

## Prejudice

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### Abstract

The author considers that prejudice is the method of survival and protection of the mind due to the impossibility of development of tolerance and contact with one's own emotional experiences. Without intimate contact with his emotions, the individual cannot attribute meanings to his experiences and has to resort to and count on rigid systems of beliefs and of behavior that would have the role of substitutes of his own discernment that cannot be reached. However, this protection can turn into a nuisance. In the same way the protective shell is to mollusks; the protection, if not abandoned, may impede the animal's growth and suffocate it, killing it.

**Key-words:** Prejudice, thinking, reasoning, emotional experience, rêverie, moral, ethic

### A: Theoretical considerations

Consider a hypothetical situation that is based on an actual experience, in which a patient needs to insist that his analyst is treating him badly and with cruelty, in spite of verifying in his own perceptions and descriptions what is happening at the consulting office where he is shown quite the opposite. We could verify that the patient is an "expert" in dealing with situations in which he thinks he is being attacked. However, if the atmosphere continues to be friendly, he does not know how to react; he gets bewildered and is without any ready-made scheme of behavior. He believes he knows what to do with an enemy, but he feels completely lost if he verifies that he is indeed being well treated. He does not find a way to handle the situation; he does not know how to behave. We could, as a hypothesis, correlate this situation to Melanie Klein's<sup>1</sup> postulations about the functioning of the paranoid-schizoid and the depressive positions. If the patient recognizes the analyst as a friendly object, he does not know what to do with his violence nor with his hate; he cannot rationalize and therefore he cannot find justification for his hate. He will have to recognize that he himself is where the original source of the violence stems from, and he will not be able to say that his hate and his violence are reactive. If the analyst is a villain, his cruelty would be "justified". Otherwise, the patient will possibly have to confront himself with contradictory feelings of love and hate and, probably, with remorse and guilt. The friendly analyst also indicates a world that he doesn't know or he doesn't recognize. In this new world, he doesn't know how to behave. We could think about certain individuals that work as mercenary soldiers; when a war ends,

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<sup>1</sup> Klein, 1946.

they need to find another. They do not know what to do in a civilized environment. In the war, they are "justified" to act with atrocity.

Following the same line of thought, we could consider several religious conflicts around the world. Mr. X that is not of my religion is a monster, a mortal threat. I can attack him with all my hate because he is a threat to "my" God. - The paradoxical, is there an all-powerful God that needs human beings' to defend him? - In this context, there is a clear splitting among good and evil. A religious doctrine could possibly orchestrate a behavioral pattern, it organizes social groups when it is not reachable an elaboration of depressive nature (where the good and gratifying breast is the same that frustrates and is hated by the baby). When ambivalence and feelings of guilt and regret (feelings that are humanizing) cannot be tolerated, neither the perception associated with these feelings of the existence of himself and of the "other" - there is a recurrent splitting. A world of external persecutory enemies organizes an operation system of behavior.

A similar situation could be verified when people say that they are submitted to family and matrimonial relationships where everything that they say is very unfavorable. Apparently, all of the relationships are stereotyped and formal. These people live their lives in great suffering. Though, he/she cannot leave this routine that he/she describe as being infernal, for as bad as it can be, there is a routine, there is an organization of conduct, in a manner where it is supposed that somebody in the family, or the family itself, should know how to behave. These manners are all according to stereotypes and they are imitations that are based on prejudices (what is different from pre-conceptions in search for realizations)<sup>2</sup>. A person in this mental state fears to change the situation where he/she lives because he/she would be frightened with the possibility of not finding an external context to indicate him/her what to do - even though what he/she feels he/she has to do is in a dogmatic and coercive way. He/she feels extremely bewildered in situations that are not predictable. This is due to the absence of the person's own discernment. The lack of personal discernment excludes the capacity for decisions in unknown and new situations with unknown reference and context.

