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# In Defense of Prejudice, Sort of

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Adam Adatto Sandel has not written a book about the Jim Crow South. Actually, he takes great pains to avoid *The Place of Prejudice* having anything to do with "prejudice" in the everyday sense of bigotry. Sandel, a lecturer at Harvard with a D.Phil. in political theory from Oxford, is in his first book out to defend a very different meaning of the word—a broader kind of prejudice that was a central preoccupation of the intellectual founders of modernity, that they saw as an ancient crust built up upon the mind of the world, and dreamed of shaking loose.

*The Place of Prejudice: A Case for Reasoning within the World*
By Adam Adatto Sandel
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The book opens with a list of philosophers' grievances against prejudice. Francis Bacon labeled as prejudice the patterns of thought ingrained by tradition, habit, and language. He sought to rid our minds of these influences, for to judge truthfully, one must be "unbiased, a blank slate." Immanuel Kant named many of the same bogeymen, and for good measure threw in natural desire. He went so far as to write that "enlightenment" itself means "emancipation from prejudices generally." René Descartes was so radically suspicious of "preconceptions" and received ideas that he aimed to rebuild philosophy from a stance of absolute ignorance.

For the founders of the Enlightenment, then—once a project, but now, need we remind ourselves, the starting point of most thought in the Western world, from academic philosophy tomes all the way down to the comment wars on political articles posted to your Facebook news feed—prejudice was not just a vice, but the very thing against which enlightenment could find its definition. So don't get the wrong idea from the title of Sandel's book: it's even more reactionary than it looks.

On his account, Enlightenment thinkers aimed to supplant prejudice with a "detached conception" of reason, rid of "any authority or influence whose validity we have not explicitly confirmed for ourselves." Ultimately, detached reason aims to become entirely free of perspective. It seeks to reach conclusions modeled on the exactness and universality

of mathematics, truths of science and ethics and politics that float far above the jagged shores of circumstance upon which we find ourselves washed up. Thomas Nagel got to the heart of the matter by calling this the "view from nowhere."

Sandel aims to replace this detached view with something better. His book is centrally concerned with Martin Heidegger's depiction of how our felt lives are the source of our judgments about the world, and it aims to demonstrate that Heidegger, despite his gripes about Aristotle, was largely continuing a project he began. Sandel also explores the German philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer's defense of rhetoric, and of perspective in the study of history.

Putting these thinkers in conversation, Sandel offers what he calls a *situated* conception of reason, or "reasoning within the world," as the book's subtitle has it. Our individual experiences are not the antithesis of reason but its basis, the ground on which we stand while we peer out on the world and expand our horizon. The result is a remarkable, deeply humanizing book.

But the book's achievement also points to its missed opportunities. It does not really address the forms that the case against prejudice takes today, aside from two contemporary examples: our general suspicion of political rhetoric, and the ideal of having jurors who are untainted by prior knowledge of a case. For the most part, the fights Sandel picks are with long-gone philosophers. This is fine, for it is hard to overstate their continuing influence—but that's the thing: think of, say, today's trench warfare over bias and objectivity in the media. Or the widely accepted picture of science as a detached search for truth. Or contemporary utilitarianism, which is regarded by many modern intellectuals as the ideal of ethical thought. Or the newly emerging subfields of psychology and economics that aim to study human reasoning empirically, and claim to have found it to be a slave to prejudice. The dead philosophers Sandel is prodding have many offspring very much alive and kicking in all corners of the culture today, and one wishes to see the fight brought to them too.

Sandel identifies several strains of the Enlightenment case against prejudice, starting with the problem of *fairness.* Adam Smith, writes Sandel, argued that "we tend to be prejudiced by our loyalties to family, friends, and country." But these influences are contingent: family ties, for example, are but the happenstantial product of repeated exposure to our kin. Loyalty and love, then, are inadmissible to moral deliberation, not only because they are by nature unequal but because they are arbitrary and meaningless from a rational standpoint.

