

The term « prejudice » has two meanings in English: 1) a bias (a partiality) in the judgement, a prejudgement, 2) the harm that someone can do to someone else. One can, perhaps, feel that somewhere and somehow the two meanings are connected. When, to take only one example, Yanko Tsvetkov proposes an Atlas of Prejudice, a book in which he presents an analysis of what people in Europe generally think about other people living in other places of Europe — aka stereotypes —, he uses the term « prejudices » in both senses: i. e. the harm that people do to other people by the bias of some of their judgements [12]. However, the connection remains obscure and while it could be suspected to be only located in the structure of language, it could also have its roots in the experience itself. Where and how are these senses connected? Is it a purely grammatical connection? Or is this connection more profound located in the core of lived experience itself? These are the questions I would like to address in this paper by looking at the work of Marcel Proust in search of some interesting insight that would be dispersed here.

My approach will follow a three-step process. I will begin with 1) some preliminary considerations that will show the importance of looking at « inner speech » to understand prejudice. From there on, 2) I will look at what phenomenologists have said about inner speech. And from there, 3) I will turn to some pieces of literature, namely to the work of Marcel Proust, to explore the concrete meaning of what phenomenologists have shown and I myself will show the relevance of such a turn for the understanding of prejudice in its double aspect (bias and harm).

Inner speech and prejudice

What is « inner speech »? Broadly defined, inner speech covers all the things people say to themselves, the flow of their thought, as long as these thoughts are verbalised (expressed in some way) but not loudly pronounced (and thus inaudible). « Stream of consciousness » is an alternative term that is often used to describe that phenomenon, even though this term is generally connected to a sequence of authors in the history of literature who took interest precisely in that phenomenon (the term has been initially employed by William James in his *Principles of Psychology*, published in 1890,[6] but it characterizes a literary movement that, according to the novelist May Sinclair, appears with Proust: « Richardson comments that “Proust, James Joyce, Virginia Woolf... were all using ‘the new method’, though very differently, simultaneously » [10]. Another term, also frequently used to designate inner speech, is « inner monologue » (it is the term used by Edouard Dujardin, for instance, when

he tries to characterise the art of James Joyce, the narrative technique of which is inspired by his own *Les lauriers sont coupés*, initially published in 1876 [3]). All these denominations are pointing to roughly the same phenomenon, although they each have a particular accentuation. Inner speech can even possibly include forms of inner conversation (one can think here, for instance, at Dostoyevsky's characters, speaking to themselves in a kind of fight against a part of themselves [2]).

Recently, this « theme » of inner speech (if one can speak about a « theme » assuming that it encompasses a very large part of all human activity) seems to have regained an intense interest in the philosophical and psychological community. Indeed, in the year 2016 only, two books dealing with inner speech have been published. One is called *The Voices Within: The history and science of how we talk to ourselves*, by Charles Fernyough [4]. The book proposes a scientific and psychological approach. It is a broad review of works that have been published on the topic of inner speech. A second book, *The Inner Speech and The Dialogical Self*, published by Norbert Wiley, also in 2016, proposes a phenomenological approach to the phenomenon. Wiley has developed an investigation tool that allows him to access to some original data about inner speech [13].

I will follow this second kind of approach, i.e. a phenomenological approach, to first address the following question: Why is it important to look at inner speech to investigate prejudice? The answer is that comparing what people say overtly to what they say to themselves is like comparing leaves falling from a tree to the roots of the tree: for a single leaf falling (let say, a single prejudice, or stereotyped thought actually expressed), one might have many a root embedded in the soil by which the prejudice has been nourished and reinforced. In other words, the prejudice takes its roots in inner speech. Inner speech is its first medium of expression, well before it goes out in overt expressions. A discrete bunch of sentences that might appear fortuitously in public speech could correspond to an abundant and robust formation in inner speech.

According to the definition we just gave, it is clear that people are experiencing inner speech almost all the time — in other terms, it is a very common experience. Noam Chomsky considered that the largest part of what we say — by far — is said to our self: « Now let us take language. What is its characteristic use? Well, probably 99.9 percent of its use is internal to the mind » [1]. If such an estimate is correct, a large part of the being-with-one-another (the occurrence that generally provoke speech acts) is going on through « inner » speech (being with one another is not restricted to the time we spend with the others in question, it extends to the time one speaks to them in inner speech; to say nothing about simple feelings). And this is where inner speech meets rhetoric.

