PREJUDICE OR REASON

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My title sets prejudice against reason. It might seem that there could be no contest. Reason should win every time. That would, after all, be the only reasonable outcome. While I generally endorse that view, I will argue that our need to understand the world makes the reality less straightforward. We have to perform a delicate balancing act between prejudice and reason.

First, prejudice needs to be defined. We can recognize many examples easily enough. Most conspicuously, some people are prejudiced against other people on grounds of race, sex or creed. But I want to cover a wider field than these obvious examples, while still including them.

In the literal sense, a prejudice is a belief that is arrived at without considering the evidence for and against it: the person with the belief has prejudged the issue. That is the core of my definition, but I will enlarge it by including a belief where the person has considered the evidence, and has retained the belief even though there is no better evidence for it than for the alternatives. In the worst cases, they may retain the belief even though they are aware of strong evidence against it.

Arguments Against Predjudice: Moral And Prudential

Prejudices are generally recognized to be bad. There are two arguments against prejudices, the moral argument and the prudential argument.

The moral argument comes to the fore when the objects of prejudice are other human beings. Prejudice against a person, or against a group to which that person belongs (for example an ethnic group), shows a lack of respect for that person. It can easily be very hurtful to that person. It can seriously harm that person's prospects in life. Most moralities likely to command widespread acceptance today would say that we simply should not prejudge humans in this way.

The prudential argument against prejudice is that we get on best if we understand the world correctly. That requires paying attention to the evidence, and prejudice can easily make us overlook some important evidence. In particular, it can make us miss out on some of the best opportunities. For example, an employer who is prejudiced against a particular ethnic group may fail to hire some very talented employees. But the prudential argument can also apply when the objects of prejudice are not human beings at all. For example, someone might be prejudiced against South American wines, and might therefore miss out on some exquisite tastes.

If we accept these arguments against prejudice, we have good reason to discard each prejudice as and when we identify it. However, this can be difficult. The brain is not like a computer's hard disk, where files can be precisely and decisively amended or deleted at the touch of a button. The brain is a sticky mush, and getting a belief out of it can be like trying to get a clump of breadcrumbs out of a pot of honey using a knife.

Two Deep Prejudices

It is especially hard to rid ourselves of deep prejudices, and I will turn to these now. Deep prejudices are those that are central to our thinking, and that we could not discard without making major changes to our thoughts about many other things, or changes to our whole way of thinking. A prejudice against South American wines is not like that. It is an isolated prejudice, and we could change it without making many changes to our beliefs about other things. On the other hand, a prejudice such as the belief that only science provides reliable knowledge is likely to be a deep prejudice.

Of course someone could have a well-founded belief that only science provides reliable knowledge, having studied the evidence and considered the arguments thoroughly, but then it would not be a prejudice at all. I am only concerned with the belief when it is held without careful examination. Then it would be a deep prejudice, because if someone did stop believing that only science provided reliable knowledge, it would change many things. It would change the way in which he appraised the evidence for and against other beliefs: he would no longer only consider the sort of quantitative evidence that scientists seek. It might also open his eyes to the ways in which literature, and indeed all the arts, can teach us things about humanity. And so on.

Another example of a deep prejudice is the prejudice that British history should be read as embodying a politically progressive tendency, moving towards a liberal democracy under a constitutional monarch. This was the view attacked by Herbert Butterfield in 1931, when he called it the Whig interpretation of history. Someone who thinks like that, or who has comparable beliefs about the history of any other country, is at risk of misinterpreting quite a lot of the country's history. History is too messy, and has too many twists and turns, to be fitted into such a neat framework.

Correspondingly, someone who recognizes that she holds such a prejudice about the history of a country, and who manages to discard that prejudice, will start to think about the history of the country in a different way. Many of her beliefs about the value of current political institutions could also change. Someone who comes to realize that current institutions are not the result of an inevitable march of progress may very easily start to wonder whether they are the best possible institutions. It will then be natural to think about changing the current institutions in some way, or even replacing them.

Deep Prejudices Are Essential

These far-reaching effects of discarding deep prejudices makes it very tempting not to discard them. However, there is more to our retention of deep prejudices than a lazy desire to avoid the effort of re-drawing our whole mental map of the world. Deep prejudices are essential to life. Basic, unchallenged ways of thinking help us to make sense of the world.

For example, we need to know where we should go for knowledge. The foregoing example of a prejudice in favour of science gives us one answer to that question. An opposing prejudice, that a study of literature is the best way to understand humanity, if not the cosmos, gives us a different answer. But we need

some answer to be going along with, otherwise we will not know where to start our search for knowledge.