Smith aspired to make the morally reasoning subject a "spectator,"

a detached judge who may acknowledge his own felt loyalties but is no more bound by them than he is by the next man's. This was also the aim, argues Sandel, of philosophers like Kant, with his universalized moral laws, and, in the twentieth century, of the liberal legal theorist John Rawls, with his famous thought experiment in which we are asked to design a society fair enough that we would agree to be born into it without knowing what our position within it will be.

Sandel's focus is on how fairness was understood by the Enlightenment theorists. But the ideal of fairness also offers an opportunity to examine how readily the detached conception of reason detaches from its own philosophical foundations. In our day it has become a set of free-floating moral intuitions that strike us as the self-evident basis of any fair ethical system. But the actual attempts to construct these systems often wind up far from where they begin, in the result revealing the kind of self-exile that the detached ideal really strives to achieve.

Consider, for example, one of the most prominent champions in our day of the project to make us objective judges of universal moral obligations: Princeton University philosophy professor Peter Singer. Singer is less interesting for—and often seems less interested in—doing good philosophy than in using philosophy as an instrument of provocation. Singer and his followers make a point of defending practices like infanticide for no reason other than preference, euthanizing the elderly (including his own mother), bestiality, cannibalism, and other such bourgeois peccadilloes. That these arguments are sure to be met with shudders and gasps is of course not incidental to what motivates them, so perhaps they are better met with a roll of the eyes—except for how seriously many intellectuals take these arguments, and how tellingly they distill certain universalist and countercultural strains in the legacy of Enlightenment thought.

Consider, for example, a thought experiment that is a recurring element in Singer's work. It was first proposed in a 1972 paper he wrote for *Philosophy and Public Affairs* that has been described as "one of the most famous articles written in moral philosophy." Imagine that you happen across a pond, and in it you see a child drowning. The inconvenience and mess of wading into the muddy pond is clearly a trivial price for saving the child's life. The right moral action here is plain. So far, so good.

The life-or-death peril faced by this hypothetical child, Singer continues, is essentially the same condition faced by many real children and adults around the world at any moment—he invokes a famine then occurring in East Bengal. How can morality compel us to act only to save those in need whom we just happen across?

Singer's provisional point, then, is that the affluent Western world ought to expend more than it does in alleviating famine and poverty in the Third World, even though the people there are not immediately present to tug at our heartstrings. So far, still so good, most of us would say.

But Singer is not done yet. He does not mean just to expand our humanitarian concern but to derive a complete moral system. And in that system, whatever we happen to *feel* about a being—human or animal—is irrelevant to our actual *obligations* toward it, which derive instead from universal rights that inhere in objective traits. Singer says that "if it is in our power to prevent something bad from happening, without thereby sacrificing anything of comparable moral importance, we ought, morally, to do it." Quite a lot of work is being done—or not done—by the words "bad" and "comparable" here, not to mention by the unbounded "something" and "anything." Singer tellingly doesn't feel the need to explain his premises: "I do not think I need to say much in defense of the refusal to take proximity and distance into account," he writes. After all, you cannot discriminate against someone on those grounds if you "accept any principle of impartiality, universalizability, equality, or whatever."

The simplicity and absoluteness of this utilitarianism makes it vulnerable to a rather big problem that philosophers have dubbed the "demandingness objection": it would seem to compel us so far that we must continue giving our time and money and resources indefinitely—actually, exactly up to the point that we are depleted and everyone else uplifted such that there is no person who is worse off than us. As Singer himself puts it, "This would mean, of course, that one would reduce oneself to very near the material circumstances of a Bengali refugee."

He hedges against this objection only rhetorically, arguing that we could accept some weaker standard and still see that we at least ought to be giving more than we currently do. And in his original paper and his public speaking, Singer generally sticks to this weaker version. Yet he also adds, "I should also say that the strong version seems to me to be the correct one." Well, why wouldn't it be? Logic abhors a compromise.

Singer's morality, then, must be one of total leveling. Hence he has made a career not only out of condemning Western consumer culture as frivolous and selfish, but of depicting even most of our charitable giving as little different. This is why he routinely condemns spending on the arts, and the week before Christmas in 2013 took glee in using the "Batkid" story to bash donating to the Make-A-Wish Foundation.

