: 'I have a good illustration of what you are describing. When I was 6 years old, staying with my grandmother, we were walking along the road, and a nice man with a clerical collar waved to me and called out "Hello". I waved back, thinking what a friendly person he was, but he was hardly out of ear-shot when my gran shouted at me: "You are never to greet or talk to this man again. Don't you know, he is a Roman?"' I did not know what a Roman was, but from my gran's behaviour I knew it must be something really bad and dangerous, the nearest thing to the Devil—because she was usually very kind. It was years before I could look at a Roman Catholic, especially a priest, without my heart missing a beat'.

This example helps us to see something about the origins of prejudice. Biassed and distorted views of other creeds and conventions are often instilled into us at an early age, at a time before we can apply logic or assess evidence. This is also one reason why the emotions which go with prejudices are so powerful.

Example 2: This example comes from a paper by Dr M. Jacobi on 'Love your Enemies', given to the British Guild of Pastoral Psychology. In it Dr Jacobi talks of an anthropologist in New Guinea. He wanted to leave one tribe and go on to another, but the people came to him and said: 'You had better not go there. The people of that tribe are dirty, stupid and evil. You cannot trust them. We do not know these people, but we have heard that they are wild and cruel.'

When the anthropologist nevertheless went to this tribe, he found them to be very hospitable; there was no sign of special cruelty or wildness, nor were they more stupid and dirty than the members of the first tribe.

Each tribe feels threatened by the other and feels a need to protect its way of life from strange influences.

Prejudice towards the outsider or the stranger

Hostility towards the stranger is not, of course, special to so-called primitive tribes in New Guinea. The exhortation in the Old Testament to treat the stranger in your midst with kindness indicates that there was a tendency to do the opposite. Most of us

will have had some experience of the treatment meted out to the new-comer in a class at school or a railway compartment. Even Church groups, religious communities and therapy groups are not exempt from this tendency. This applies especially if there is anything different about the new-comer. One of my patients recalled the agonies she suffered as a little girl coming from Canada more than forty years earlier on account of the teasing and bullying she encountered because of her accent.

The 'enemy'

It is often those who were closest to us but who have taken a different path who become the most hated 'enemies'. We regard their deviation as a betrayal, and they become endowed with devilish motives. Think of the splits in the British Labour party between the extreme Left and the rest, the Christian Church in Northern Ireland, Orthodox and Reform Judaism, different versions of Communism in Russia and China and the splits and enmities among the various schools of psychology or psychoanalysis. Think of individuals such as Freud and Jung who started off with boundless admiration and affection for each other which turned into bitter animosity when their ideas began to diverge from each other.

The rage evoked by differences in perception or viewpoint cannot be explained solely by wounded pride, since the friend turned foe becomes endowed with all the worst characteristics imaginable. He is not simply an adversary or someone we can still respect even though he does not totally agree with us, but he has turned into the personification of evil.

Prejudice against different beliefs

Prejudice is not restricted to people or groups, creeds or political views. Scientists are just as prone to it as the rest of us. Some of the greatest discoverers were met with derision and even execution because their discoveries threatened the world-view held by the majority at the time. Think of Galileo and Kepler, and of Darwin who was told by his fellow scientists that *his* grandfather may very well have been an ape, but he should not dare to cast aspersions on *their* ancestry. Sigmund Freud did not fare much better when he discovered infantile sexuality. It was quite bad enough to attribute sexual feelings to women but to innocent children—that was unforgivable.

Even today there are serious conflicts between those who believe that the Book of Genesis is a literal account of the creation of the world and those who see it as allegorical.

Reasons for prejudice

Many people feel that a difference of view or a criticism is an attack on their self-worth as individuals or on the group they belong to, and they therefore react with intense anger or rage and thoughts of vengeance. This reaction in a milder form is no doubt familiar to most of us, but it is generally more extreme in those who have little satisfaction in their lives, who feel inferior and humiliated and have few other reasons to feel proud or worthwhile. Erich Fromm in his book on human aggression says:

As a member of a particular group, Church, club or party such a person can tell himself 'I am part of this most wonderful group in the world. I who am in reality nothing but a worm become giant through belonging to this group'.

