

## Reorganizing Our Prejudices

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IN MUCH of the present-day writing and discussion, especially that concerned with interracial and intercultural relations, prejudice is blamed for the antagonisms and persecutions so often exhibited toward minorities or foreign-born groups. It is customary in these discussions to denounce prejudices and to plead for a wholly objective, detached, and unbiased attitude.

It is scarcely necessary to say that the unfair discriminations, the cruel and unnecessary humiliations, the many forms of injustices and exploitation visited upon those of a different race, color, or religion are deplorable and should be vigorously characterized as destructive and wholly opposed to our democratic aspirations. But to go on to say that we must abolish all prejudice and strive for an Olympian detachment and objectivity in human relations and

social intercourse calls for some further thought.

### *Culture Grows From Prejudice*

If we will pause a bit to reflect, we will recall that, while man—the mammalian organism—exists in the geographical world of nature, nowhere do we find man living as a child of nature or as a naive organism, existing on the level of physiological functions and organic impulse. Everywhere man lives in a cultural world which he has created by imposing upon nature and upon himself the basic beliefs, assumptions, and patterns of conduct of his cultural traditions. Every group of men, all over the world, has its preferred design for living, pursues the goals or values and aspires to the patterns of conduct it cherishes as at least desirable, if not absolute. Each group has selected what in nature it will pay attention to, cultivate, and utilize and what it will reject and ignore. Each group has selected some of the functional capacities and potentialities of man to be developed and cherished while forbidding or repressing or neglecting other capacities and potentialities.

Thus each group, in accordance with these historically developed beliefs and patterns and aspirations, has developed a social order which it maintains by its acceptance and approval of these traditions and its use of the formalized, symbolic (and nonobjective) practices

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*So much of what we are is based on prejudice—some of it wise, some foolish. In our frenzied enthusiasm for a belief or a cause, we are likely to forget the rather trite admonition that one man's conviction is another man's prejudice. But if we are intellectually honest, we will see that a sharp line cannot be drawn between prejudice on the one hand and conviction on the other because we do not know them apart. In this article, Lawrence K. Frank of New York City suggests that, as teachers of youth and as persons, we should understand that the urgent need in our thinking today is for a reorganization of our prejudices rather than for a witch-hunt to sever prejudice from conviction.*

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of group life—e.g. contract, barter, sale, courtship, marriage, litigation, voting, etc.

What should be realized is that culture, a summation of these historically developed ideas and patterns of conduct and of functioning, is a way of life which is built upon discriminations and—if you please—prejudices or strongly held convictions for and against various aspects of nature and of man and his sundry functions and behaviors.

It is sufficient to recall how each cultural group has patterned organic hunger into appetite for certain preferred food, eaten at the intervals it has set for eating; how each culture has utilized sex functions in different ways, some minimizing and some maximizing the role of sex; how each culture has cultivated certain patterns of emotional expression or repression, all built upon the same basic organic functions and capacities of the human species. Moreover this preferred way of life and the social order each group maintains are to be recognized as aspirations, goals that are sought, values that are cherished. Often these preferred beliefs and practices have little or no justification except their origin in remote historical times, as we see in our own culture which has been cumulatively changing over the centuries under the influence of critical thinking and of new sensibilities, that is, feelings of concern for persons formerly exploited or neglected.

It would appear, therefore, that the very basis of culture is a discriminating, patterned awareness, conduct, and feeling toward nature and other people and toward our individual, personal selves. The very existence of what we call values rests upon a prejudiced attitude

or viewpoint and feelings of greater desirability and worth. To be wholly objective would involve abolishing our values and living on the basis of organic impulse and functions, naively reacting to nature in the way of wild animals in their native habitats. Moreover, if we had no cultural traditions to give living more meaning and tension and fulfillment than just eating, sleeping, procreating, and fighting, we would soon be very bored.

### *Prejudices Are Essential to Orderly Living*

It may be suggested, therefore, that instead of preaching objectivity and denouncing prejudice, we might more wisely recognize that nonobjectivity—prejudice for and against—is apparently essential to orderly, meaningful living. Indeed we don't need to be told this because we all rely so much upon the love and affection and understanding attitude of those near and dear to us. If everyone were to become objective in his or her human relationships, to act impartially and no longer with insight, sympathy, and compassion, what kind of marriage, family life, and friendship would survive?

Instead of abolishing prejudices, we might try to reorganize and redirect them so that they are in accord with our basic human values and our persistent aspirations toward an orderly, humanly fulfilling way of life.

