

# Prejudice Made Plausible

by Jack Trotter

*"Without the aid of prejudice and custom, I should not be able to find my way across the room."*

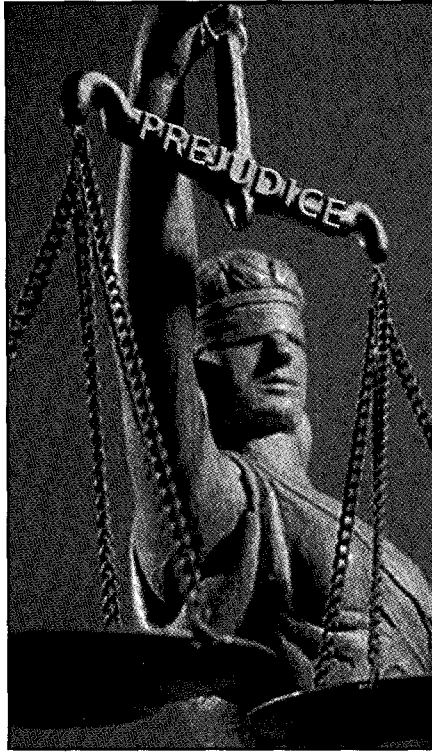
— William Hazlitt

## In Praise of Prejudice: The Necessity of Preconceived Ideas

by Theodore Dalrymple  
New York: Encounter Books;  
129 pp., \$20.00



The "prejudice against prejudice," as Theodore Dalrymple ironically terms it, has become so culturally pervasive that many—perhaps most—people are completely unaware that the term has not always been exclusively pejorative. The Latin *prejudicare*, in its primary sense, meant simply to "judge or rule beforehand" (as in a legal proceeding), though it could also signify an injurious action. Eric Partridge, in his etymological dictionary *Origins*, cites Tertullian as an early example of one who employed the term in this latter sense. Moreover, it is also true that the OED's citations, dating back to the 13th century, are weighted heavily on the side of injury or "hasty judgement." Yet in its most inclusive meaning (most relevant for present purposes), *prejudice* is simply "a feeling, favorable or unfavorable, toward any person or thing, prior to [sic] or not based on actual experience; . . . an unreasoning predilection or objec-



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tion" (OED). Please note that "unreasoning" need not in itself imply anything malicious or hurtful. I have a prejudice against Brussels sprouts; I have never actually tasted them. I am put off my feed by the odor alone. I have never subjected my prejudice to empirical enquiry. When it comes to the odious sprout, I am anything but Baconian, yet my prejudice against the pale cabbage is perfectly harmless.

Whether I prefer broccoli or Brussels sprouts, Bach or Beethoven, is, of course a matter of "taste," or prejudice. Everyone recognizes that in matters of aesthetic judgement, prejudice is an inescapable factor. I will no doubt believe until the day I die that Bach is superior to Beethoven, but I do not (unless my unreasoning predilection

has become fanatical) stigmatize the lover of Beethoven as somehow an inferior being. There is no malice in my prejudice. And I would be the first to admit that I can never "prove" to the satisfaction of any but lovers of Bach that *The Musical Offering* is a finer work than anything Beethoven ever composed. But when we move from the purely aesthetic realm (if there is such a thing) into the realms of morality, politics, jurisprudence, or even scientific judgement, most of us are apt to suppose that prejudice not only can be but should be eliminated from our deliberations. Yet, as Theodore Dalrymple attempts to demonstrate in his *In Praise of Prejudice*, prejudice plays an indispensable role in all judgment and is closely allied to the formation of character. Thus, Edmund Burke once wrote that "Prejudice renders a man's virtue his habit. . . . Through just prejudice, his duty becomes a part of his nature." For most of our contemporaries, Burke's apothegm is virtually incomprehensible. How, we might ask, can a prejudice be just? Isn't that simply oxymoronic? And doesn't Burke reveal the injustice of his own prejudices by employing sexist language ("a man's virtue") and by assuming that there is such a thing as human nature? And what about that hurtful word "duty," which implies some external code of behavior that may do injury to our pursuit of per-

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sonal happiness?

Today, we commonly use *prejudice* to describe, not our own behavior, but the behavior of those of whom we disapprove. Dalrymple notes that no one,

at least in polite company, would admit to a prejudice about anything: To admit to prejudice is to proclaim oneself a bigot, the kind of person who can't, or worse still, won't examine his preconceptions.

