

PREJUDICE: reason and non-reason

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Is it possible to live without prejudice? How should this concept be understood? How can psychoanalysis contribute to this discussion, which is now known to be multidisciplinary? Today, prejudice is considered a multiple and complex phenomenon that, in order to be understood, requires data from various fields of knowledge, including psychoanalysis. Therefore, it is indispensable that psychoanalysis – as any other science – does not search for ‘the’ explanation, but rather consider the share of the phenomenon that its tools are able to observe and comprehend – i.e., its psychodynamic aspects, with their conscious and unconscious registers.

The word ‘prejudice’ derives from the Latin *praejudicium*, which refers to a judgement made before any experience. It is something like the Kantian concept of *a priori*, and it is connected to the inherited values that organize the categories necessary for the constitution of relationships. It characterizes a first way of organizing experiences by separating and discriminating, by defining categories. It is what we observe in children: all that is classified as ‘non-mother’ is completely different, and the child starts by organizing their experiences in the broad, opposing categories good/bad, known/unknown, safe/dangerous. Everything in the first column (good, known, safe) is merged together, with a similar merging happening between everything in the second column (bad, unknown, dangerous). A child’s anxiety when meeting a stranger offers a model of primary prejudiced manifestations, clarifying one of the functions of prejudice in a person’s life: self-preservation, safety, and protection against threats.

This is envisaged through the search for the known and the avoidance of the different. Living with differences and diversities is a lesson that needs to be continually revised.

Therefore, what needs to be emphasized is that it is not possible to conceive the mind’s functioning without pre-judgments, since they reflect a psychic process that classifies stimuli, registers similarities and differences and is, thus, essential for logical thinking. In this sense, Akhtar (2007) highlights the risk of classifying individuals as prejudiced or non-prejudiced. He proposes that each individual’s personality has a prejudiced share and a non-prejudiced share. The former is characterized by omnipotence, arrogance, aversion to knowledge, and intolerance to differences. The latter shows flexibility, humility, and curiosity about *the other*. The proportion of each share in a person’s psychic dynamic – and its evocation by social triggers – is what determines the form of prejudice. Benign prejudice is the feeling of belonging and safety among equals; malignant prejudice implies the condemnation of and revulsion to the other – including acting on it via dehumanizing extremes.

The factors that lead to malignization continue to be a challenge, since they imply a complex network of intrapsychic, intersubjective, and sociocultural variables. Psychoanalysis has contributed to this discussion since Freud’s fundamental notions on the unconscious psychic mechanisms and his works on this theme (*Group Psychology and Analysis of the Ego, Civilization and its Discontents*). In these texts, Freud focused on the close relation between individual and group mechanisms – which, however, cannot be assumed as a simple transposition from individual to group. The growing research on primitive mechanisms of psychic functioning and on the importance of the initial object relations brings some further elements for the understanding of the obstacles that can appear in the passage from one structuring process to another. The impossibility to recognize and accept the different without transforming it into a threatening enemy becomes patent.

It also becomes patent that the prejudice puts us face to face with the issues of transgenerational transmission and the weight of what is inherited, both in terms of family and culture (in which the family is immersed). Prejudices reveal the network of meanings and interpretations in place when an individual is born; a network already containing an organization, a tradition, and a culture in which the person will be immersed and which will consciously and unconsciously influence them, hindering their critical thinking. It is much harder to revise that which is unconsciously acquired and which allows the individual to belong to a group. Therefore, any discussion about prejudices requires us to keep in mind the socio-cultural background. In this sense, it is valid to question the current increase in prejudiced manifestations. Atlan (1994), a researcher on complexity, states that the Enlightenment's ideal of replacing the religious paradigm for reason has failed because it has been used as a form of omnipotent control over nature and people. Following this line of thought, the author differentiates anti-reason and absence of reason: the former contains a logic different from the rational one (such as in aesthetic experiences), while the latter holds an attack against logic – a brutalizing countersense. Atlan also highlights that which we, psychoanalysts, know very clearly: the psychic functioning in its two registers (primary and secondary processes), their indissociable relation, and the obstacles in the construction of a system of non-rationalized, reflexive logical thinking. These processes are always threatened by the human need to find definitive explanations and certainties that can give us the illusion of safety. Recognizing the differences without feeling threatened by the other/different is always a challenge. In terms of prejudices: instead of stressing 'we are all equal,' we should emphasize our differences and their importance.

