

## Prejudices: An Investigation Into Barriers of Humanity\*

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### Abstract

By bringing people closer together, the phenomenon of globalisation not only accentuates differences but also it reinforces the sense of identity and belonging. This paradoxical and dynamic picture puts us straight before the challenge as to how to accommodate differences in order to live peacefully together. The gulf between “us” and “them” become more and more visible. The perception we can have of “others” remains deeply shaped by the values and precepts we learn in our respective cultural and educational circles. Yet, because men are not mere cultural products, individual responsibility and rational deliberation play an important role in the ways we approach “others.” In this article, we investigate prejudices as a phenomenon that is in the heart of above-mentioned issues. After a brief investigation into the nature of a prejudice, the paper outlines two main philosophical positions that either rehabilitate prejudices (Hans-Georg Gadamer) or calls for their abandonment (Descartes). The author argues that, despite the good arguments to be found in both positions, the nature of prejudices—as “something not yet knowledge”—puts upon us a kind of “moral and epistemological obligation” to overcome them, in order to do justice to ourselves and to our fellowmen, and construct sustainable and peaceful societies.

**Key words:** prejudice, judgement, knowledge, understanding, dialogue, self-knowledge, peace, sustainability, humanity, difference

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\* Some ideas in this article have been expressed in a previous article of mine. (Gueye 2005, pp. 83-103).

“Oh! I know these people!” someone may say of another nation.

“They are superficial.” If you ask why, he will answer:

“I once knew a man from this nation and he was very superficial.”

Men who tend toward this type of reasoning allow certain facts, which they know from naïve cognition, to fall right into their

theoretical attitude, and they proceed to employ these facts

merely as examples for their uncritical induction.”

Dietrich von Hildebrand (1991, p. 54)

## INTRODUCTION

The relevance of the issue of prejudices takes on a greater value nowadays, in the twenty-first century, because of the inescapable routine of living side by side with people from different backgrounds. The cohabitation and juxtaposition of “differences” reveal two dynamic movements that are intrinsically intertwined: facing the “other” and facing “ourselves.” The contact with the “other” becomes a mirror which brings us back to our own self, our own identity. By learning to know the “other” we put into the test our preconceptions, prejudgments, and prejudices.

However, prejudices can have a double-edged “function”: they can help with or distort the encounter with the “other.” Where to place the cursor? When can we rely on prejudices while being sure that they don’t fail us and make us adopt unjustified attitudes? How to move between the mazes and pitfalls of prejudices with a realistic conception of the human being, i.e., a human being with an individual and a social identity expressed in various areas and dimensions: society, culture, religion, politics, etc.?

In order to give answers to these questions, it is useful to take recourse to philosophy in general, and philosophical anthropology, epistemology, and ethics in particular. Hence in what follows, I will try, after I) some general remarks on the ontology of prejudices, to provide a II) sketch of the two movements of pro- and anti-prejudices in philosophy; after that, I will propose to look into III) some practical ways as to how to overcome prejudices.

## I. WHAT IS A PREJUDICE?

To investigate the nature of prejudices requires a clear attention to the elements and kinds of prejudices and the necessary states of affairs rooted in their nature. It is also necessary to distinguish between the intrinsic value or disvalue of a prejudice and its different kinds,

differences that derive from the various levels on which prejudices exist and from the different groups of persons subject to prejudices. Thus, since prejudices can be classified in relation to certain social, intellectual, and ethico-religious aspects, one can then speak of racial, philosophical, and ethico-religious prejudices, etc. (See Allport: 1954).

Furthermore, one can distinguish between: a) internal prejudices in the sense of inner acts of prejudices, i.e., the personal acts of premature or prior judging, b) the objective judgements (propositions) held true in these acts of judging, c) and the external manifestations of prejudices, i.e., linguistic utterances and certain modes of behaviour, through which these inner prejudices are clearly expressed. Therefore, it is crucial to be aware of these different forms and moments of prejudices and of the differences between inner prejudices and their external manifestations. Consequently, reducing prejudices to mere behaviours would be tantamount to overlooking the inner acts of prejudices and the assumptions and propositions espoused by them, which seem, to a great extent, to be the most important moment and the chief factor responsible for their external manifestation. For, our language and conduct are often spontaneous expressions of our inner judgments, dispositions and convictions.