As for the "demandingness objection," Singer dismisses it as a merely practical one, which is indeed how it is usually formulated, though he

himself is ideologically bound to recognize only the practical. And this is why he misses the deeper significance of this objection: his ethical system is willfully, cynically naïve about the nature of the human beings it claims to ennoble, and for whose welfare it claims such concern.

Set aside the question of whether real people, living lives cleansed of the arts, of small acts of kindness, of the gratification of charity, and most certainly of all selfish expenditures of joy, would really be higher-functioning—more productive, that is, and so better economically poised to contribute to humanitarian causes. Set aside, in other words, the question of whether a moral imperative that asks us all to reduce ourselves to the material level of Third World refugees would not after all wind up reducing us all to the material level of Third World refugees. Look just at Singer's view of the moral constitution. He asks that we never give to causes we can see and touch. Our considerations as individual moral actors are to be no different than a government funding agency, bound solely by universal obligations.

Moreover, it is actually not at all clear-cut from Singer's logic that we really should save that child drowning in the pond. In fact, his logic might equally be invoked to demand that we let the child drown, depending on some contingent facts. His argument presumes, first, that moral obligations exist on a continuous spectrum admitting of relative comparisons, so that we can always examine cause A and cause B and discern toward which we have the greater obligation; and second, that the strength of our obligation to a cause holds the same regardless of our proximity to it. Therefore, it is trivially true that there always exists some cause of greatest obligation which it is always our greatest imperative to meet.

And what are the odds that even the child in the pond is this greatest obligation? Can we really be sure that nowhere in the world is there someone in even *direr* need and *greater* suffering—no person who is not only dying but dying in agony, or some whole village so imperiled? To save the child at the expense of these others would be unfair, a violation of Singer's imperative. If this hypothetical is too outlandish, one need only ratchet down the stakes just so from the child in the pond to see the point—say, a child merely extremely hungry on the street but not quite so imminently about to die.

I do not mean to be glib toward Peter Singer's humanitarian concern or his call to charity, but rather to point out how corrosive his formulation is, not just if we were to actually adopt it but even if we merely aspire to it. Singer manages to take a moral imperative that was on the lips of Jesus Christ a revolutionary call to love one's fellow man and make of it a rhetoric of righteousness and spite. No mean feat.

Singer's work makes a strange but deft play on our felt moral lives: he begins from obvious, widely held moral intuitions and, appearing simply to extrapolate from them, in fact does violence to them. In the professed service of enlarging our sense of empathy, his argument actually *condemns* it as prejudiced and small. What's more, the thing he invokes to smear our empathy *is our empathy*, well more so than our reason.

In practice, Singer's proposal seems as likely to encourage the rationalization of cynicism as the widening of charity: why should I give to this homeless man, this needy neighborhood school, my own struggling brother, when others on the other side of the world are surely in much greater need? We begin training ourselves to meet our empathetic response with guilt and doubt, and to regard its suppression as a mark of our fairness and rationality. In our hearts we are to become like the doctor Dostoevsky describes, moved by humanity but feeling nothing for individuals—or resenting them for tugging so unequally on our concern. What Singer asks is that we expand our circle of moral concern by first hollowing out the center.

Of course nobody really adheres to this standard, including Singer himself, who though he claims to donate a quarter of his income to charity, a generous portion by nearly any standard but his own, most assuredly lives like no refugee. So the thought experiment is as much as anything else a case study in the dissonance between belief and practice that results from striving to adhere to the moral view from nowhere.

The problem of unfairness is just one ugly instance of a broader charge against prejudice: that it leads us into error in general. Saddled with preconceptions, we tend to dismiss contradictory evidence, or even to be blind to it.

Sandel employs several clever approaches here. The first is to point out that those who claim to have rid themselves of prejudice are, without exception, kidding themselves, even setting themselves up to be more susceptible to prejudice by creating a fictitious realm in which they are immune to it. He offers as an example the "prejudice against prejudice" itself, as Hans-Georg Gadamer put it. The detached ideal of having no perspective is naturally quite effective at concealing the fact that it is itself a perspective, a tradition at every moment seeking to forget that it is a tradition.

