

Prejudice – can we live without it?

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I will start with a well-known Zen story:

The Zen master Hakuin was praised by his neighbours as living a pure life.

A beautiful Japanese girl, whose parents owned a food store, lived nearby. Suddenly, without any warning, her parents discovered she was with child. She would not confess who the man was, but after much harassment at last named Hakuin.

In great anger the parents went to the master. 'Is that so?' was all he would say.

After the child was born it was brought to Hakuin. By this time he had lost his reputation, which did not trouble him, but he took very good care of the child. He obtained milk from his neighbours and everything else he needed.

A year later the girl-mother could stand it no longer and she told her parents the truth that the real father of the child was a young man who worked in the fish market. The mother and father of the girl at once went to Hakuin to ask forgiveness, to apologize at length, and to get the child back.

Hakuin was willing. In yielding the child, all he said was: 'Is that so?'

How many of us could lose our reputation and good name and retain complete equanimity in the face of such undeserved prejudice?

Now for a story of my own:

One hot summer day in 1981, rioting broke out in the predominantly black neighbourhood of Brixton, London. My home was close by and from the garden I could see billowing smoke and flames. The air reverberated with the noise of breaking glass, screams and police sirens. On the radio, I heard that rioters were on the march and would be coming past my house. Immediately I rushed about looking for a weapon to defend my home and young family. I found an axe and waited inside the front door, prepared for the worst. As it happened, the rioters took a different route but this was a great lesson to me. I had seen myself as a tolerant, liberal-minded psychiatrist and within a few minutes, I had become capable of extreme violence.

It could be argued that defending one's family is a natural instinct. Yet there was something else that I was forced to admit – the world had suddenly become a place of 'us' and 'them', us being the peaceable white home-owning professional class and them being the angry and dispossessed black community living a stone's throw away. Far from retaining equanimity, my prejudice had run wild.

As widely used, prejudice means a preconceived opinion that is not based either on reason or actual experience - a negative prejudgment about a group or its members.¹ It is more than just a statement of opinion or belief, for it is imbued with feelings such as contempt or even loathing. In its extreme form, it can result in sheer indifference to the fate of one's fellow human being, for instance, as shown by the treatment of the Jews and others in Hitler's death camps. Indifference is possible when a person is no longer seen as a fellow human being. Such dehumanisation is evident today in what is known as 'the war against terror', in which neither side views the other as human and remotely deserving of compassion.

In trying to account for prejudice, social scientists have looked at how we make judgments. Gordon Allport pointed out that 'the human mind must think with the aid of categories...Once formed, categories are the basis for normal prejudgment. We cannot possibly avoid this process. Orderly living depends upon it'.²

While categories are seeming clear cut, they are in fact only approximations.³ There is a continuum between good and evil, summer and winter flow one into the other and the male and female genders too, are blurred these days. Categories may help us read the map but the territory is another matter.

In the case of prejudice, categorising turns into categorical thinking that distorts perception. Differences between the in-group and out-group are exaggerated while intra-group heterogeneity is glossed over. This leads to stereotyping. Children as young as 2½ years of age will stereotype, as shown by one study of anti-Arab prejudice in Israeli infants.⁴ Unfortunately, such stereotypes are self-perpetuating unless vigorously countered.

Here is a short list of the devastating effects of prejudice: racism including white supremacism and slavery, anti-Semitism and Islamophobia, religious war, genocide and so-called 'ethnic cleansing', stereotyping and stigmatization, sexism and gender oppression, and ageism.⁵

I now want to turn to early human history in suggesting that prejudice has been around a very long time.

The first advanced hominid was Homo neanderthalensis, a skilled tool maker who provided care and shelter for his family group. Neanderthals lived a nomadic life, with ample territory for hunting across Europe and Russia and it is thought internecine feuding was rare – the only

¹ The word prejudice first appears in the English language in the 14th Century CE. Its etymology is from the Latin *prae* meaning 'in advance', and *judicium* meaning 'judgment'. There is an assumption also of unfairness, the Latin *praejudicium* meaning 'injustice'.