Let us note here that the word “judgment” can be understood in different manners. (1) It can simply refer to the act of the intellect which holds a certain state of affairs to exist and judges it to obtain; this meaning is the primitive and primary meaning of judgment. (2) More restrictedly, it can refer only to those acts of judging that allot a certain value to an object, a person, or an event. (3) It can also refer to a certain objective logical entity which is composed of concepts and to which we can ascribe truth or falsity. This third meaning of judgment is even more complicated and calls for a clear attention. (See Pfänder, Crespo 2000, pp. 31-126). Within judgments of all these kinds there is a huge difference between those that are well-founded in knowledge and those which are rash, blind, ill-founded, or erroneous. The concept of prejudice can be related to all of these meanings of the word “judgment.”

In this attempt to overcome the difficulties pertaining to understanding and defining prejudices, linguistic analysis can be helpful. In fact, one of those difficulties comes from the ways of understanding the anteriority implied in a “*pre-judice*.” As a matter of fact, from the Latin *praejudicium*, prejudices can refer to a *judgment* or to *something which is not yet a judgment*. These two interpretations are valid because of the two meanings which could rightly be attached to the Latin preposition *prae* which could be translated as “anterior” or “before,” as an adjective or an adverb. Prejudices could then be an anterior (or precedent) judgment, as well as something (not yet a judgment) which could be held before any kind of judgment. In this second meaning, prejudices can refer to some inclinations, the nature of which has still to be investigated and its

difference with a judgment be established. Nevertheless, it seems that at least a triple understanding of anteriority could be established here: A *logical* anteriority, a *psychological* anteriority, and a *chronological* one.

The “anteriority question” reveals in general the issue of the nature of prejudgment and judgment, and their relations; it reveals especially three problems that I would term as the “limit,” “continuity,” and the “subordination” problems.

a) “The limit problem” refers to the question as to which extent a judgment is *totally* different from a prejudgment. If there is a rupture, what could be the terms of that rupture between a judgment and a prejudgment? In other words, where do prejudgments end, and where do judgments start?

b) “The continuity problem” refers to the question as to what extent a judgment can simply constitute the continuity or continuation of a prejudgment. In other words, the question is whether there are essential elements in a prejudgment that have necessarily to be maintained in a judgment.

c) “The subordination problem” would refer to the question as to what extent prejudgment can be subordinated, if ever, to a judgment.

We could, then, rightly infer that a prejudice is not yet knowledge. And even the protagonists of positive prejudice would have serious difficulties in determining in which sense prejudices can be positive. The main problem that they are confronted with has to do with what I would call “the situational state” of a prejudice, namely, how it is related—within the process of thinking, formulating ideas and reflections, and coming to knowledge—to judgments. While knowledge is something acquired, secured and justified, resulting from deliberation and reason’s ratification, something of certainty, prejudices can only be the anterior judgements that might help in the possession of knowledge. Hence a notion of “positive prejudice,” in my opinion, has nothing to do with truth and true knowledge. Therefore, a tentative definition of a prejudice could be *a rash, cognitively unfounded, judgment of a certain kind*. It can be identified with *an act of judging rashly, or with the cognitively ill-founded objective logical proposition, especially the ill-founded value judgment*. But it can also refer to the *propositions asserted in such rash judgments and to their falsity or to true judgments which are cognitively ill-founded*.

In our relations within a social environment, we come to form certain ideas about peoples, situations, things, and so on. We come to form prejudgments that do not always match the true reality or being of things. These prejudgments, although it is hard to get rid of them, can constitute serious obstacles when we try to enter into contact or cohabitate with others. This cohabitation is in danger mostly when people form prejudices, i.e., prejudgments which, not only

do not match the reality and true being of things, or states of affairs, but also, more often than not, come into conflict with the truth of things.

## II. PHILOSOPHERS ON PREJUDICE

Philosophers have always been struggling with notions of truth and knowledge. They have tried, through the proposition of various philosophical systems, to provide answers to questions such as how to acquire true knowledge, and how to conceive of the truth. Since an important element of the philosophical inquiry is to tend towards impartiality and find solid and objective foundations for knowledge, the issue as to how we should stand by our traditions and experience has occupied an important place. The experience we gather throughout our lives is full of instances that are deeply engraved on our minds and they consequently influence our conducts.

We might be philosophers aspiring to knowledge and wisdom, but we are first and foremost human beings, i.e., social and political beings who lead actual lives with other fellow human beings. This fact of our being “on board,” i.e., born in actual communities, makes us somewhat vulnerable to many influences that could colour our judgments. Our experiences in society make us form prejudices, consciously or unconsciously.