Look at what now happens. Some of us discriminate against others, mistreat, humiliate, and exploit them or otherwise aggressively react toward them on the basis of their color or race or membership in a religious group. The individuals so ill-treated may be

law abiding, orderly, cooperative, friendly persons who give no provocation or exhibit no conduct we can criticize; yet we react against them as undesirable. At the same time we tolerate and even approve to the extent of giving recognition, social prestige, and friendship to, individuals who belong to our color or race or religious group but who openly violate the canons of decent human relations and cynically flout our values.

### *An Influence for Social Order*

If we would develop strong prejudices against all those who violate our ethical and moral canons and who exploit, humiliate, and harm others, even when they are of our color, race or religion, we could make of prejudice a major influence for social order and the conservation of the human values we cherish. But this is exactly what is most difficult because all through our history we have been largely governed by what was and is basically irrelevant in people:

*It was not what people did to others and to themselves that was important but rather their color or race or the particular verbal formulations they invoked as explanations or sanctions for what they did.*

Much of the religious persecution and destruction of groups was seemingly aroused by what people gave as reasons for their conduct, not by their actual conduct. Apparently those who were persecuted or massacred were just as orderly, sincere, and well conducted as their persecutors who, however, objected to the words or creeds they professed. This is the same kind of discrimination which leads to persecu-

tion of a person or group because of color or race, regardless of the conduct exhibited.

As we look back, it's no wonder prejudice has become almost synonymous with unfairness, and lack of justification because so much of the prejudiced actions we have noted were anti-social and humanly destructive. But, as our literature shows, prejudice can also mean discrimination for and approval of a person or an action. When people show favorable attitudes and actions such as courtesy and generosity and loyalty we are apt to forget that they are prejudices too. A cynically minded observer might say that we label any discrimination we don't approve of a prejudice, and only those discriminations we favor and like are given an honorific name. Yet the same underlying process of feeling and discriminatory action is involved in both. The really important question is what basis or criterion guides our feelings and action.

### *Criteria for Discrimination*

As we learn to discriminate on the basis of criteria which are relevant and overt, we can reorganize our prejudices and focus our dislikes and antagonisms on those persons whose conduct is anti-social and opposed to recognized human values. Then we can begin to live and work with all those of good will who are striving for a decent way of life, regardless of color, race, religion, accent, or any of the other wholly irrelevant criteria we now employ.

As the writer has said elsewhere,<sup>1</sup> if we genuinely wish for world order, we

<sup>1</sup> Frank, Lawrence K.: "World Order and Cultural Diversity," *Free World*, III, No. 1, June, 1942.

must recognize and accept the other cultures all over the world and learn to work with people who have developed historically different designs for living. So long as any group will accept the major human values, the dignity and worth of man and woman, we can collaborate in establishing a world order in which there will be large differences of color, race and religion, and patterns of living. But those differences are unimportant in the establishment of a world order and the achievement of the human conservation to which we aspire.

As D. H. Lawrence, the novelist, pointed out: "It's the way our sympathies flow and recoil that really determines our lives."

#### *Let Us Not Educate Away All Sensibilities*

In the endeavor to intellectualize our lives and make ourselves wholly rational, even trying to make the arts rational, we are forgetting that feelings are basic and that an educational program directed to the development of youth must provide the experiences that will cultivate the feelings and the sensibilities needed for a democratic social order. This means giving students esthetic experiences, through novels, plays, poetry, moving pictures, the graphic and plastic arts, not as subjects for critical scholarship, but as esthetic experience so they can feel what the artist is trying to communicate to them.

It cannot too often be said that the democratic aspiration means more than voting, more than representative government and participation in decisions, important as these are; more than freedom of action, speech, and belief; the

democratic aspiration is expressed in the conviction that the conservation and development of the individual human personality is our major goal and purpose.

We cannot, therefore, allow anyone to be unnecessarily deprived, frustrated, neglected, injured, or humiliated because those so mistreated are thereby rendered incapable of maintaining social order, of bearing the burdens of freedom, of respecting other personalities, because they cannot respect themselves. So many of those who try to hurt others have themselves been badly hurt and warped and distorted in their feelings.<sup>2</sup>

If we genuinely believe in the democratic aspiration we will try to focus our thinking and our feeling on those democratic ends, deliberately utilizing prejudices for and against, to advance the human values which we cherish because we believe in them and feel them.

<sup>2</sup> See *Human Conservation: The Story of Our Wasted Resources*, National Resources Planning Board, March 1943.

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