The example of a prejudiced view of history illustrates the same point. History is meaningless and incomprehensible if it is just a catalogue of facts. We need some guiding principle that we can use to organize the facts into a coherent story. That might be a belief that the history of a country embodies a tendency to political progress, or a belief that everything should be seen in terms of class war driven by economic realities, or some other belief. Any historian will start with some general approach, rather than just thrashing about at random in a heap of facts. Of course a good historian will review her chosen approach occasionally, to see whether it is fruitful and not a source of error.

A basic belief may even be most effective as a deep prejudice. We cannot rely on a basic belief to help us to make sense of the world if we are continually worrying about its correctness. So at the risk of falling into error, we may allow ourselves to adopt deep prejudices as the most effective method of making sense of the world.

Quine's 'Continuous Fabric' Of Beliefs

We can go further in mapping out the role of basic principles in our thinking. The philosopher W V O Quine, in a 1951 essay called *Two Dogmas of Empiricism,* gave us a fertile image of our beliefs as a continuous fabric. All our beliefs are interconnected, either directly or indirectly. When we realize that our beliefs are not quite right, we have a choice about which beliefs to revise in order to alleviate the tension in the fabric of beliefs. Any belief is theoretically capable of revision.

At the edge of the fabric lie beliefs that are pretty directly connected with individual experiences, such as the belief that there is a tree ten metres in front of me. I check that belief by walking over to the tree. If I push it and find that it falls over because it is only a paper model of a tree, I simply change my belief that there was a tree there. It would be silly to look for any other belief to change, even though I could concoct some story that I had hallucinated the fall of the tree, so as to preserve my original belief that there was a tree.

Further away from the edge lie beliefs such as the belief that paper objects tend to be lighter than they look. We would need quite a lot of convincing that this was not so, especially because it is connected with a lot of other beliefs, for example the belief that a person can easily lift 500 sheets of paper and put them into a computer's printer. If we were presented with lots of heavy paper objects, there would be a tension in our fabric of beliefs. Obviously something would be wrong. But this time we would have a real choice about what to do in order to alleviate the tension. We could discard our belief that paper objects tend to be lighter than they look. But we could also discard the belief that the objects presented to us were really made of paper. They might, for example, have been made of metal disguised as paper. Then we could retain our original belief that paper objects tend to be lighter than they look.

At the very centre of our fabric of beliefs are basic logical beliefs, such as the belief that if a statement is true, it is not false as well. It would be incredibly

difficult to dislodge a belief like that. But it would not, in Quine's view, be absolutely unthinkable. Perhaps there is some deep problem with our concept of truth, a problem that might only be exposed by a very difficult task such as interpreting quantum mechanics. In that case, even basic beliefs about the relationship between truth and falsity could be at risk.

This image of our fabric of beliefs can give us a new understanding of our deep prejudices. We can see them as beliefs that are fairly central in our fabric of beliefs, not easily dislodged by isolated bits of evidence. They can be dislodged if there is enough evidence, so that discarding some central beliefs is the only sensible way to remove the tension caused by the conflict between the evidence and the more central beliefs. It would be fairly respectable to hold a deep prejudice that was held because it was needed to make sense of the world, and because there was no particular evidence against it. But it really would be contrary to reason to retain a deep prejudice when overwhelming evidence had built up against it.

The deep prejudices that I have discussed may seem to be a far cry from the shallow prejudices against groups of people, or against some wines, discussed at the start of this talk. But once they are identified as prejudices, they can be confronted by the same moral and prudential arguments. If, for example, a deep prejudice about how to construe a country's history leads some people to attack or denigrate other people, there is surely a moral argument against the prejudice. And a deep prejudice about how to understand the world may lead to serious mistakes. That would allow a strong prudential argument against the prejudice. The dilemma is that it is also prudent to make progress in understanding the world, and that requires us to take a chance on some deep prejudices. ❑

DAN CHATTERTON, ATHEISTIC, COMMUNISTIC, SCORCHER 1820-1895

Terry Liddle

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In his history of British Anarchism, *The Slow Burning Fuse* (Paladin, London, 1978) John Quail wrote of Dan Chatterton that he deserves to be rescued from oblivion. In a period, the late 19th century, when remarkable people were common among both secularists and socialists, Chatterton was one of the most remarkable of all, a one man revolution against church and state.

Chatterton was born in August 1820 into an artisan family of fairly comfortable means in Clerkenwell in London. His mother was a Christian but Chatterton was early influenced by his father who worked as a furniture laquerer and who took the young lad to radical and freethought meetings at Richard Carlile's Rotunda in Blackfriars Road.

From an early age Chatterton suffered ill health and was sent away to be educated in Aylesbury and later Barnet. His father suffered an accident and changed his work from japaning to selling coal. Chatterton was apprenticed to a shoemaker in whose workshop he had his political education. Shoemakers were