The issue of prejudice has been broadly explored in philosophy. In fact, there are two main trends which hold either a positive nature of prejudices, or a negative one. On the one hand, Hans-Georg Gadamer (1975) thinks, for example, that prejudices have a positive character because they can help us understand and enter into dialogue with our environment. Mills and Polanowski (1997), follow in the footsteps of Hans-Georg Gadamer to criticize the ‘negative’ connotation and twist that are attached to prejudices and define prejudice as a preferential self-expression of valuation, the necessary precondition for the self and civilization to emerge. On the other hand, Descartes (1971) as well as Bachelard (1938) consider prejudices as epistemological obstacles which hinder us from gaining true and unshakable knowledge.

### 1. The Positive Nature of Prejudices

Hans-Georg Gadamer (1975, p. 240) tried to rehabilitate prejudices by claiming that they have a positive nature in so far as they “are conditions for understanding.” For Gadamer, the negative connotations of prejudices stem from the Enlightenment. In fact, prejudices and fore-meanings in the mind of the interpreter make understanding (*verstehen*) possible, are not at the free disposal of the interpreter, but linked to a “horizon” and an “effective history.” In *Philosophical Hermeneutics*, he states:

It is not so much our judgments as our prejudices that constitute our being....Prejudices are not necessarily unjustified and erroneous, so that they inevitably distort truth. In fact, the historicity of our existence entails that prejudices, in the literal sense of the word, constitute the initial directedness of our whole ability to experience. Prejudices are biases of our openness to the world. They are simply conditions whereby we experience something. (Gadamer 1977, p. 9)

Understanding Gadamer's stance about prejudices requires going back to his theory of historicity or historicity of understanding which is closely connected to Heidegger's call for taking seriously into account the fore-structure of understanding. Actually for Heidegger, in order to grasp the objective ways of understanding one should consider understanding as meaning the projection of possibilities. And in order to get to be able to make those projections, one should rely on fore-structures. The interpretation we make of something we encounter in the world arises out of the way we understand the world. Heidegger goes on to spell out the three stages of the fore-structure. For Heidegger (1962, p. 191), "in every case this interpretation is grounded in *something we have in advance*—in a *fore-having*. (...) in *something we see in advance*—in a *fore-sight*. (...) in *something we grasp in advance*—in a *fore-conception*."

Gadamer takes on Heidegger's circle in order to develop the role of the fore-meanings in our effort to understand and interpret. But, as Heidegger who warns us against the tendency of relying on "fancies" and "popular conceptions" introduces the fore-having, fore-sight, and fore-conception, Gadamer (1975, pp. 236-7) also emphasizes that as interpreters, we should not "rely solely on the fore-meaning at once available to us, but rather examine explicitly the legitimacy, i.e., the origin and validity, of the fore-meanings present within ourselves." Moreover, Gadamer acknowledges that prejudices (as fore-meanings) can sometimes distort; the point is that they do not *always* do so.

Nevertheless, Gadamer has come under hard criticisms, all mostly deriving from his conception of historicity as a condition of understanding. What is the criterion for determining the validity of an interpretation? If understanding is always historical, how do we account for any criticism of a current interpretation? How does Gadamer understand at all the historicity of understanding? These are questions that critics of Gadamer have raised to point at some tensions in Gadamer's hermeneutical theory. My aim here is not to provide answers to those criticisms but to raise them in order to show some of the crucial problems that the project of rehabilitating prejudices has been confronted with. At any rate Bilen (2000) does address those sorts of criticisms by arguing that Gadamer's theory is in no way promoting relativism. Quite to the contrary, philosophical hermeneutics, he says, as developed by Gadamer, rests on the ontological

structure of the relation between understanding, language, and Being; and he argues that Gadamer maintains the universality of reason and language.

Furthermore, there is still another problem, namely, how prejudices can lead to knowledge. If for Gadamer mutual agreement or understanding amounts to knowledge, then a society or, persons—to paraphrase Dermot Moran (2000, p. 286)—through their use of prejudgments or prejudices, might well be convinced that the earth is flat, and they might agree on this. However, although there is agreement, society, or those persons, cannot claim to possess knowledge. Hence, the setting up of criteria proves relevant and even more necessary, for agreement in truth is much better than an agreement in falsity or much rather, agreement on false claims is even a greater evil than the discord between true knowledge and error.