Fromm is here talking specifically about the narcissistic person, that is someone for whom nothing has any real significance which does not pertain to himself. This kind of person is likely to have seriously impaired judgement and to lack the capacity for objectivity. He achieves a sense of security through a conviction of his extraordinary qualities of perfection, and anything which challenges this view of himself is experienced as a body-blow. It is therefore reacted to violently and furiously. But whereas as an individual he may still have occasional doubts about his perfection, as a member of a group he has none, since his image is shared by all the rest. A challenge by any other group arouses intense hostility. The image of one's own group is raised to the highest. It is endowed with all the most cherished qualities such as courage, strength and complete possession of the *truth*, while the opposing group is devalued, hated and despised as devilish, treacherous and inhuman.

We have daily examples of these tendencies whenever we listen to the radio or open a newspaper. Depending on what paper you read the same group will be hailed as heroic guerrilla fighters or as murderous assassins and terrorists, and not infrequently yesterday's heroes become tomorrow's terrorists, and vice versa.

Polarizing

This way of splitting the world into good and evil, black and white with everything good on our side, including God, and everything bad on the other is a very primitive and destructive strategy for dealing with things which threaten our sense of security or disturb us in some way.

*Mechanisms which keep prejudice in being**A. Projection*

This is the process whereby we blame others for faults we do not wish to accept in ourselves. Thus they become someone else's fault. Simone Weil writes:

The ugliness or evil within us fills us with horror. We want to be rid of it and therefore pass it on to the people and things which surround us. The things thus become blemished and ugly in our eyes and send us back the evil we have put into them, having added to it. Thus the evil increases.

I witnessed an example of this when I saw three year old Wendy chasing the cat and knocking against a chair. She hurt herself and hitting the chair shouted at it angrily: 'Naughty chair. You hurt Wendy.'

There are many things within ourselves which we cannot accept, and we therefore do our utmost to put them onto someone else. It is frequently the person who has to fight the impulse to steal or be violent who shouts most loudly for the return of the birch or hanging, and those who cannot acknowledge homosexual tendencies in themselves are generally the most vituperative in their abhorrence of gays.

As mentioned earlier, Carl Gustav Jung called these unrecognized and unacceptable aspects of our personality the 'shadow'. This is experienced as the 'other' who, in his strangeness, is always suspect. There is an Eastern proverb of long ago which reflects the same idea. 'When you see someone you admire—imitate. When you see someone you dislike—look within'.

Many of us try to keep our prejudices intact, for if we do not, we have to see ourselves as we really are with our dark, primitive side as well as our virtues.

B. Polarizing and splitting

I mentioned earlier how we tend to split things, people, nations and human characteristics into good and evil. There will be those

among you who believe in a personal devil or the personification of evil. Satanism, possession and exorcism have been much in the news in recent months.

Those who have acted as advisers in exorcism to bishops in the Church of England have found that the vast majority of the people who thought of themselves as possessed by evil spirits were emotionally disturbed or mentally ill.

I too have seen a number of people who thought they were possessed. One young woman in particular stands out in my mind. Aliza had in fact seen an exorcist, but although she had felt better for a short while after that, especially when he laid hands on her, the symptoms of fear and rage returned not long after and she was desperate. It soon became clear during our talks that she had a vast store of bottled-up, deeply-buried rage inside her which, as the good Christian she thought to herself to be, was an abomination to her. She experienced it as something totally alien which was coming from outside and it felt like demons. She began to identify and acknowledge some of the early primitive rage which related to her conviction that, as a small child, she was never heard, noticed or understood, and if she dared to protest there were very unpleasant consequences such as being locked into her room or even a wardrobe. She learned painfully that it did not pay to express her misery and hurt, but it was still there, threatening to burst forth at the most inopportune times, such as during a Church service or when receiving the sacraments. As she began to understand the source of her fury and to see also that mother was not as unloving as she had thought nor father as perfect, she lost the sense of being possessed. Instead she became able to use the energy which had gone into keeping the demons at bay for more constructive purposes.