Here one would have liked to see Sandel offer some comment on those stalwart keepers of the faith of objective journalism, whose members genuinely seem to believe in the personality-splitting power of the magic dance they must do day in and day out, the one whereby they have their political opinions, yes, but check them at the newsroom door. The

conceit that they can avoid reportorial prejudice is just bound to make their preconceptions manifest at a deeper level—in the questions they ask, in how they structure their stories, in which terms they use, which they forbid, which they set aside in quotation marks.

Sandel next argues that prejudice can actually be beneficial. Here he offers some elegant readings of American rhetoric, such as the occasions on which Lyndon Johnson spoke against segregation to Southern audiences. Johnson did not discuss abstract ideals but instead invoked his audiences' own very particular experiences—and he reportedly did so in a thickened drawl, to boot: "How would you feel, if you were shopping and your child was thirsty, and you could not give him a cold soda at the counter in the drugstore?" Like Johnson, Sandel is meeting his audience where he believes they are, speaking to their own anxieties about warming up to prejudice by showing how humanizing prejudices can be a powerful weapon against dehumanizing ones.

To Sandel's positive case for prejudice we could add more examples. Argument influenced by prejudice is also known as *rationalization* or *motivated reasoning*: instead of a free inquiry, started from a neutral standpoint and equally open to any possible conclusion, motivated reasoning is a counterfeit, presenting itself as open when it is actually working backwards to prop up an existing opinion. But motivated reasoning can often help to elaborate and generate ideas. Think of how science, despite its airs of objectivity, often in practice advances through rival factions with rival theories, each motivated to produce novel evidence and arguments that will prove their own side right and the other wrong. Or consider our adversarial trial system: Instead of pretending that lawyers could objectively derive a single, best interpretation of the evidence, it unabashedly presents to juries two partisan interpretations, with two teams motivated to produce the best case for each. These are models of how to employ the cognitive virtues of self-interested argument to correct its very well-known vices—if not quite making a giant leap that plants us squarely at the feet of The Truth, then at least lumbering in its general direction.

This understanding of rational inquiry suggests something like the dialectic model of the ancient Greeks, in which each view aims not only to be more accurate than its rivals, but to subsume them. In part this just means that rival views must be disproved, but it also means, as the philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre describes it in *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* (1988), that "a successful correction of a false view" requires "that we are able to explain why we might expect such a view to be generated if our overall standpoint

is correct." In contrast with the detached ideal, this conception of reasoning is tentative and bound by history. To understand a theory requires not just giving its latest formulation, but telling the story of its development, including the major false ideas held along the way, and how their refutation led to the more accurate and comprehensive theories held now. This model sees our understanding as expanding not through some single and final heroic act in which we rid ourselves of all perspectives, but through a gradual process in which we encompass more of them.

The dialectic model does not do away with bad prejudices—widely held but wrong ideas, especially ones that are assumed without being recognized. But it suggests that prejudices in this sense can be condemned as such only in retrospect, from our expanded view. And so too, in political argument and personal encounter, to call out an idea as a prejudice requires an account of why it might have been held without question, and why it is false or misleading beyond the mere fact that it was held without question.

Sandel's broader argument is not that prejudice is advantageous or inevitable, but that properly understood it is a component of reason. Reading Aristotle, Sandel argues that an individual's character "can be understood as a 'prejudice' in the sense of a particular life perspective—a viewpoint from which certain actions appear desirable that otherwise might seem unworthy." This does not mean that "our judgment would be improved if only it could be freed" from the particularities of character. Rather, judging well, obtaining the ability to discern the good, means gaining the ability to "partake of the right perspective, the right 'prejudice.'"

There is a risk in this reading. Aristotle's view is that an individual's ability to reason well requires his or her possession of certain virtues. Differences in opinion among individuals, then, can in part be explained through their differences in disposition, life experience, and so forth; these elements account for their differing strengths and weaknesses as reasoners. But the kind of perspective Sandel aims to describe is a more elaborate one than can really be found in Aristotle's account of character.