Let us stress that in Gadamer, one can find three basic understandings of “understanding.” Here I focus only on one of them, i.e., understanding as mutual agreement that I think, is somewhat flawed. The other two kinds of understandings are an intellectual grasp, and understanding as a practical know-how (Grondin 2002, pp. 37-51).

I shall retain from Gadamer at least three levels of the historicity of understanding: the historicity of experience, the historicity of objects of the human sciences, and the historicity of the understanding subject him or herself (Bilen *ibid*, p. 3). The context in which the dialogue between the subject and the object takes place is of an utmost importance. Crucial is also the way in which the subject is “colored” by tradition, beliefs, and “truths” of his time. The description of human beings’ “embeddedness” should not necessarily lead to holding on to relativistic conceptions of morality and truth. Gadamer, by emphasizing the role of historicity in human understanding and approach to things, reveals the important tripartite relationship constituted by subject-object-environment. The role of the subject who aspires to gaining true knowledge is to take a measured consideration to the context while pursuing with perseverance the truth of the things in themselves.

The positivization of prejudices can also be seen in the light of legal procedure, precisely in the so-called “presumption of innocence.” An accused person is presumed innocent until the contrary is proven, i.e., a positive prejudice is *granted* to him unless proofs are laid out that show and confirm his culpability. The presumption of innocence is also closely linked to the right to the benefit of doubt. What the presumption of innocence aims at is the preservation of the dignity of the accused; but more important, it rests on the idea that people are basically honest and respectful of the laws. Hence, any theory of prejudices remains closely linked to a certain conception of man. The inherent fallibility of man has led some philosophers to adopt a cautious attitude towards—if not a complete rejection—of prejudices.

## 2. The Negative Nature of Prejudices

René Descartes holds that prejudices have a negative character; hence people must get rid of them in order to gain true knowledge. Prejudices are *epistemological obstacles*, an idea that is also espoused by Gaston Bachelard (1999), for whom, man, in the course of understanding, should be led to wipe out his prejudices, all those “primitive modes of thinking” which are naïve and credulous. “There are no first truths,” he says, “only first errors.” Hence the search for truth consists in a permanent rectification of errors. Once we start asking ourselves questions related to the why and how of things and beliefs, we start moving slowly away from prejudices. Prejudices conflict with a questioning of received ideas. As long as I ask myself questions, I doubt, and by doubting, I start to put into question beliefs. Descartes (1971, p. 20) was aware of this task as he alluded to it in his first method:

The first was never to accept anything for true which I had not evident knowledge of its being so; that is, carefully to avoid precipitancy and prejudice, and to embrace in my judgment only what presented itself to my mind so clearly and distinctly that I had no occasion to doubt it.

The philosophical inquiry has to start from somewhere. Alone the fact of choosing which method and methodology to adopt can be interpreted as a prejudiced approach. But beyond that, the question that needs to be posed here is how to account for the possibility of philosophizing without prejudices. Descartes has been criticized in this respect for his idealistic conception of man, i.e., as a being who must be entering (and who can enter!) into philosophical reflection with no prejudices. Descartes, in fact, calls for a pure *presuppositionless* beginning in philosophy in general, and in epistemology in particular. This stance seems to overlook the fact that men are “on board,” i.e., carrying with them some features of their cultures, beliefs, and so on, all of which are very hard to get rid of. Furthermore, besides the temporal problem as to when we are able to confirm our possession of true knowledge, there is the risk of being a “perpetual beginner” for whom “no thesis could ever be sufficiently well established that it could not be called up for re-examination at any point of the investigation.” (Salomon 2001, p. 145)

Interestingly, Descartes seems to be having recourse to prejudices (prejudgments) while calling for an abandonment of prejudices through his doubt which results in a provisory judgment (*jugement provisoire*). On what should the provisory judgment be based? Furthermore, the provisory doubt which is the exposition of some rules of action given by Descartes in the third part of the *Discourse on Method*, as valid in the sphere of action, *awaiting to find certitude and knowledge*

*of moral principles*, cannot be worked out *ex nihilo*. More importantly, this provisory doubt finds itself in three maxims: 1) to follow the customs of one's country (rule of conformism), 2) to take the certain as probable, and 3) to change one's desires rather than the order of the world. It seems that, to avoid falling into contradiction, Descartes needs some foundations, a kind of springboard for his provisory doubt to take place and work correctly. Now the nature of these foundations seems to be either unknown, or at least, not clear enough, mostly when it comes to differentiating them from prejudices. At any rate, it seems that any act of judging, whatever its object might be, is somehow unthinkable without prejudgments.