By our own lights, it would seem, we live in the most nonjudgmental, enlightened era in human history. Aside from the occasional bigot who, like the antediluvian farmer in Robert Frost's (often misunderstood) "Mending Wall," lives in his own mental darkness "like a stone-savage armed," we make no judgments that are not reasoned judgments. "Every proper man . . . is a Descartes on every subject and every question that comes before him," forming opinions that owe nothing "to unexamined pre-suppositions." Or so we like to flatter ourselves. We may disapprove of the man who homeschools his children and believes that the Bible provides a factual account of human origins; we may shake our heads at the woman who believes that her place is in the home with her children; or we may believe that gangsta rappers are paragons of artistic originality. But none dare call such judgments *prejudice*.

How, then, did we arrive at such an advanced degree of enlightened self-deception? Dalrymple identifies a number of culprits, but chief among them is John Stuart Mill, whose *On Liberty* provides a philosophical foundation for the view that the truly sovereign individual must owe nothing to preconceived opinion or authority—the view that absolutely everything must be subject to rational ex-

amination. To place one's faith in hand-me-down opinions is to sacrifice some part of one's authentic individuality. "To conform to custom merely as custom," says Mill, "does not educate or develop in [the individual] any of the distinctive qualities which are the . . . endowment of a human being." But as Dalrymple convincingly argues, Mill dangerously exaggerates the place of rationality in everyday life. To a certain extent, we really have no choice but to rely on prejudice (preconceived opinion) or external authority. I trust in the authority of my physician, for example, when he tells me that my cholesterol levels are much too high and that the problem must be treated in a particular way. Of course, I could choose to question his authority. I might object to his choice of treatments, having read up on the matter. But if I refuse the treatment he suggests, I rely on the authority of some other expert who has no doubt spent years of his life researching hyperlipidemia. Of course, someone might object, that may be true in scientific matters, but surely, in the moral sphere, things are different, especially since they involve the very essence of my sovereign individuality. If I rely on the authority of medical experts to prescribe my medications, that might be accepted without permanent damage to my *amour propre*; but if I rely in moral matters on the guidance of some preconceived body of opinion—say, the wisdom of my grandparents or the teachings of a church tradition—surely that compromises my selfhood in a radical way. Surely I am then a mere cipher, a nonentity, ripe for extermination in the name of the greater good!

Dalrymple's response to such arguments is both invigorating and less than fully satisfying. He admits, to be sure, that not all prejudices are equal. Some are clearly unworthy or unjust. Nor would he claim that a prejudice

should never be subject to rational examination, yet he would assert that, even after an "unreasoning" prejudice is examined in the light of reason, it does not cease thereby to be a prejudice. He further recognizes clearly enough that the quest for an autonomous source of judgment within the self alone is a fool's errand. The individual who rejects the claims of a moral tradition inevitably turns to some other external authority—a peer group, a therapy group, a role model fabricated by Hollywood, the mass media. He simply swaps one prejudice for another. Of course, that same individual will persuade himself that his will in these matters is sovereign, while he fails to notice that his moral choices invariably serve the dictates of his libido, or his craving for security, or his longing for social recognition, or mere convenience. In short, the desire for moral autonomy leads to moral automatism.

Dalrymple does not pay nearly enough attention, however, to the problem faced by the individual in a society in which the erosion of moral traditions, of inherited bodies of prejudice or opinion, has left him to wander aimlessly in an ethical Potter's Field of shards and detritus that were once part of an intact tradition. Of course, Dalrymple is aware of the problem, but he seems incapable of, or unwilling to, face it squarely. While he is eloquent (and, at times, witty) about the necessity of prejudice and its role in perpetuating moral traditions, he is evidently reluctant to advocate any particular tradition. Yet if Western civilization has any hope of surviving its present malaise, of resisting not only further attrition of its vital substance from within but also the Islamic threat from without, it cannot do so without a massive renunciation of the false gods it now worships and a return to its specifically Christian foundation.