² Allport, G. W. (1954:20). *The Nature of Prejudice*. Basic Books; Unabridged edition (1979).

³ See Plous, S. (2003) The psychology of prejudice, stereotyping, and discrimination: An overview. In *Understanding Prejudice and Discrimination*. New York: McGraw-Hill.

⁴ Bar-Tal, D. (1996). Development of social categories and stereotypes in early childhood: The case of 'the Arab' concept formation, stereotype and attitudes by Jewish children in Israel. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, 20, 341-370.

⁵ Scientism asserts that only the material world is 'real' and atheism similarly denies any super-ordinate reality. Both presume to hold a superior claim on the truth, while failing to recognise that their fundamental status is that of belief systems. The Spirituality and Psychiatry Special Interest Group, while valuing science, rejects scientism. Similarly, the group is concerned to explore the meaning and purpose of existence from both secular and spiritual perspectives (see www.rcpsych.ac.uk/spirit).

enemy was the cold climate. Then Homo sapiens came out of Africa around 195,000 years ago. Migrating across Asia and Europe, Homo sapiens overlapped with the Neanderthals and we know some interbreeding took place.⁶ However, about 40,000 years ago, Neanderthals became extinct. Why this happened remains something of a mystery but at the very least, Homo sapiens had the advantage of a larynx better suited to the development of speech and seems to have outstripped the Neanderthal in cultural complexity and the capacity for symbolisation.⁷

The Neolithic age, around 12,000 year ago, marked the world-wide migration of Homo sapiens. Human society now took a giant step forwards with the development of agriculture, husbandry, property, advanced tool making and a progressively structured, hierarchical social order. It is very likely that this also marks the era when endemic conflict among humans first arose, since when it has never stopped.

The advancing complexity of human society and the civilization that it conferred is testimony to the accomplishments of the human ego in driving forward the human species' mastery over the animal kingdom and the natural world.⁸ However, all has not gone well subsequently with the balance of Nature.

In the Neolithic era, Homo sapiens numbered around one million. 200 years ago the world population had increased to one billion. By 1960 there were three billion and we now number 7.5 billion. Countless animal species have been eliminated⁹ and we also ferociously attack our own kind.^{10,11} At the same time, the destruction inflicted on the planet – on its atmosphere, hydrosphere, cryosphere, geosphere and biosphere – looks set to result in a global catastrophe in our children's lifetime if not our own.¹²

⁶ 1-4% of Neanderthal genomic material is present in non-African people today.

⁷ There may also have been genetic differences of temperament comparable to the two species of great apes living today, chimpanzees and bonobos. In contrast to the chimpanzee, the bonobo is exceptionally peace loving and as a result bonobos have become an endangered species.

⁸ In the story of Creation, God blesses humankind with these words: 'Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky and over every living creature that moves on the ground' (Genesis 1:28, The Holy Bible. NIV.) Whether or not we take the story of creation literally, this was an extraordinarily prescient depiction of what later was to come but not, unfortunately, in the benign form of stewardship intended. Human beings have instead appropriated the earth for their own purposes, showing none of the forethought and humility that would have been needed to ensure that the species remained in balance and harmony with the abundance of Creation.

⁹ Since 1900, the animal kingdom has suffered around 1000 times the natural background extinction rate, and is known as the sixth mass extinction in Earth's history.

¹⁰ See Calhoun, J. B. (1962) Population Density and Social Pathology. *Scientific American* 206:139-148, for a summary of Calhoun's research with rats, showing how overcrowding causes uncontrollable aggression that can result in decimation of the animal population.

¹¹ Estimates put death from violence, oppression and war in the 20th century at between 150 - 200 million - more than in the entire history of the planet to date.

¹² See Emmott, S (2013) *10 Billion*. Penguin, for a powerful critique of humankind's impact on Nature.