The question, in my opinion, is less about whether we have prejudices—I think we all do—than how to go about our prejudices. I think we should move from an idealistic conception of man to a realistic description of man that, nevertheless, does not allow giving a blank check to our prejudices. The call to overcome prejudices—as *rash, cognitively unfounded judgments*—has a special role to play in our efforts to work out a solid platform for addressing the (social, political, psychological, religious, political, etc.) obstacles or barriers of humanity.

In social relations, prejudices play a decisive role in that they influence our way of behaving towards each other. It goes without saying that when these prejudices have a negative character (nature), the social relations are more jeopardized. The examples of the consequences of negative prejudices are not totally unknown in our century where suspicions of all kinds are most of the time expressions of prejudices. Furthermore, if we call for an effort to overcome prejudices, it is surely because their nature poses problem.

Because prejudices lack verification and evidence, and their defenders often are not even interested in the question of truth, but are guided by other considerations irrelevant for the question of truth, they are prime targets for a systematic and critical analysis into their nature and origin. Such an analysis forms the groundwork for any objective and impartial approach to our social and political environment and would thus contribute much to the dissolution of prejudices, and prevent us from engaging in stereotyping, bigotry, scapegoating, and other elements and roots of prejudices.

### III. WAYS TO OVERCOME PREJUDICES

By the call to overcome prejudices and the plea for a careful analysis of the latter, we make ourselves aware of the danger we all run into when we have recourse to prejudices while interfacing with others. Overcoming prejudices can, at times, require monumental efforts, since man is inclined towards and immersed in prejudice. Though the efforts to overcome prejudices have different aspects, not all of which are reducible to the intellectual sphere, I will chiefly

indicate here four practical ways: 1) self-knowledge, 2) critical thinking and attitude, and 3) solidarity, sympathy and compassion.

### 1. Self-Knowledge

The Socratic expression “know yourself” is a celebrated injunction which began its career in the realm of philosophy. However, it also extends to other spheres of human existence inasmuch as it emphasizes the place that self-knowledge has in relations with others. By knowing oneself, one can avoid becoming a victim of external manipulations and, at the same time, avoid falling prey to some misunderstanding and misjudgement. This knowledge of oneself indeed goes hand in hand with a profound and constant *prise de conscience* of oneself, not only of one’s place and role in the world, but also of that of the others. It is through this *prise de conscience* that one comes to realize the infinitesimal and yet very important place that one occupies in the general administration of the world. Along with this *prise de conscience* come certain virtues such as humility. Furthermore, this *prise de conscience*, rather than occasioning a closed-mindedness, is what helps us broaden our perspective and views about the world. For, as Bertrand Russell (1961, p. 438) puts it:

So far knowledge is concerned, a man should be aware of the minuteness of himself and his immediate environment in relation to the world, all with an equal right to live and think and feel. He should see his own age in relation to the past and the future, and be aware that its own controversies will seem as strange to future ages as those of the past seem to us now. Taking an even wider view, he should be conscious of the vastness of geological epochs and astronomical abysses; but he should be aware of all this, not as a weight to crush the individual human spirit, but as a vast panorama which enlarges the mind that contemplates it.

Prejudices can profoundly dwell in man’s mind; they can be so hidden that it becomes a Herculean—if not simply an impossible—task, to get rid of them. Hence people need to look into themselves, to scrutinize themselves, their behaviours as well as their beliefs and ideas, in order to learn more accurately in what their judgments and prejudices consist, and more importantly, if they coincide with truth and reality. For, although brought about from the outside world, prejudices are—consciously or unconsciously—entertained and developed within our minds.

