

In Defense of Rational Prejudice



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Many a modern popular commentator and political pundit rail against prejudice. They say that that we shouldn't judge others on the basis of gender, race, sexual orientation, religion, or other such characteristics. They claim that all prejudice is evil. But is it?

Prejudice Defined

Since it's often so very helpful, we shall break down the term etymologically. Prejudice comes all the way from the Latin *praeiudicium*, meaning "prior judgment". Fast forward to 14th century English, and it means "preconceived opinion" as a legal term in describing an unfair assessment by a judge in a court case. When we examine its colloquial meaning, we have "preconceived opinion that is not based on reason or actual experience."

Prejudice Defended

That qualifier in the colloquial definition is troubling. What should we call a preconceived opinion that *is* based on reason or actual experience? That, too, falls under the etymological definition of prejudice. It may not be *en vogue* to use prejudice in a rational sense, but since I must in order to defend it, I will qualify my use by saying that there is such a thing as "rational prejudice". Indeed, if a prejudice is not based on reason or experience, then it is irrational. Moving along.

Prejudice Applied

How many of us have actually experienced a wild tiger? Certainly not I, but if I entered a room and there sat in the middle, unchained, a tiger, I would quickly "pre-judge" him – before getting to know him – as dangerous to my health and leave the room. That's rational prejudice. Likewise, if every news story coming out of a certain racially- or economically-segregated neighborhood is about its crime, and I happen to find myself walking through that neighborhood, and a member of that group, let's say black or "white trash", started walking toward me, I'd probably cross the street or otherwise avoid a

confrontation. Again, that's rational prejudice.

It's not racism or specie-ism to have a negative, rational prejudice toward who is likely, on statistical grounds, to be dangerous toward you. It seems quite natural, actually. As hunter-gatherers, group solidarity meant survival, and holding a prejudice against strangers or strange animals secured group solidarity. That's not to say that we shouldn't reevaluate our prejudice from time to time. I think that if we want to live the Golden Rule, then we must continually examine our own prejudices and reset them where reason and experience provide us with new information by which to do so. That, too, is rational.

Final Thoughts

Who is to blame for negative prejudice toward certain groups in society? It would seem to me that those certain members that have helped to create a negative perception of their group would hold a share of it. But also, those outside the group who hold and promote an irrational prejudice, a prejudice not based on reasons or experience, hold a share of the blame. I hope that I'm never in either camp, but nobody's perfect.

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