

In the Latin original—*praejudicium*\*—the usage of this notion was specific to the field of law and meant, in classical times, “a preceding judgment, sentence, or decision, a precedent” (Lewis & Short, 1879; cf. also Newman, 1979). In post-classical Latin, cognate meanings started to appear, including “[a] judicial examination previous to a trial... [a] damage, disadvantage... [and a] decision made beforehand or before the proper time” (Lewis & Short, 1879). The aspects of harmfulness and erroneousness began to emerge in conjunction with “*praejudicium*”. Over the centuries, they submerged the initial, neutral, technical meaning, up to the point that, today, the *Oxford Dictionary* defines “prejudice” as “[p]reconceived opinion that is not based on reason or actual experience... Dislike, hostility, or unjust behaviour deriving from preconceived and unfounded opinions” and, with reference to the field of law, “[h]arm or injury that results or may result from some action or judgement.”

It is difficult, if not impossible, to pinpoint the exact time when the pejoration of “prejudice” occurred. Nor can “prejudice” be understood once and for all as being exclusively a poorly formed opinion, an unreasonable belief, a false judgement, a sentiment, an assumption dictated or corrupted by sentiment, a bad behaviour, or an admixture of them, at least as far as intellectual history is concerned. Though assuming only one particular meaning of the term *ab initio* may be very convenient (e.g. Penco, 2019), speakers, erudite ones included, have been using “prejudice” in many ways, the variety of which the *Oxford Dictionary* and researchers at large cannot but acknowledge and report to varying degrees (e.g. Allport, 1954; Duckitt, 1992; Gadamer, 1985/1960; Van Dijk, 1984). Unlike artificial technical terms—e.g. the classical legal interpretation of “*praejudicium*”—and like all important concepts of our natural languages—e.g. love, justice, beauty, education—“prejudice” too is polysemic, ambiguous, living, contestable and contested (Dorschel, 2000).

Within philosophy, it is even possible to find positive appraisals of the term itself. For one, sensing perhaps the morally and socially paradoxical outcomes of too extreme a rejection of prejudice in all its forms, Voltaire (1901/1764) had already distinguished “different kinds of prejudices”, which he defined as “opinion without judgment.” Some of these unreasoned opinions were said to be more or less dangerously mistaken (e.g. “that crabs are good for the blood, because when boiled they are of the same color”), while others could be “universal and necessary... and... even constitute virtue.” For example, “throughout the world, children are inspired with opinions before they can judge... In all countries, children

are taught to acknowledge a rewarding and punishing God; to respect and love their fathers and mothers; to regard theft as a crime, and interested lying as a vice, before they can tell what is a virtue or a vice" (Voltaire, 1901/1764). Under such social, moral and pedagogical conditions, "[p]rejudice may... be very useful, and such as judgement will ratify when we reason" (Voltaire, 1901/1764).

In his essay "On Prejudice", Hazlitt (1903/1830) reached an analogous conclusion, but he also added two important observations: (A) that human reason may be rarely able to ratify any such opinions, thus issuing good judgements; and (B) that we may have to rely on prejudice instead, insofar as:

*We can only judge for ourselves in what concerns ourselves, and in things about us: and even there we must trust continually to established opinion and current report; in higher and more abstruse points we must pin our faith still more on others... I walk along the streets without fearing that the houses will fall on my head, though I have not examined their foundation; and I believe firmly in the Newtonian system, though I have never read the Principia. In the former case, I argue that if the houses were included to fall they would not wait for me; and in the latter, I acquiesce in what all who have studied the subject, and are capable of understanding it, agree in, having no reason to suspect the contrary. That the earth turns round is agreeable to my understanding, though it shocks my sense, which is however too weak to grapple with so vast a question.*

Voltaire's case suggests that, *pace* very many fellow Enlightenment thinkers (cf. Dorschel, 2000) and today's prevalent parlance exemplified by Penco (2019), prejudices may not always be bad and worthy of elimination, lest we let our children fail to acquire basic moral and social principles of conduct (cf. also Billig, 1988). Hazlitt's reflections add that prejudices are quite simply necessary for us to function at any level. Without holding some prejudices *qua* tacit presuppositions of our voluntary actions, including our thinking and talking, no common person or no eminent scientist could attain anything whatsoever. Descartes (1968/1637), for instance, when engaging in radical doubt, did never stop assuming that the meaning of his own words and concepts would persist unchanged through time.

In the modern age, Pascal (1993/1670), Vico (2013/1710), Schlegel (1975/1796–1806) and

Amiel (1981/1860-1863) concurred on this point, though only the last two may have used the term “prejudice” as such. In the 20th century, the great Hungarian chemist and philosopher Polanyi (1969) reached the same conclusion too. Indeed, Polanyi (1962/1958) reflected on how young persons, were they not prejudicially convinced of the value of a discipline that they do not yet know, would never endeavour to learn it, and that scientists themselves, without prejudicial faith in the actual presence of a valuable bit of unknown knowledge, would never strive to discover it, sometimes at great peril for themselves, their career, or even their wellbeing. What is more, both students and scientists may fail miserably, thus confirming the prejudicial character of their presuppositions. Had they not held them, though, then they would have not even tried. Also, had they held them lightly, then they would have been less likely to succeed. As sportsmen, soldiers and artists know well, a crucial step in achieving anything great is to believe that you can do it, even if you have never done anything like that before and would have good reasons to conclude that you are unlikely to be able to (Dorschel, 2000; it should be noted that Polanyi did not use the term “prejudice” as such).