Although the *philosophical* task of an analysis of the essence of prejudices (dealing with the general essence and roots of prejudices) is entirely different from the type of self-scrutiny considered here, the two things are closely connected. We should examine the nature and roots

of our own prejudices and seek to free ourselves from them *in the light of understanding their general nature, elements, and roots.*

And it can only be the quest for truth, not a relativistic philosophy and attitude, that can lead to overcoming prejudices and even to understanding their nature. Without the notion of an objective truth the whole notions of error and of prejudices make no sense. It should be a daily occupation of each and every man to aspire to, and to espouse, truth that alone has the power to lead us to freeing ourselves from prejudices. If there is no truth, there are no errors and prejudices nor can we free ourselves from them. Moreover, relativism, as history, in which the worst forms of oppression of human dignity were built on relativistic ideologies (see Buttiglione 1991; von Hildebrand 1994), has taught us, is only the origin of an unstable and precious world, where wars and conflicts of all kinds abound and where not only *de facto* but also *de jure* no rational notion of prejudices is possible. Fighting against relativism, however, in no way means a promotion of exacerbated and uncritical universalism that would make us blind towards the many factual negative and positive differences of cultures, civilizations, and convictions of people, and towards the need to respect all authentic cultures and values. Furthermore, this investigation into the truth of things remains closely related to a critical attitude which one also ought to have towards inherited ideas and traditions.

## 2. Critical Thinking and Attitude

Prejudices often abide where laziness prevails. The relation between the nature of man and his tendency to form prejudices has also been characterized by Kant (1968, pp. 136-7), in his definition of a prejudice as “the tendency to passivity [passive reason], and therefore to heteronomy of reason.” As Trojan horses—to borrow an expression from informatics—prejudices can be present in one’s minds, unnoticed, hidden, while colouring one’s decisions and behaviours, ‘undermining’ the very autonomy of oneself as a person. There is a need for a critical attitude towards the received ideas which are taken for granted and never questioned. The routine in which the lazy man moves favours that he never questions anything. In order not to leave the ground to prejudices, one has to eliminate them from their very roots, i.e., from the very beginning of their formation. Here the criticism towards oneself, including one’s ideas inherited from tradition and culture, can be a tremendously important tool in the fight against prejudices. Indeed, from a “learned” culture, people should move towards a rationally “judged” culture. From an enculturative conditioning people should tend to harbour a critical attitude towards the established and “taken for granted” cultural practices.

In this respect, one could also point at the need to take distance vis-à-vis some religious teachings that promote and encourage indoctrination and fanaticism, etc. If it is true that there are truths on which every religion rests, it should be emphasized that some of what we are taught in religious surroundings needs to be objectively analysed. There are, indeed, religious prejudices that are different from prejudices about a religion. Religious prejudices would be endogenous or “inherent” to the very teachings of a religion; they would be part of the religion. Whereas prejudices about a religion would be false ideas *projected*, from without, to a religion, thus misjudging it. This differentiation is important, mostly in the context of our epoch, where terrorism, and all evil acts performed in the name of religion, are so common. Finally, I could stress that the call for a critical thinking towards our environment and culture in general, and towards religion in particular, has nothing to do with any kind of heretical attitude. Rather, it denotes an awareness of and an attachment to truth and objectivity that have to motivate and support our judgments and ways of life.

It is not just a philosophical task to put into question some received ideas, as Descartes seemed to imply. It is even a moral vocation for every man to challenge and question the “smooth continuity of obviousnesses” in order to cultivate objectivity and a sense of independence. However, it is important to stress here that this call for distancing oneself from one’s environment and inherited ideas has nothing to do with condescendence. Rather, it has everything to do with learning to respect another’s beliefs and culture. Hence it is not so much to deny the existence of prejudices, than it is to dominate and control them, or to apply to them what Socrates suggested Meno doing with true opinions: to fasten them, as the statues of Daedalus:

To possess one of his works which is let loose does not count for much in value; it will not stay with you any more than a runaway slave: but when fastened up it is worth a great deal, for his productions are very fine things. And to what am I referring in all this? To true opinions. For these, so long as they stay with us, are a fine possession, and effect all that is good; but they do not care to stay for long, and run away out of the human soul, and thus are of no great value until one makes them fast with causal reasoning. And this process, friend Meno, is recollection, as in our previous talk we have agreed. But when once they are fastened, in the first place they turn into knowledge, and in the second, are abiding. And this is why knowledge is more prized than right opinion: the one transcends the other by its trammels. (Plato, *Meno*, 97e- 98a)

Hence, there is a need to develop a critical thinking. Children who are not so much capable of taking distance vis-à-vis their environment need to be schooled and initiated into a critical thinking. Adopting a critical thinking and attitude requires an analysis of our daily experiences by using some criteria such as the representativeness, the relevance, and the quality (validity) of the experiences. Apart from these rather intellectual efforts, the overcoming of prejudices can also be practiced through more or less spiritual and affective efforts.