What about us, psychoanalysts? We are not mere observers of the world around us – we are subject to the same influences of the transsubjective, cultural, and family spaces. We can sometimes recognize this shared context, but we cannot have awareness of how it affects us beyond the conscious mind. Therefore, both in our work with patients and in the contact with colleagues within institutions, we are constantly biased by our prejudices. The need for belonging and safety leads us to divide into Lacanian, Kleinian, etc.; the fear of the new can make us attached to known concepts, avoiding with a certain despise that which we do not master.

Our institutions are equally affected. We need them so that we can, once again, belong to a group of equals; and, in this sense, we exaggerate the similarities between members. Inside the institutions, the same process is repeated: sub-groups that look with prejudice to other sub-groups, groups that feel discriminated, etc. If we go ahead with the line of thought that we have followed so far – which sheds a light on the omnipresence of prejudices – we will see the negative effect of ossified structures that are scientifically stagnant and closed off to debates. Moreover, we cannot forget that our institutions are also affected by extra-institutional factors (such as socio-economic tensions) that contribute to the weakening of the group structure and make it more inclined to host prejudices with malignant characteristics.

Some final considerations

The repetition, for each new person born, of the same trajectory of absolute dependence, of necessity to feel safe through the definition of differences between known and unknown, and of processes of identification with the caregivers' conscious and unconscious aspects makes prejudices inevitable and necessary. Among other functions, they also participate in the formation of the feeling of 'belonging'.

The search for understanding the processes of malignization of prejudice has been the emphasis of contemporary studies involving many scientific areas. Psychoanalysis, in its turn, has focused on the study of the primitive processes that involve the formation of the thinking functions and that have the

early emotional experiences as a determinant. The intersection with social triggers is, among other elements, in the human fragility in the face of situations of (individual or social) helplessness, which reinforce the search for omnipotent illusions of safety.

Freud's initial optimistic view of the civilization as progressing throughout time could not be sustained in his later texts (Freud, 1940). However, if we do not want to fall onto the most absolute pessimist about the human nature, there seems to be no alternative but to invest in reason.

Of course, we refer, here, to a particular reason – not rationalizations, not a reason that believes itself powerful and omnipotent. Rather, we envisage a reason that is constructed from a matrix of emotion and that continuously feeds off the contact with symmetric processes. Green (2001 [1972]) proposes the idea of a tertiary process, defined as the possibility to establish associations between the primary and the secondary processes. It is to the result of such an operation, to the reason that emerges from this relation, that we refer in this text.

Psychoanalysis continues to have the role of assisting in the comprehension of the different logics that determine our psychism. The logic that reigns over the primary process needs to be repeatedly revisited and explained to avoid the vision that psychism corresponds to the human nature's incontrollable and disorganized forces. It is also necessary to clarify the notion that the process of civilization is reset with every new baby and that, just like education intends to 'civilize' the little savage, laws have the role of 'civilizing' social groups. Firm and sensible laws, not simply punitive ones; as firm and sensible as must be the limits established and followed by parents. A new reason, less idealized, must be found. In his book *The Age of Rights*, philosopher and jurist Bobbio (1992) discusses the permanent search for forms of guaranteeing, protecting, and enforcing human rights – which, being part of a historical process, will never be static. He highlights the importance of studying the concept of 'tolerance' by affirming: 'tolerance must be extended to all, except those who deny the principle of tolerance or... all must be tolerated, except the intolerant' (p. 213).

We are likely speaking about utopias here. The word 'utopia' has its origin in the Greek *ou-topos* (non-place) and tends to be used to emphasize, under a sad tone, that which cannot be reached. Rather, in More's *Utopia* (1972 [1516]), the non-place is presented as a limit to tend toward (in the mathematical sense). It is not an unreachable object, but rather a goal to which we must get as close as possible.

Therefore, in this paper, we deal with utopias. Without them – without believing in possibilities that we ultimately know to be impossible – how can we be psychoanalysts?

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