Inner speech in the phenomenological tradition

When I talk to myself, I am — among other things — imagining the presence of others and thus imagining, for instance, what I would say or what I should have said or what I could say to some others. This is why it is not so simple to distinguish between speaking to oneself and speaking to others. Indeed, the others are constantly present in us, even though they are not physically with us.

There are two immediate and important consequences of these remarks. The first one is that, in one sense we are always speaking to others, even when we are speaking to ourselves. And the second one is that, in an other sense too, we are always speaking to ourselves, even when we are speaking to others (we are continuing a dialogue with ourselves).

This characteristic has been recognised since a long time in the phenomenological tradition. For instance, Heidegger writes in *Being and Time*, §29: « Rhetoric must be understood as an hermeneutic of being-with-others ». And he would add: « It is not a matter of chance that the first traditional and systematically developed interpretation of the affects is not treated in the scope of « psychology ». Aristotle investigated the « pathé » in the second book of his Rhetoric. Contrary to the traditional orientation of the concept of rhetoric according to which it is some kind of “discipline”, Aristotle's Rhetoric must be understood as the first systematic hermeneutic of the everydayness of being-with-one-another » (En. tr. by Joan Stambaugh [5]).

Thus: when we speak — to oneself or to others, inwardly or outwardly — we are rhetorically convincing ourselves or others regarding the matter of the appropriate way to take things, to understand them, to interpret what happens. In that sense, inner speech constitutes a material that is as valuable as public speech to study the mechanic of prejudice. And it is perhaps even more valuable, since it is, so to say, the birthplace of prejudice.

The phenomenon is particularly intriguing and interesting since it is located at the very birth of each of our thoughts. And this particularity of inner speech has been recognised by Husserl, the master of Heidegger, very early. In his book *Logische Untersuchungen* (logical investigations), published in 1900, he would write: « one of course speaks, in a certain sense, even in soliloquy, and it is certainly possible to think of oneself as speaking, and even as speaking to oneself, as, e.g., when someone says to himself: ‘You have gone wrong, you can't go on like that’ » (En. tr. by John N. Findlay: *Logical Investigations*, Investigation 1, Expression and meaning, Chapter 1, Essential distinctions, §8 Expressions in solitary life).

The piece of inner speech that is proposed by Husserl ('You have gone wrong, you can't go on like that.') is quite limited for an analysis. Indeed, we have only a few words that are given as an example of what people are possibly saying to themselves and of the way they are doing it. As Husserl generally does, he is very short on the empirical examples he is giving.

The examples of inner speech that are given by Husserl are too minuscule to give rise to an analysis of its content. It is only pointing to the phenomenon but not entering into the detailed description of it. If we want to turn to a more general presentation of what is at stake in inner speech, we have to find an other way to enter into the phenomenon itself. Where could we find larger examples that could become the basis for a more thorough analysis? In other terms: the analysis we have presented gives us the methodological basis to address the question I was mentioning in the introduction (where and how the prejudice as bias becomes prejudice as harm). But we need more matter to enter into the question. Where shall we find this matter?

Proust and inner speech

I propose to enter into the problem of examples of inner speech through the work of a writer, Marcel Proust, 1871-1922. Not only because his book, *A la recherche du temps perdu* can be seen as a long inner speech, but also because it contains many insightful remarks about the way people are talking to themselves. There are two English translations of Marcel Proust's novel: *Remembrance of Things Past* and *In Search of Lost Time*; the first one, by C. K. Scott Moncrieff later revised by T. Kilmartin has been initially published in 1922-1930; the second one has been published in 1992, translated by D. J. Enright. I will use the second translation [9].