C. Scapegoating

Anthony Storr in his book *Human aggression* writes:

It seems necessary for most cultures to maintain certain sub-groups who become the recipients of projections and who are treated with hostility and contempt. The untouchables of India and the outcasts of Japan are examples of groups considered polluted and contaminating, and because of the fear of pollution they are scapegoated. Scapegoated minorities who are in reality weak and vulnerable are often depicted as potentially very powerful. Jews in Nazi Germany were regarded as despicable outcasts.

The media constantly showed them in association with vermin, thus creating revulsion and fear in the population. They were deprived of all means of existence but nevertheless also accused of being rich and powerful and part of a world-conspiracy, plotting to achieve supremacy. Child murder, financial rapacity, ugliness, poisoning and dilution of the purity of the Aryan race were a few of the accusations levelled against them. The absurdity of these accusations was only matched by the equally absurd idealisation of the so-called Aryan race. It was an extreme example of man's tendency to split human beings into totally good and totally bad.

It is not, of course, necessary to go back in history to find examples of scapegoating. Each one of us will have experienced it at some time in our lives whether as victim or aggressor. The tendency to be suspicious of anyone who differs in some way from the 'norm' is almost universal. The child with a Welsh, Scottish or Yorkshire accent in an English school, the dark-skinned among light coloured ones, the fat child or the one with a physical handicap is likely to be bullied, mocked and even attacked when there is no one around to stop it.

I have seen a number of people whose school-days were a terrifying ordeal, because of accent, dress, religion, social class, hair colour or size. It is very comforting to the members of any group to find an 'outsider'. This helps the members of the group to shelve the conflicts among themselves, and direct them onto this outsider. Hippies seem to be the most recent threat.

D. Labelling and stereotyping

Labelling is like giving a dog a bad name. When we attach a label to a person or group, there is generally a derogatory connotation. During World War II coloured people were generally described as 'wogs', which meant that they were in a category below whites. It made no difference whether the 'wog' was head of state, a doctor or a pilot and the white person was a private soldier.

The American Forces in Vietnam were given instruction not to talk of the native population as Vietnamese, but only as 'gooks', 'dinks', 'slopes' or 'slants'. These terms were designed to express contempt. It made the Vietnamese people into a lesser breed, something not quite part of the human race. Through depriving them of individuality and status as human beings it became possible to kill them off by their thousands—men, women and children.

There are innumerable examples of this kind of labelling, which puts people into categories and stereotypes them. We have stereotypes of national, religious, political and professional groups. Scotsmen are regarded as tight-fisted, French people as over-concerned about food and sex and English people as more sentimental about their animals than their children. The Irish are seen as drunks and the Australians as always ready for a fight.

Labels can also reflect changes in attitude. Homosexuals who not so long ago were queens and queers have become gays. Now that ecumenism has become more acceptable in many circles, the term Papist is rarely heard outside Northern Ireland. Mentally-ill people are less often described as nutters, perhaps because there is more information about such conditions and therefore less fear and hostility. Those dealing with the mentally disturbed, on the other hand, still do evoke a good deal of hostility and suspicion and remain head-shrinkers or trick-cyclists.

Origins of prejudice

I would like to look at some of the sources of these biased judgements and attitudes. Every family has its own conventions, ideas about rearing children and its own myths. Some of our most enduring attitudes are acquired during infancy and childhood—in fact almost from the moment of birth. Something gets communicated between mother and baby right from the start, something about bodily contact, feeding, satisfactions and frustrations. When the infant takes its first feed it receives a message that this is a good and satisfying experience for both or that the encounter evokes tension and fear. The infant who had the good experience will develop positive feelings about everything relating to feeding and taking things in generally, including knowledge as well as relating to others. It does not, of course, all depend on a few isolated experiences, but on the degree to which these are reinforced or changed by the subsequent relationship with mother. This relationship will colour the infant's way of reacting to new experiences generally and teach him certain strategies to help him cope with anxiety, frustration and fear.