Aristotle, Sandel notes, contrasts two kinds of understanding. The first, craft knowledge, is abstract, formal, and explicit. The second, practical wisdom, involves an understanding of purposes and situations, is "irreducible to rules or principles," and is "embodied in the agent's action… rather than represented in his or her mind." Hannah Arendt developed this into a contrast between *work* and *action*: "Arendt maintains that action is always situated within a 'web of enacted stories.' Only insofar as work

is drawn into this web does it acquire meaning. Detached from the world of action, she argues, our ability to manipulate and fabricate things would be pointless."

What Sandel is really after here is reversing the conventional ordering of our understanding. Where the Enlightenment picture treats our given world of experiences as clouding our philosophical deliberation, Sandel aims to show that the abstract statements at which philosophy aims emerge only by our drawing out of our vast store of experiences and intertwined worldly concerns. It is just this world that gives reason its motive, after all, for it is just this world that reason aims to reveal and make coherent.

This is where Sandel's project really begins to shine. It is also, not coincidentally, where it becomes plain that the idea of judgment he is defending is something that occurs so fluidly across mental life that he would probably have been better advised to jettison the label *prejudice* entirely rather than attempt to reappropriate it. Here he also brings in the work of Martin Heidegger—and does a fine job of making Heidegger's forbiddingly jargony work accessible. Sandel argues that it is in the fundamental nature of perception and so of thought to be situated and engaged in a particular scene in the world. Our philosophical reflections, intrinsically bound by perspective, do not find their meaning by the force of abstract imperatives, but from how they arise out of a world not of our own making—the physical world, and the human recrafting of it, that we are born into. "We can reflect upon [the world] philosophically only insofar as we already exist within it, only insofar as we are engaged with the world and understand it as a world of *concern* to us," Sandel writes. "In this sense, philosophy does not teach us something new, as if it connected us to reality for the first time. Illuminating the world means clarifying what we, on a certain level, already know."

Does this mean, then, that we are slaves to the arbitrary whims of natural desire, received ideas, and social norms, as Enlightenment theorists said all along? Not quite. Although we are unable to escape from the world through some conceit of detachment, we are active or creative within it; we can add to or interpret it. We are bound to gain responsibility for our world even as we are extensions of a web of meaning that runs far outside of ourselves, that is crafted by countless other people too, most of whom lived long before us.

To explain this view of bounded freedom, Sandel offers the illuminating metaphor that we are compelled to become authors of the latest chapter in a book already written by others. "In this situation, the author is clearly not free to write whatever he desires. Insofar as he must continue the story, any addition, any new creation, is

determined by the standard of [the] story itself, by the unity of meaning that the text expresses. The addition, even if we speak of it as a wonderful enhancement, is nothing other than the story *itself*."

Today there is an intellectual project on the rise that puts a novel spin on the old rationalist ideal. This project takes reason not as a goal but as a subject for study: It aims to examine human rationality empirically and mathematically. Bringing together the tools of economics, statistics, psychology, and cognitive science, it flies under many disciplinary banners: decision theory, moral psychology, behavioral economics, descriptive ethics. The main shared component across these fields is the study of many forms of "cognitive bias," supposed flaws in our ability to reason. Many of the researchers engaged in this project—Daniel Kahneman, Jonathan Haidt, Joshua Greene, Dan Ariely, and Richard Thaler, to name a few—are also prominent popularizers of science and economics, with a bevy of best-selling books and a corner on the TED talk circuit.

The project of these new rationalists is, in part, deeply pessimistic, as it tends to bleakly describe our rational faculties as little more than a pleasing illusion. But it is also implicitly optimistic: the very premise of "cognitive bias" presumes an evaluative standard of rationality that can be described straightforwardly, and the project carries the suggestion that its findings might be the hard science needed to finally shed these biases. And unlike the early Enlightenment writers, who faced some difficulties in evangelizing a reason disinterested about everything but itself, the new rationalists seem to be selling nothing: they're just doing science, after all. This pretense is genius and slippery enough that even the scientists themselves seem to believe that their work has no philosophical content.