The book deals, according to the author himself (as far as one considers, at least, that the narrator is not completely a stranger to the author; for a thorough distinction between the author and the narrator of *In Search of Lost Time*: [8]), with the general laws of human nature. In *Time Regained*, the last volume of the novel, Proust would write: « I was soon able to show an outline of my project. No one understood it. Even those who sympathised with my perception of the truth [...] congratulated me on having discovered it with a microscope when, to the contrary, I had used a telescope to perceive things which were indeed very small because they were far away but every one of them a world. Where I was looking for universal laws I was accused of burrowing into the "infinitely insignificant". »

Whether these sentences are those of Proust himself or of the character of the narrator, they indicate a kind of project in which the mechanism of the way a prejudice is built and maintained might receive some light. Moreover, Proust would publish the first volume of his novel before the first world war and will finish after the war. As a consequence, the book contains abundant remarks about the reasons that made the war happen. These reasons are to be found, as one will see, in prejudice itself (in the sense of partial bias) and they produce, of course, abundant prejudices (in the sense of harm).

This war, the first world war, and the one that will follow, constitute the main reason for the construction of « Europa » as a political project. Proust would not give any historical argument. What does interest him are what could be called the « phenomenological argument » about the roots of war which, according to him, are located in the prejudice that is at work.

From small facts to universal law

Proust would thus describe very subtle situations. But the goal, for him, is never to stay at the level of the quiet limited descriptions he first would give. It is always to formulate the general, and even the universal law that is revealed by subtle situations. And there, he would frequently meet the phenomenologists.

The analyses he would provide go, in one sense, further than those of phenomenologists when it turns to prejudice. The passage that I would like to comment to show this is located in *The Fugitive*. It consists in a long meditation on the suffering experienced by the narrator (and hero of the novel) intertwined with a meditation on art and politics.

The Fugitive is the second-from-last volume of *In Search of Lost Time*. It comes after the volume *The Captive* and before the volume *Time Regained*. *The Captive* and *The Fugitive* both deal with the character of Albertine, with whom the narrator is in love, which gives rise, as one can easily imagine, to an abundance of inner dialogue.

From these conversations with himself, the narrator would discover some general law of human nature. The passage on which I would like to focus deals with a minute error that Françoise, the housemaid of the hero, is making all the time. When she speaks about « Madame Sazerat » (a secondary character in the novel) she says « Madame Sazerin ». And she never corrects herself. Even after years of having heard « Sazerat », she continues to say « Sazerin ». Sazerat or Sazerin, that is the question. Here comes the passage:

« Everyone at Combray had spoken to Françoise for five-and-twenty years of Madame Sazerat and Françoise continued to say 'Madame Sazerin', not from that deliberate and proud perseverance in her mistakes which was habitual with her, was strengthened by our contradiction and was all that she had added of herself to the France of Saint-André-des-Champs (of the equalitarian principles of 1789 she claimed only one civic right, that of not pronouncing words as we did and of maintaining that 'hôtel', 'été' and 'air' were of the feminine gender), but because she really did continue to hear 'Sazerin'. This perpetual error which is precisely 'life', does not bestow its thousand forms merely upon the visible and the audible universe but upon the social universe, the sentimental universe, the historical universe, and so forth. The Princesse de Luxembourg is no better than a prostitute in the eyes of the Chief Magistrate's wife, which as it happens is of little importance ; what is slightly more important, Odette is a difficult woman to Swann, whereupon he builds up a whole romance which becomes all the more painful when he discovers his error ; what is more important still, the French are thinking only of revenge in the eyes of the Germans. We have of the universe only formless, fragmentary visions, which we complete by the association of arbitrary ideas, creative of dangerous suggestions. »

Proust is often interested, in *La recherche*, by the way people pronounce words and he often pays attention to the meaning of a certain kind of pronunciation that may appear somewhere in a conversation. However, most of the time, this interest is directed to a kind of demonstration which is at the opposite pole to the one we can see here in Françoise. Proust would show, for instance, that the way someone pronounces this or that word is influenced by the way someone else pronounces it. For instance, in *In the Shadow of Young Girls in Flower*, the narrator changes his way of pronouncing some expressions as a result of his fascination for the Swanns family: « 'How d'e do?' (They both pronounced it in the same clipped way, which, you may well imagine, once I was back at home, I made an incessant and delightful practice of copying.) » Here, with Françoise, it is quite the opposite: nothing could make her change the way she pronounces 'Sazerat'.