The mother who did not enjoy the earliest encounters with her baby often finds it difficult at subsequent stages of its development also, so that attitudes to cleanliness, to experimentation and exploration, taking risks, overcoming obstacles, to authority and self-assertion are largely formed in the nursery. Because we have not

yet developed critical faculties and are totally dependent on parental approval and good-will, we absorb the parents' attitudes and either identify with them or rebel against them. The attitudes we acquire in this way have very powerful emotional connotations, and it can take years or a whole lifetime to question or discard them. Thus they often get passed on from generation to generation without any re-evaluation.

Children in Northern Ireland expressed enormous astonishment when Catholics and Protestants were brought together in one of the few schemes which have tried to promote understanding. One child exclaimed: 'But, you are just like us. No horns, no tails. I imagined you would not even be like human beings.'

Another example of prejudice passed on in this way is from the book *In the land of Israel* by Amos Oz. He writes about Abu Haled, an Arab author of many books. He began writing in his native city of Nablus, which was occupied by Israeli forces in 1967. He told Amos Oz:

Until then I had never set eyes on a Jew. We had been accustomed to thinking of the Zionist as a combination of a predatory animal, a disease-carrying maggot, a sort of monster or beast. After the occupation there was a lot of hatred towards the whole world: the Americans who sold us out, the English, the Russians and the French, all of whom had clearly been twisted round Zionism's little finger.

And then something happened. One day my mother asked me to take her to see some relatives in Acre. It was my first trip to Israel. I looked around Natanya, where the cab driver stopped for a while for some business of his own, and I saw old people sitting on park benches in the sun, leaning on their canes, talking, just like old people in Nablus. It was strange. It annoyed me. The Zionists should be soldiers. They should be the brutal enemy. They are not supposed to look like the old people in Nablus.

Then I saw an elderly Jewish labourer drag an ice box and load it onto a cart, drawn by a donkey. All of a sudden, it became difficult to hate these people. They looked too much like human beings. We wandered around a bit more, and suddenly my mother needed a toilet. I realised, I would have to go up to a Jew and ask the way, but I just could not do it. I was totally incapable, as though under a spell. Meanwhile my mother was suffering. Finally she went up to a young Jewish woman herself and explained the problem without words. I watched how the girl took my mother by the arm, as if she were hugging her and led her to the toilets

at the edge of the park. Do you know what I did? I began to cry like a child. I could not stop.

What to do about prejudice

We saw in the examples of the Irish children and the Arab writer how prejudice can be overcome when we meet the stereotyped other—the adversary—face to face. The cry: ‘But you are just like us’ is perhaps the beginning of change. Such confrontations can have a powerful and lasting impact, but generally the testing out of our perceptions against external reality has to be an ongoing process. Friends, Church and media are likely to undo the recognition that the enemy is not so different from us.

It is also important to foster the realization that our childhood tendency to split the world into black and white, good and bad, saintly and satanic remains a dangerous proclivity of our adult selves. We may disapprove of such simplistic world-views, but who among us can truly say that there is no group of people—religious, political, social or professional—that we have never regarded with contempt, dislike, fear or revulsion?

It is necessary for every one of us to look deep into our own hearts to discover our own prejudices and stereotypes. Listening to Ronald Reagan’s description of the ‘Russian menace’ or to Gorbachov’s ideas about American aggression is very frightening, because they so clearly demonstrate this primitive mechanism of dividing the world into all that is ours as good, moral and fine, whereas everything about the other as bad, immoral and unacceptable. Perhaps, only humour can begin to make a dent in this dangerous process which shows no sign of change. We badly need our comedians such as Alf Garnett, Alfie Bass, Mike Yarwood. They perform a similar function to that of the court jester of old. He alone could speak the dangerous truth with impunity.

The fanatics in any group take themselves very seriously. Indeed, jokes, take-offs and humour generally, especially about any shortcomings of their own, seem taboo. Yet the ability to laugh at our own weaknesses and to see the mote in our own eye can help us not to see the weakness and the mote in the eye only of the other.

NOTES

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