Moreover, in spite of all the novel sciences and great technologies that thinkers such as Bacon (1902/1620) and Descartes (1968/1637) could only begin to fathom, or the revolutionary political freedoms and personal emancipations conquered since their times, Polanyi (1969) noted as well how the power and propensity of humankind for cruelty and oppression did not seem to have waned over the modern centuries. If anything, the greatest slaughters and the very imperilment of human survival as a species have characterised the most recent ones, not the distant ages that the Enlightenment thinkers would have described as filled with prejudice and superstition (cf. also Hobsbawm, 1994).

Back in 1721, Swift’s popular *Modest Proposal* had already reached, in a satirical tone, the murderous conclusions that his day’s allegedly enlightened and scientific rationality could lead to. Specifically, the most effective economic solution to the famine in Ireland, as he had sarcastically argued, was to breed poor people’s children for public consumption. Indeed, Swift had noted in his earlier *Thoughts on Various Subjects*: “Some men, under the notions of weeding out prejudices, eradicate virtue, honesty, and religion.” On its part, Boswell’s *Life of Johnson* (1923/1791: 467) reports the famous moralist to have said: “To be prejudiced is always to be weak; yet there are prejudices so near to laudable that they have been often praised, and are always pardoned.”

Before both these Anglophone authors, Fontenelle (1683/1803: 92–96; translation ours) had reflected on the expediency of those “prejudices” that “philosophers” seem eager to “destroy”: “common opinions” can be very “handy” and “useful”, whenever we may have too little knowledge, time or opportunity to reason fully about things—which is far from being an uncommon experience, since “reason offers us a very small number of sure maxims”. In the same pages, Fontenelle (*ibid.*) observed also how “prejudices” are part of the heritage or “costume” of “our Country”: they are constitutive elements of people’s identity, the source of their sense of belonging, that is, important threads in the fabric of society itself.

The importance of prejudice for identity, belonging and social cohesion is a specific theme that other defenders of prejudice discussed at length. Duclos (2004/1751: 7; translation ours), for one, defined “prejudice... a judgment held or admitted without examination, which can be true or mistaken”. Although it may be wise to try to eradicate erroneous and nefarious prejudices, he thought it unwise, “for the good of society”, to carry the Enlightenment’s battle against prejudices much farther: why “demonstrating accepted truths”, if “recommending their practice” can be enough? (Duclos, 2004/1751: 7; translation ours) Why trying to make people reach by “reasoning” what they do already by “sentiment”, or “an honest prejudice?” (Duclos, 2004/1751: 8; translation ours) Hume (1964/1742) and Chesterfield (1847/1779) made similar points, but Duclos added: “Prejudice is the common law of men” and as such it should be respected; whereas “by wanting to enlighten people too eagerly, we teach them a dangerous presumption” that can lead to dreadful moral and social chaos (Duclos, 2004/1751: 7; translation ours).\*\*

Moral and social chaos is precisely what Burke (2008/1790: 42 & 63) observed in France at the time of the Revolution, which he believed to have been inspired by “sophisters, economists; and calculators” who thought that they were “combating prejudice, but [were] at war with nature.” Preferring, as a general rule, the present time-tested institutions to the future ones pandered by revolutionary thinkers, Burke (2008/1790: 72) famously stated:

*You see, Sir, that in this enlightened age I am bold enough to confess that we are generally men of untaught feelings, that, instead of casting away all our old prejudices, we cherish them to a very considerable degree, and, to take more shame to ourselves, we cherish them because they are prejudices; and the longer they have lasted and the more generally they have prevailed, the more we cherish them. We are afraid to put men to live and trade each*

*on his own private stock of reason, because we suspect that this stock in each man is small, and that the individuals would do better to avail themselves of the general bank and capital of nations and of ages.*

Currently, it is rare to hear any philosopher speaking well of “prejudice”, whether in the epistemic context or in others, e.g., politics, morals, education. Somehow, the pejoration of this notion has reached a point such that the usages made of it by Johnson or Fontenelle sound odd to our ears. Different words should be used, e.g., “preconception, presupposition, hypothesis, presumption, presentiment, presage, premonition, foreboding, predilection, prepossession, outlook, expectation or anticipation in general...intuition.” (Dorschel, 2000: 58 & 136; emphasis removed) Yet, as Dorschel argues (2000: 136; emphasis added), “such choice of terms is a matter of *rhetoric*”, in the technical sense of this term, i.e. as appropriate to the circumstances (or *kairos*; cf. Barthes, 1988). Depending on the audience and on the point to be made, “eulogistic” or “dyslogistic” synonyms are to be preferred, if and when “prejudice” may appear inappropriate (cf. Bentham, 1824: 214).

Still, whether we use “prejudice” or not, the fact remains that “if some of our beliefs are based on reasons, there has to be something which is not based on reasons. We are able to reason in support of certain things and to prove certain things only if and because there are other things for which we do not have reasons or proof.” (Dorschel, 2000: 135). Recognising the existence and the value of this “something” or of these “things”, whether we call them “prejudices” or “intuitions” or else, is the contribution of Voltaire, Fontenelle, Burke and the other eccentric defenders of “prejudice” *qua* “prejudice”. They did not succeed in stopping the pejoration of “prejudice” as such, but they succeeded in preserving important insights concerning the tacit assumptions of human agency at large, the educational limits of thoroughly rational approaches, the complex sources of morality, the roots of political power, and the needs for cultural identity and social belonging.

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*\*\* This short text is being published during the Covid-19 international crisis. Thus, I wish to provide a topical example of the corrosive “presumption” that Duclos associates with the modern preference for reasoning at all costs, rather than relying on good prejudice. Specifically, the reader may want to reflect on all those individuals who, especially on ever-popular social media, feel entitled to challenge with all kinds of arguments, however faulty and uninformed these may be, the far more competent individuals and institutions that their grandparents would have treated, prejudicially, with great deference and humble respect (e.g. physicians, epidemiologists, national health institutes).*

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