Surely evolution would not lead us down a blind alley? Even the 'selfish gene' would not embrace its own demise. Is there anything psychiatry might have to say about the apparently suicidal behaviour of our species?

There is a simple medical analogy - that of autoimmune disease. We depend for our survival on antibodies that develop in response to an otherwise lethal array of antigens, viral, bacterial and chemical. But when the immune system goes into overdrive and attacks the self, the consequences can be dire.

So it is with the mechanisms of defence that determine how we respond psychologically to threat. In earlier human civilisation, they ensured group survival, yet today they threaten us with destruction. We can understand this better by taking a look at the propensities of the human ego.

The ego is an indispensable function of the psyche. It is the means by which a child becomes conscious of its identity – indeed, that it exists as a 'self'. For this to happen, the ego first enables the child to learn the difference between 'me' and 'not me'. The distinction between awareness of self and other gives each of us a mind of our own, a unique blend of thoughts and feelings, with a personal narrative that weaves us into a timeline of past, present and future.

The ego drives the child to explore the world with curiosity and a sense of adventure. As socializing grows, there is the discovery of group kinship and the cultural richness of all that follows. However, what I want to highlight here is that self-awareness greatly complicates what it means to be a social animal. I will illustrate briefly with reference to the model of the 'triune brain', put forward by Paul MacLean over 50 years ago.¹³

The so-called 'reptilian' brain includes the basal ganglia and structures derived from the floor of the forebrain. Maclean argued that it is responsible for behaviours involved in aggression, dominance and territoriality.¹⁴ The 'paleomammalian' brain comprises the nuclei of the limbic system, which Maclean saw as governing motivation and emotion involved in feeding, reproductive and parental behaviour. Last but not least comes the 'neomammalian' brain or cerebral neocortex, the most recent stage in evolution, conferring the ability for language, symbolisation, abstraction, planning, perception and, crucially, empathy.

When we humans feel safe from threat and are sustained by loving relationships, there is harmonious integration of these levels of function, resulting in adaptive and mature human behaviour. Nevertheless, this is a fragile balance and stress unmask more primitive behaviour.

¹³ Many neuroscientists today regard the model as simplistic (see, for instance, LeDoux, J. (2012) *Evolution of Human Emotion: A View through Fear*. *Prog. Brain. Res.* 195: 431-442). Nevertheless, it provides a useful schema of our evolutionary heritage.

¹⁴ For a detailed study, see Naumann, R. (2015) *The reptilian brain*. *Current Biology*, 25(8): 317–321.

Let me come back to my story of the Brixton riots. As my anxiety level rocketed, my limbic brain went into overdrive, emotion flooded my rational self and the fight/flight mode kicked in - at its most extreme, either to kill or be killed.¹⁵

When I had calmed down, however, my neocortex asserted itself and the values inculcated during my upbringing came to the rescue; the wave of my prejudice subsided as quickly as it had arisen. At the same time, I could see that a different personal history may have left me with my prejudice powerfully reinforced; the point being that past experiences shape our response to threats whether real or imagined, and it is belief, not fact, that wins the day. It has been said that if you give a person a gun, that person may kill dozens, but if you give a person an ideology, that person may kill countless thousands.

Psychoanalysis has had something very useful to say about ego defences. Children who live in fear of abandonment cannot risk getting angry with their parents or caregivers. Anger is associated with vulnerability and so must be got rid of. If this can be achieved, then the threat is gone both outwardly (the needed caregiver will not retaliate) and inwardly (the ego is now free from contamination with anger, and so can hope to be lovable). However, the split-off anger needs to go somewhere, hence it gets projected into a suitably vulnerable 'other' where it can be treated with contempt, attacked and (in accordance with magical thinking) destroyed.¹⁶ This dynamic of splitting and projection characterises scapegoating and abusive relationships in particular, but also applies to human society more widely, as I shall be describing.