Analysis of the example

Let us examine the example given here by Proust which is nothing less than a proposition of explanation regarding the causes of the first word war based on the mistake that Françoise refuses to correct in her language.

Inner Speech and Prejudice in Proust's *À la recherche du temps perdu*

The (apparently) tiny example

Everyone at Combray had spoken to Françoise for five-and-twenty years of Mme. Sazerat and Françoise continued to say 'Mme. Sazerin,' not from that deliberate and proud perseverance in her mistakes which was habitual with her, was strengthened by our contradiction and was all that she had added of herself to the France of Saint-André-des-Champs (of the equalitarian principles of 1789 she claimed only one civic right, that of not pronouncing words as we did and of maintaining that 'hôtel,' 'été' and 'air' were of the feminine gender), but because she really did continue to hear 'Sazerin.'

The generalisation

This perpetual error which is precisely 'life,' does not bestow its thousand forms merely upon the visible and the audible universe but upon the social universe, the sentimental universe, the historical universe, and so forth. [1] The Princesse de Luxembourg is no better than a prostitute in the eyes of the Chief Magistrate's wife, which as it happens is of little importance; [2] what is slightly more important, Odette is a difficult woman to Swann, whereupon he builds up a whole romance which becomes all the more painful when he discovers his error; [3] what is more important still, the French are thinking only of revenge in the eyes of the Germans.

The general (universal) law

We have of the universe only formless, fragmentary visions, which we complete by the association of arbitrary ideas, creative of dangerous suggestions.

We find three lines of arguments clearly separated. The first one concerns the example itself. The second one is the generalisation of the example. And, finally, the third one, is the expression of the universal law formulated in a way that is not without evoking what one could find, for instance, in the *Sentences and Moral Maxims* by François de La Rochefoucauld (1665)[7]. Thus, we can decompose the passage as follows and find the movement of the rhetorical wave that goes from Sazerat to the war.

Three situations are grouped under the same general law. First: a social situation ([1] The Princesse de Luxembourg is no better than a prostitute in the eyes of the Chief Magistrate's wife, which as it happens is of little importance). Second: a love affair ([2] what is slightly more important, Odette is a difficult woman to Swann, whereupon he builds up a whole romance which becomes all the more painful when he discovers his error). Third: a political situation ([3] what is more important still, the French are thinking only of revenge in the eyes of the Germans). And in this last case, it is the destiny of countries that is at stake. All

prejudices are commanded by a single law, it is claimed, and this law can even be revealed to a good observer who is looking at the way Françoise is pronouncing the name of Madame Sazerat. Where does all this reasoning take place? In the inner speech of the narrator which is rendered in the novel. More interestingly, this inner speech contains some kind of reasoning that would have gone unnoticed if we had remained at the examples given by Husserl. And the reasoning leads to a remark that has a general value.

Prejudice as bias and harm

This law of the bias of human judgement, it is suggested, is observable in all judgements. It produces minute errors as well as major errors such as those that constitute the prejudices of people when it comes to the judgement of someone else. We have of the universe only fragmentary visions. Because of this primitive and universal situation, we have to complete our vision by the association of « arbitrary ideas ». And this is creative of dangerous suggestions. The necessity of unifying what we receive as partial is thus the basis of our bias in judgement as well as the dangerous consequence it can have as far as we believe in the associations that we are forced to produce.

Thus, we must, if we follow this analysis, exclude two interpretations that could have been proposed for the link between the two senses — bias and harm — of the term « prejudice ». The first one would have been to consider that the link is only located in a convention of language that would have put together, for some arbitrary reason, the notion of bias and the notion of harm together. The link is located in something else than language itself, since it appears to be connected to perception itself.

The second interpretation that we can exclude is that the connection of the three situations that have been associated by Proust (and that we just detailed, namely social, emotional and political) are only connected by means of metaphor. In his erudite work, *Proust et le roman*, Jean-Yves Tadié suggests that Proust incorporates the metaphor as a complete sort of thinking and that this is one of the particularities of the novel[[11](#)]. This may be true. But it does not mean that all the occurrences in which one goes from one situation to another are obtained by means of metaphors. In this particular case, it is likely that another process is at stake, since the processes analysed are not only given as similar but also described as based on the same kind of process. It is not a metaphor that ensures the passage from social to emotional and from emotional to political, but rather a community of mechanisms at stake in the description.