### 3. Solidarity, Sympathy, and Compassion

Another way to overcome prejudices is to try to put ourselves in the place of the other and here I speak not solely of an intellectual effort but also of a free attitude and an affective response to others. A certain outburst of solidarity is needed, which consists in our will to encounter the other, to be informed about what he feels and endures, about his pains and joys, in his days and his crepuscules, his smiles and cries. This will to encounter the other expresses a human need which consists in re-affirming what unites all men, i.e., their humanity. But it is always recommendable that this solidarity be worked out in reference to truth, love and mutual respect. For it needs, indeed, unshakable and powerful foundations in order to last.

Because prejudices are formed on an incomplete set of data, or simply on “bad consciousness,” it is an important task to cultivate the will to “join” the other and ourselves in his orbit. For, there are also hidden characters or hidden elements that cannot simply be approached or known through a cold and distant contact. It is this deep feeling together, this sympathy which can help us in comprehending the other, living with him in peace, and sharing with him as much as we could, all this on the mutual respect between each other, without taking into account those contingencies that divide more than they unite human beings. This sympathy has also been recognized by the Dalai Lama (1998, pp. 42-5) as one of the main conditions to implementing peace in the world.

Along with sympathy, compassion, as a positive emotion, can help us “get into the shoes of the other.” If we are able to be compassionate, it is solely because we are human. But compassion does not go hand in hand with egoism or closed-mindedness: it requires a sort of *transcendence* which, far from referring to any condescension or certain contempt for earthly things, is the view that all human beings are members of the great community of mankind, and as such, they deserve respect and concern. This kind of *transcendence* avoids, however, any subjectivism that can be inimical to the life in community. Transcendence and the overcoming of our own subjective feelings and prejudices about the other would then allow us to start the difficult process of imagining the others not as a mere transient intellectual exercise, but as an attitude that

stems deeply from our will to live up to our humanity. (Scarry 1998, pp. 40-62) Bertrand Russell tells us here one of the various ways to imagine the other, an exercise that each of us may already start practicing, when opening and reading *foreign* newspapers:

When reading a foreign newspaper each day, we ought to routinely substitute the names of alternative countries to *test whether our response to the event arises from a moral assessment of the action or instead from a set of prejudices about the country.* (Nussbaum 2002, p. 106)

Russell's proposal, although mainly directed to a certain commitment to drawing the divide between the objective and the subjective and to showing how the status of morality and moral actions can be different from our respective social conditioning and determinism, can also be taken as a good and practical advice to experiencing the emotion of compassion. Indeed, Russell's proposal can be interpreted as a third way between the thoughts of those who hold for compassion to the kins, and those who advocate compassion for those at distance. Given the dynamism involved in man's existential display, I think neither of those two could address satisfactorily the issue of compassion. As a matter of fact, compassion should be given to all mankind, regardless of the ties that bind us.

Through the methodological tool consisting in rotating names, we can come to not only test our prejudices, but also our reactions when what seemed so foreign to us is all the sudden brought to our doorsteps. Furthermore, the virtues of effectively practising solidarity, sympathy and compassion rest on the possibility of breaking the divide between "us" and "them" and focusing on commonalities rather than on differences. They enable the process of integration which should take place first in the minds and hearts of human persons, and assisted by an adequate platform to be worked out by society at large and politics in particular. The responses we give to the events we come to know about throughout our lifetimes are often coloured by our previous experiences. But our attitude towards and usage of those previous experiences need also to be carefully analysed if we are to do justice to the other persons.

## CONCLUSION

Although all of us harbour various kinds of prejudices that we happen to gather from our respective educational surroundings and individual experiences, we are called upon to exercise a permanent self-prospection and a criticism of our environment in order to gain true knowledge that would constitute the basis for our acts and choices. But we should not be oblivious of the

fact that prejudices are not always negative. They can, as initial thoughts, help us start our cognitive journey towards truth.

Nevertheless, whether they are negative or positive, they need to be overcome and replaced by a valid and true knowledge that takes into account of and is informed by reality. This call takes on today an important dimension when we witness the rapidity in which our globalised world enables encounters and shapes relationships. Facing this reality it is useful to abandon any comfortable attitude that would make us mere victims of prejudices; our efforts should rather tend to the adoption of a responsible approach that consists in transcending and overcoming prejudices.

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