Carl Jung, who was well aware of the destructive side of human nature, made a deep study of the archetypes, of the persona that we show to the world and the shadow that when made conscious, compels us to recognise our imperfection and fallibility.¹⁷ Jung's concern was to make the shadow conscious, not only to confront the ego with its conceit but also to disarm the shadow of its destructive power by containing it and valuing it as part of the self. The aim of individuation, according to Jung, is to become whole, for only with wholeness can there truly be healing.¹⁸

Both psychoanalysis and Jungian psychology envisage health as freedom from distortion of reality due to unconscious projections. For Jung, however, this is a matter for the soul, as clearly revealed posthumously in his Red Book.¹⁹

I earlier drew attention to the emerging social complexity that defined the onset of the Neolithic era, which brings me to the part played by defence mechanisms in the social group. In common with much of the animal kingdom, human survival has depended on developing a group culture that allows for differentiation of labour, better provision for care of the young,

¹⁵ In warfare, this mode of function is sanctioned and medals are awarded, although more usually we are conditioned to resist such impulses.

¹⁶ See Klein, M. (1957) *Contributions to Psycho-analysis*. Hogarth Press.

¹⁷ See Jung, C.G. (1954) Archetypes of the collective unconscious. Reprinted [1959] in *C.G. Jung: The Collected Works*, vol. 9, part 1: The Archetypes and The Collective Unconscious (eds H. Read, M. Fordham & G. Adler). Routledge and Kegan Paul.

¹⁸ The words wholeness and healing share the same linguistic root.

¹⁹ Jung's private reflections, written between 1915 – 1930 in the *Red Book (or Liber Novus)* were finally made public in 2009 and were published in 2012 by W. W. Norton and Co.

a milieu in which bonding of kith and kin can be established and more effective protection of the species when under threat. As agrarian communities enlarged, this meant that control moved from the family to centres of influence and power. Politics was born in the form of fiefdoms, nepotism and, of course, taxes.

Sigmund Freud has described how the group leader carries the ego-ideal for the group²⁰. At best this is a force for good but at worst, it renders the group susceptible to manipulation²¹ - as we see in the politics of extreme nationalism, and also religious proselytism. Such movements are generally accompanied by suppression of individual freedoms in favour of a rigid and unquestioned group norm²².

Throughout history, the state, the military,²³ and religion, have shaped the culture of the developed world. When there has been serious ideological conflict, their effectiveness as institutions of governance is collectively strengthened by splitting and projection - it is well known that a nation is never more united than when at war. All war, whether political, territorial, ethnic or religious, is centred on an ego-ideal that justifies the need to fight, either to proselytise (the truth must be imposed if resisted), to defend against incursion (the right of sovereignty), to regain what was once taken (there is a historical wrong to be righted), to claim territory (for assets that 'justly' can be appropriated), or to unify the group (when in danger of fragmenting). This last manoeuvre is a device by means of which a leadership in danger of being overthrown will create an enemy and thereby preserve its power.²⁴

I have alluded to the broad sweep of nation states but like a fractal that repeats over and over, we find the same mechanisms at work in sectarian disputes, local communities where there is ethnic and cultural division and in troubled families,²⁵ for war is, more than anything, a state of mind.

I am now ready to opine on the nature of prejudice. Prejudice is a persistent derogatory attitude based on a separative ego-mentality that dissociates self from other; it is rooted in

²⁰ See Freud, S. (1921) Group psychology and the analysis of the ego. Reprinted [1955] in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. 18 (trans. & ed. J. Strachey), Hogarth Press.

²¹ As described in Aldous Huxley's 1932 novel *Brave New World* (Vintage Classics, 2007), which portrayed a benign but soulless tyranny.

²² 'Conspiracy theory' is based on the supposition that while freedom of expression is permitted so that people can feel they have a voice, the real power-broking continues hidden from democratic scrutiny.

²³ Weapons manufacturing is now in excess of 400 billion US dollars annually. See SIPRI Yearbook 2016. OUP, in conjunction with Stockholm International Peace Research Institute.