To say that this new rationalism is deceived of itself is not to say that it is fruitless, and indeed it has had some fascinating findings. Sandel's defense of prejudice as a tool of practical reasoning, for example, could be recast in terms of what the decision theorists call *heuristics*. A heuristic is a sort of rule of thumb that approximates some more accurate ideal, useful when the ideal is not perfectly known or would take too much effort to follow exactly. Instead of first stopping to examine and rank the moral obligations of every event occurring in the entire world (as, say, Peter Singer would implicitly have you do), you judge the hungry beggar or the drowning child you have just happened across to be a good enough obligation to do something about right now. Seen in this way, prejudice makes possible what Herbert Simon called "bounded rationality": it puts a limit on the cognitive costs of fully

rational decision-making, so that it does not altogether paralyze us.

Cognitive science teaches that each of our minds has two broad systems for thinking. System 1 carries out mental processes that are rapid, emotional, perceptual, intuitive, automatic, and largely outside our awareness. System 2 carries out mental processes that are abstract, analytic, deliberative, and seemingly within and controlled by our consciousness. This division was pithily captured in the title of Daniel Kahneman's 2011 book, *Thinking, Fast and Slow*. And it might seem to align remarkably well with the division Sandel develops from Aristotle through Heidegger, between the knowledge explicit in our thoughts and the understanding implicit in our actions—so much so that the two could even be seen as scientific-philosophical counterparts.

But in the most fundamental respects, these schools of thought are in deep opposition, for the new rationalism still proceeds from the old Enlightenment division in which reason must exist in a realm set starkly apart from the passions, an assumption under which science increasingly condemns reason as an illusion. The idea of subconscious influences on the conscious life is hardly novel. But where the work of, say, Freud, for all its obscure mythologizing, ultimately sought to explain the psyche in terms of legible forces, the new rationalism depicts a jumbled realm of emotions and perceptions that are invisibly warping our reason and yet are also fundamentally alien to it.

Think of Peter Singer's arguments about empathy. His newer work increasingly draws on cognitive science, particularly findings about how pictures of doe-eyed children activate our evolutionarily encoded instincts to help. Now that you have been granted this scientific verdict on the true, base nature of your caring impulse, what are you to do with it? You certainly cannot grant it as having any rational content admissible to your moral deliberations, for of course the most basic premise here is that what you feel is irrelevant to what you ought to do.

But how are you to vanquish the distortion caused by the passions? The usual answer, in the Enlightenment tradition, is that you are to strive through a mighty act of the will to push them down, or ignore them. But the novelty of the new rationalism is its scientific account of how the passions distort even this effort. An impulse—empathy, say—becomes a sort of gremlin, birthed by our savannah ancestors and lurking still on our axons to tug at our decisional ropes.

Aside from its bleakness, the new rationalism is a philosophical mess. It takes us to be prejudiced beings, with given impulses that are at once devoid of rational content and yet also capable of wreaking havoc on our rational ideas. Meanwhile, our ideas are still stubbornly taken by many to be capable of conquering our brute

impulses, though the impulses do not speak any language of ideas and the ideas do not carry any force of impulse. Out of this mental fog stumble actions, driven either by impulses or not, either by reasons or not, at once under- and over-determined.

But to condemn a sentiment as not merely false but unintelligible to the terms of our reason is to posit an unbridgeable gap between them. No force of perception, no prejudice, can be simultaneously distorting *and* unintelligible. To offer an account of a distortion is to begin to make it intelligible, which must also be to admit it as having rational content, even if that content may be wrong or poorly interpreted or otherwise imperfect, as most such content surely is.

Today researchers are assembling an ever-longer list of what they consider cognitive biases, which are apparently the product of a jumble of cognitive mechanisms that evolution has snatched up and crammed uncomfortably together. A new philosophical effort is needed to account for the findings of this science, and to challenge its shortcomings. Efforts like the one undertaken in *The Place of Prejudice* will be vital to this task. Adam Sandel offers a picture of a mental world pervaded to its lowest levels with intelligibility; a world in which sensation and feeling and passion are not raw and brutish things, but brimming with meaning awaiting revelation and articulation. If philosophy succeeds in reckoning with this science, we will be able to see more clearly the kind of beings we are: animals rational yet always immersed in some scene and bound to act within it, unified beings in a multifarious world we did not ask to enter yet have no choice but to make our own.

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