Among the most insightful of Dalrymple's arguments is his claim that the abolition of prejudice has totalitarian implications. It is perfectly obvious that, in the name of "equality," at least some prejudices

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must be suppressed. Racial prejudice is the paradigmatic prejudice of this sort. Thus, in the name of “equality of opportunity,” we have codified into law all manner of prohibitions against racial discrimination (some of which are no doubt justified). In some cases, as in affirmative-action legislation, the law seems rigged to ensure not only equal opportunity but equal result. But, for the most part (here in America, anyway), we have resisted the kind of draconian measures that would be required to produce an absolute equality of outcome for all, regardless of race, creed, sex, or social class. We pride ourselves on the notion that “equality of opportunity” can happily coexist with individual initiative. But as Dalrymple notes, while “equality of outcome” would require authoritarian measures, “equality of opportunity” is potentially much more radical. For if the latter objective were to be realized fully, prejudice would have to be, not suppressed, but recalibrated through massive social engineering, to ensure that all share the same (pre-

sumably multicultural, feminist, anti-Christian) prejudices. “And to do this would require methods of the kind described in Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World*.” Such an experiment

would necessitate a totalitarian dictatorship more terrifyingly thoroughgoing than any yet seen. It would make the achievement of equality of outcome . . . seem like an exercise in liberty.

Despite his use of the conditional tense, Dalrymple is too well informed to imagine that the scenario he conjures lies merely in a possible Huxleyan future. Although he stops short of saying so, I suspect that the experiment has already begun.

For those who are unfamiliar with Dalrymple and his work, I should add that he is no armchair moralist. He is, to his credit, employed by no think tank, nor has he ever (to my knowledge) sought or acquired tenure in an academic setting. On the contrary, he

is a retired physician (a psychiatrist) who treated patients for many years in a public hospital in Birmingham, England, as well as in a nearby prison. He draws heavily upon his personal experience, not only in the present work, but in his highly regarded *Life at the Bottom: The Worldview That Makes the Underclass* (2001) and, more recently, *Romancing Opiates: Pharmacological Lies and the Addiction Bureaucracy* (2006). In addition, he writes regularly for the *Spectator* as well as the *City Journal*.

Some may argue that Dalrymple (whose real name is Anthony Daniels) leans too heavily upon anecdotal, firsthand observation. (What, after all, could be more prejudicial?) But, as a social critic, he is also capable of rigorous argumentation, conveyed with an elegance and clarity, that is all too rare today. Even so, I expect that Dalrymple would make only modest claims for his own work, agreeing perhaps with H.L. Mencken that criticism is, after all, simply “prejudice made plausible.”

## SIXTH ANNUAL ABBEVILLE INSTITUTE SUMMER SCHOOL

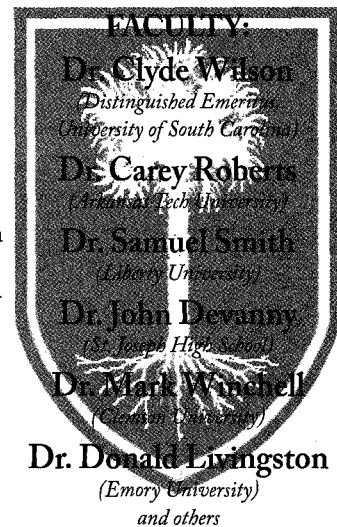
### “Northern Anti-Slavery Agitation”

St. Christopher Conference Center, Johns Island, SC • June 10-15, 2008

What motivated Northern anti-slavery agitation? Was it a moral determination to emancipate and integrate the African population as social and political equals? Since this captures our own moral outlook, we are tempted to read those inclinations into the “anti-slavery” language we find in history books.

But that is not how James DeWolf thought of the matter. DeWolf was an “anti-slavery” senator from Rhode Island, opposed to admitting Missouri as a slave state. He had been a world-class slave trader before the trade was outlawed in 1808. His family company ran over 80 voyages to Africa and sold slaves throughout the Western Hemisphere. DeWolf never had an “Amazing Grace” conversion. But if his “anti-slavery” position had no moral content, what was its meaning?

We will explore the main Northern anti-slavery critiques as they appeared in the Philadelphia Convention, the Louisiana Purchase, New England nullification of the War of 1812, the Abolition Petitions, the Missouri Compromise, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, and the agitation over allowing slavery in the West. To what extent did this agitation spring from a moral concern to emancipate and incorporate the African population, and to what extent did it display quite different motives?