²⁴ For a powerful portrayal of such a dystopia, see Orwell, G. (1949) *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. Penguin Classics.

²⁵ Individual patients may come with a psychiatric label because they are unwittingly carrying the split-off projections of their partner or family, in which case attempting to treat the patient in isolation only serves to reinforce pre-existing dynamics.

fear although often masked by compensatory grandiosity and it seeks to find fault with the alien 'other'²⁶ rather than engage in honest self-examination.²⁷

When a group holds a prejudice, cohesion is strengthened but at the cost of its humanity. Splitting and projection blunt the capacity of the psyche to see the whole picture. Instead, self-esteem is pathologically reinforced by arrogance and intolerance of difference. The ego would rather that we all sang from the same hymn sheet; to be more exact, 'my' hymn sheet – for the words 'me' and 'mine' are the most important words in its vocabulary.

Because of the ego's intolerance of 'otherness', we are attracted to similarities of educational attainment, political affiliation, religious beliefs, social habits, sexual orientation and much more besides. Yet what we find in today's multicultural world is a bewildering array of differences – of skin colour, dress, language, religion and social attitudes. The ego, insecure and on the defensive, is quick to offend and equally quick to take offence, in consequence spending a good deal of its time on the brink of outrage.

What is to be done? Rather than get caught up in the ego's perturbations, we can remind ourselves of the indivisible source from which both self and other, subject and object, originate. This fundamental unity of being is woven into all of life, not least ourselves. Nevertheless, since its manifestation is spiritual, to find it we have to look with other eyes²⁸. On the mundane level, personal differences will always be visible since we are uniquely made. Yet when we go beyond the appearance of things, we discover the unbroken wholeness from which all life arises.^{29,30} It follows that self and other are as inseparable as two sides of one coin. This is how the soul sees it. Undeterred by the prejudices of the ego, the soul knows better and persists in loving indiscriminately and unconditionally. Where fear is divisive, love is unitive; where fear is separation, love is connection; where fear is constraint, love is freedom; where fear says 'mine', love says 'ours'.

Allport, in the language of the social sciences, advocates the following approach to prejudice:

'Prejudice...may be reduced by equal status contact between majority and minority groups in the pursuit of common goals. The effect is greatly enhanced if this contact is sanctioned by institutional supports...and provided it is of a sort that leads to the

²⁶ Hence the saying of Jesus in defence of the woman accused of adultery: 'Let any one of you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone'. John 8:7. The Holy Bible, NIV.

²⁷ In otherwise decent people, prejudice is revealed by the absence of empathy when ordinarily it might have been expected.

²⁸ In the words of the novelist Marcel Proust, *'The only true voyage ... would be not to visit strange lands but to possess other eyes'*. In Remembrance of Things Past. Vol. 2: Cities of the Plain, The Captive, The Sweet Cheat Gone, Time Regained, p.657 (transl. C. K. Scott Moncrieff and Stephen Hudson, 1927). Wordsworth Edition, 2006.

²⁹ In this regard, the so-called 'developed world' could learn much from the spirituality of indigenous cultures that have always held sacred the unity of all life.

³⁰ The physicist David Bohm stated: 'Ultimately, the entire universe (with all its particles, including those constituting human beings, their laboratories, observing instruments, etc.) has to be understood as a single undivided whole...' In Bohm, D. (1980) *Wholeness and the Implicate Order*, p.174. Routledge.

perception of common interests and common humanity between members of the two groups'³¹.

This all makes good sense, yet it does not move the heart. Instead, I will end with a story told by the Aikido master Terry Dobson. If you already know it, I hope you will agree that like all good parables, it is worth hearing a second time.³²

'A turning point came in my life one day on a train in the suburbs of Tokyo. It was comparatively empty—a few housewives with their kids in tow, some old folks out shopping. At one station the doors opened and a man bellowing at the top of his lungs shattered the quiet afternoon, yelling violent, obscene curses, staggered into our carriage. He was big, drunk and dirty. His hair was crusted with filth. Screaming, he swung at the first person he saw, a woman holding a baby. The blow glanced off her shoulder, sending her spinning into the laps of an elderly couple. It was a miracle that the baby was unharmed.