One could go even farther and, returning now to Husserl, showing that the bias in judgement is present in situations which are again simpler than the apparently simple example Proust is giving (the mistake that Françoise is still making after many years in pronouncing a name). Husserl might prefer to talk about the fragmentary visions of a table, he would conclude in the same way: « constantly seeing this table and meanwhile walking around it, changing my position in space in whatever way, I have continually the consciousness of this one identical table existing 'in person' and remaining quiet unchanged. The table-perception, however, is a continually changing one, it is a continuity of changing perceptions. » Even a simple table is the result of a construction we elaborate from fragmentary visions, from fragmentary pieces of perception, that we can have from it, Husserl is claiming. When one turns to a person or to a country, this can be only truer.

By the same token, this shows how we should proceed to go to from the general law to the analysis of examples. It is neither by the free process of metaphorical association nor by the not-so-free process of grammatical habituation that we go from bias to harm when one follows the meaning of the term « prejudice », but rather by a very general necessity completing our visions. It is the very same law of perception. But now, following Proust, we can understand the danger associated with the law, which is not the case when one follows Husserl. Not because the two descriptions would be inconsistent with each other (as we have seen, far to be inconsistent, they are complementary). But because the law of perception as it is described by Husserl is too abstract to go into such human details as the way people pronounce words (which are, nevertheless, highly significant for human life). Thus, the reading of Proust allows to complete what is perhaps missing in phenomenological analyses but, at the same time, shows also their great value.

Conclusion

The law that Proust (or its narrator) could claim to have identified, while it does not explain why prejudice itself appears, shows, at least, that no thought is free of prejudice and it also shows why a prejudice can stay the same over long periods of time. When one turns to inner speech and performs meticulous descriptions, one can see the way prejudice is maintained, allowing perhaps to see where it is possible to intervene in the process and where it is not. It also allows to exclude two interpretations that could have been proposed for the link of the two senses of the term « prejudice » in English. This analysis, based on a phenomenological approach, can thus well be completed by the art of the novel as far as it shows how the universal laws beneath the surface of words and actions can emerge.

References

- [1] Noam Chomsky. *Language and Mind*. Cambridge University Press, 2006, Cambridge ; New York, 1968.
- [2] Fyodor Mikhailovich Dostoevsky. *Crime and Punishment*. Simon and Brown, tr. en. C. Garnett, 1956, Hollywood, FL, 1866.
- [3] Edouard Dujardin. *Les lauriers sont coupés*. Flammarion, 2001, Paris, 1887.
- [4] Charles Fernyhough. *The Voices Within: The History and Science of How We Talk to Ourselves*. Profile Books, London, 2017.
- [5] Martin Heidegger. *Being and Time*. Harper Perennial Modern Classics, tr. en. J. Macquarrie and E. Robinson, 2008, New York, 1927.
- [6] William James. *The Principles of Psychology*. Dover Publications, 1957, New York, 1890.
- [7] François La Rochefoucauld. *Maxims*. Penguin Classics, 1982, London New York, 1665.
- [8] Joshua Landy. *Philosophy as Fiction: Self, Deception, and Knowledge in Proust*. Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2004.
- [9] Marcel Proust. *In Search Of Lost Time*. Vintage Classics, tr. en. C. K. Scott Moncrieff, T. Kilmartin, D. J. Enright, 1981, London, 1913-1927.
- [10] Dorothy Richardson and Gloria G. Fromm. *Windows on Modernism: Selected Letters of Dorothy Richardson*. University of Georgia Press, Athens, GA, 1995.
- [11] Jean-Yves Tadié. *Proust et le roman: Essai sur les formes et techniques du roman dans «À la recherche du temps perdu»*. Gallimard, Paris, 1986.
- [12] Yanko Tsvetkov. *Atlas of Prejudice: Mapping Stereotypes*. Create Space Publishing, Louisville, KY, 2013.
- [13] Norbert Wiley. *Inner Speech and the Dialogical Self*. Temple University Press, Philadelphia, 2016.

Inner Speech and Prejudice in Proust's *À la recherche du temps perdu*

Share this:

- [Share](#)