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# Robert Frost: The Definitive Work

by Tom Landess

Robert Frost: The Poet  
as Philosopher

by Peter J. Stanlis  
Wilmington, DE: ISI Books;  
498 pp., \$28.00



During much of the 20th century, Robert Frost was widely regarded as our greatest living poet. Yet the Frost poems that students used to read in college English classes were those more easily accessible: “Mending Wall,” “Birches,” “Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening.” Typically, the professor would spend a day or two on Frost, superficially noting the quaint, country metaphorical content of these works, and then move on to T.S. Eliot and spend the rest of the semester explicating “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” and “The Waste Land.”

Thus, students were led to believe that Frost is “easier” than Eliot, less profound, and, therefore, less important. Indeed, the reverse is true. To understand and teach “Prufrock” and “The Waste Land,” the professor had merely to read a handful of articles in learned journals, where a few perceptive critics discussed the cinematic structure of these works and noted their heavily ironic contempt for the modern world. Eliot delivered that cynical message in code; and teachers—with the unacknowledged help of a few critics—acted as decoders for bright-eyed freshmen longing to be world-weary.

No such definitive criticism existed for the works of Robert Frost, in large measure because the poems that didn’t make it into textbooks were often too deep for ordinary Ph.D.’s to fathom without professional guidance. Peter Stanlis’s new book, *Robert Frost: The Poet as Philosopher*, is that definitive work, the one from which English teachers could have cribbed a year’s worth of lectures to instruct and dazzle their students.

Today, Frost and the philosophers who influenced him are regarded as relics of a repressive society by the deconstructionists, the latest academics to dumb down literary studies and make poetry the servant of ideology. For this and other reasons, some intelligent readers may come to the Stanlis book skeptically. Poets are not typically philosophers; and books about their “philosophy” are too often exercises in the making of mountains out of molehills—taking a single poem, a line, a phrase, and attaching an entire philosophical system to its tail. Frost, however, wrote philosophical poetry, grappling in verse with ontological and epistemological questions that had fascinated him since youth.

Stanlis boldly states his thesis at the beginning of Chapter 1:

My subject is Robert Frost’s philosophy, and my thesis is that dualism provides the whole basis of his total but unsystematic philosophical view of reality . . . Dualism as the basis of Frost’s philosophy is the foremost single element that scholars and literary critics need to consider in any study of his life and thought, including the themes of his poetry.

Frost’s youthful preoccupation with the conflict between philosophical and religious opposites may have grown out of his conversations with his mother, a deeply religious woman worried about her son’s willingness to consider dangerous ideas. Following Frost’s own ferocious rejection of the belief that a poet’s works can be understood by studying his life, Stanlis touches briefly on this relationship between mother and son without involving his reader too deeply.

By the same token, Stanlis says that you can’t deduce Frost’s dualism merely by reading his poetry. Consequently, he adopts an eclectic approach to the purpose he hopes to accomplish, *viz.*, persuasive proof that dualism is the key to an understanding of everything about Frost—his poetry, his philosophy, his understanding of

God, his social and political views.

In a succeeding chapter, Stanlis quotes Frost himself to show how the poet’s understanding of metaphor reveals his essential dualism:

Greatest of all attempts to say one thing in terms of another is the philosophical attempt to say matter in terms of spirit, or spirit in terms of matter to make the final unity. That is the greatest attempt that ever failed. We stop just short there. But it is the height of poetry, the height of all thinking, the height of all poetic thinking, that attempt to say matter in terms of spirit and spirit in terms of matter.

Stanlis might have rested his case there, particularly after quoting a sentence the poet wrote in a 1958 letter to Lawrence Thompson: “I am a dualist.”

However, he goes on to discuss Frost’s confrontation with a variety of conflicting views growing out of philosophy, religion, and aesthetics. In an early chapter, Stanlis shows how Frost the dualist tackles the theory of evolution. In fact, the poet managed to resolve the apparent conflict between Darwin and religion when he was a schoolboy. Thus, in 1892, he wrote: “You say, God made man of mud, and I think God made man of prepared mud.” And in 1955, at Bread Loaf, he told an audience: “It doesn’t make any great difference to give up saying that God made [man] out of mud. All you have to say is that God made him out of prepared mud—worked it up from animal life.”

In another chapter, Stanlis highlights a running quarrel with “Three Generations of Huxleys,” whom Frost regarded as monists and ideologues, evangelists for a religion of science that denied the validity of any other claim to truth, whether spiritual, aesthetic, or merely common sense. In discussing the idea of progress through science, championed so fervently by the Huxleys, Stanlis says,

Frost denied that evolution and the scientific method and tech-