The passengers were frozen with fear. I stood up. I was young and I'd been putting in a solid eight hours of Aikido training every day for the past three years. My teacher, the founder of Aikido, always taught us that the art was devoted to peace. In my heart of hearts, however, I was dying to be a hero. 'This is it!' I said to myself as I got to my feet. This animal is drunk and mean and violent. People are in danger. If I don't do something fast, somebody will probably get hurt.'

Seeing me stand up, the drunk saw a chance to focus his rage. I wanted him mad because the madder he got, the more certain my victory. I blew him a sneering, insolent kiss. It hit him like a slap in the face. He gathered himself for a rush at me.

A split-second before he moved, someone shouted 'Hey!' It was ear splitting. I remember being hit by the strangely joyous, lilting quality of it. 'Hey!' We both stared down at a little old Japanese man. He must have been well into his seventies, sitting there immaculate in his kimono and hakama. He took no notice of me, but beamed delightedly at the drunk, as though he had a most important, most welcome secret to share. 'Come here,' the old man said, 'Come here and talk with me.' He waved his hand lightly. 'Talk to you,' the drunk roared, 'Why the hell should I talk to you? The old man continued to beam at him without a trace of fear or resentment. 'What'ya been drinking?' he asked lightly, his eyes sparkling with interest. 'I been drinking sake and it's none of your goddam business'. 'Oh, that's wonderful,' the old man said with delight, I love sake too. Every night, me and my wife (she's 76, you know), we warm up a little bottle of sake and take it out into the garden, and we sit on the old wooden bench and watch the sun go down, and we look to see how our persimmon tree is doing. My grandfather planted that tree, you know, and we worry about whether it will recover from those ice-storms we had last winter. Persimmons do not do well after

³¹ Allport, G. W. (1954:281) *The Nature of Prejudice* Basic Books; unabridged edition (1979)

³² An abridged excerpt from 'A Kind Word Turneth away Wrath' by the late Aikido master Terry Dobson in the 'The Awakened Warrior,' an anthology edited by Rick Fields (Tarcher/Putnam, 1995, pp.153-156).

ice-storms, although I must say that ours has done rather better than I expected, especially when you consider the poor quality of the soil. Still, it most gratifying to watch when we take our sake and go out to enjoy the evening—even when it rains!’ He looked up at the drunk, eyes twinkling, happy to share his delightful information.

As he struggled to follow the old man’s conversation, the drunk’s face began to soften. His fists slowly unclenched. ‘Yeah,’ he said slowly, ‘I love persimmons, too... His voice trailed off. ‘Yes’, said the old man, smiling, ‘and I’m sure you have a wonderful wife.’

‘No,’ replied the drunk, ‘my wife died.’ He hung his head. Very gently, swaying with the motion of the train, the big man began to sob. ‘I don’t got no wife, I don’t got no home, I don’t got no job, I don’t got no money, I don’t got nowhere to go. I’m so ashamed of myself.’ Tears rolled down his cheeks and a spasm of pure despair rippled through his body. Just then, the train arrived at my stop. As the doors opened I heard the old man cluck sympathetically. ‘My, My,’ he said, ‘that is a very difficult predicament, indeed. Sit down here and tell me about it.’

I turned my head for one last look. The drunk was sprawled on the seat, his head in the old man’s lap. The old man was softly stroking the filthy, matted head.

As the train pulled away, I sat down on a bench. What I had wanted to do with muscle and meanness had been accomplished with a few kind words. I had just seen Aikido tried in combat, and the essence of it was love’.

Returning to the title of this paper ‘Prejudice – can we live without it?’ my answer is ‘Yes, we must, if there is to be a future for humanity’.