### **Morals and ethics**

In groups strongly submitted to norms and pre-established precepts nobody feels really capable of thinking and all of its members despair and accuse each other when something unusual or unknown happens. The relationships tend to be limited to their own group that, in its turn, tends to be very restricted. The possible moves that could be made become more and more restricted in order to avoid an encounter with the unknown. The paradoxical, however, is that real life never repeats itself. Every moment is always a new moment that has never happened before and that will never be repeated. Those groups or individuals in these conditions need an "external" structure, an exo-skeleton, an armor, that would orientate their lives for they feel that

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<sup>2</sup> Bion, 1962, 1963, 1965, 1970.

they do not count on an internal organization that makes it possible for them to have their own judgment of what happens in each specific and only situation of their lives. Somebody needs to tell them what they should do. It is necessary for the appearance of authorities, of a Messiah, of someone who is "illuminated" that would "know" which is the truth to be followed. A moral code needs to be established for the person to get a guideline to behave by. That is different from personal ethics that is developed from the elaboration of the depressive position<sup>3</sup> when, as an example, someone gives up the rivalry with the father in the oedipal situation not for fear of the threat of castration, but for the loving consideration that he has for himself, for the father and for the mother. To eliminate the father to be with the mother would result in damages for all those involved. The father is not just the rival; he is also a loved one. Not wanting to destroy the one who is loved, in spite of the desire to do it and for the mother, he can give this up due to an insight about his ambivalence and with the prevalence of the loving pulses over the ones of hate and of rivalry. The oedipal solution, in this context, would be ethical. In the context of fear of castrating retaliations, there would be the establishment of an organization based on morals (external pressure, external menace and prejudice - "this is not to be done! You will be punished if you do it!" - what is quite different from an attitude due to a depressive elaboration). In the ethical situation, there would be a consideration for himself and for the other person, otherwise, when submitted to a moral system, the restriction, if it takes place, is not due to respect for the other person, but for the fear of retaliation. In the ethic situation, the incestuous and murderous drives would be emptied of cathexis, using Freudian terminology, and in the moral one, the drives would be repressed or split-off and projected, but they would continue fully invested of cathexis. With the drives full of investment (cathexis), the external control is then necessary. This happens in the submission to very restrictive religious systems, or in the submission to neurosis which is used to hide psychosis.

Prejudice is, above all, a protecting and organizational system.

Let us take another example. A young woman enters a religious order to become a nun. When asked during the day she took her vows if she was happy, she answered yes, because she would not have to think anymore- the mother superior would do it for her.

In the lack of development of the capacity to attribute meaning to the lived experiences in function of the associated impossibility of maintaining contact with one's own emotional experiences, the prejudice, the "right" and the "wrong", the established morals, allow people to have some organization, in a way they will have an established behavioral pattern to follow and to imitate. Prejudices give a "North" to the individual. This doesn't implicate that the established North would have any actual relationship with the person's real needs or to his/hers authentic interests which

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<sup>3</sup> See Segre, M. & Cohen, C., 1995, and also Cornford, F.M., 1932. Bion, 1967, 1970.

could be known only if the person could maintain contact with him/herself. Contact with oneself is exactly what a prejudiced individual cannot tolerate or try - this intolerance or fear to have any contact with oneself is what strengthens the need for and the attachment to the prejudice.

### **Thinking**

Some patients come to see me with the idea of solving specific problems of their lives such as a matrimonial crises, problems in their jobs, impossibility of establishing durable relationships, panic crises, among others. The first step is to help them to notice that their larger and true problem is their difficulty to mull the problems that they are confronted with during their lives. Putting this in another way, most of the difficulties that they have when dealing with the adversities that they need to face is due to a failure, or lack of development in their capacity to think the thoughts that come to their mind. To think is not synonymous of ratiocinating; it is something that is inseparable from the capacity to tolerate frustrations and to the emotions associated to the existence of these. To think implies the possibility to negotiate with one's own emotions during the very occurrence of the emotions. This possibility allows a sufficiently realistic observation of the facts that we are actually living. Otherwise, the intolerance to the current emotions promotes the attempt of avoiding contact with them or the attempt of eliminating them, leading to a distortion, or even a denial, of the perception of the events that are happening and, consequently, to a practical inadequacy in dealing with them<sup>4</sup>.

A person will have better chances of being successful in her/his projects and in finding solutions to the difficulties that he/she has to face if he/she has a good capacity to think. That is inseparable from a reasonable condition to bear frustrating situations and from living together with ones' own emotions, even though they are very intense and painful at a given moment. The development of this capacity can avoid a person getting into unnecessary trouble and difficulties because, not distorting the perception, one can notice them and deal with them before it is too late. A lot of difficulties are also created due to one's own mental disturbance and the consequent distortions of perceptions.

### **Impossibility of contact with one's own emotions and the lack of the capacity of thinking. An example from the Book of One Thousand and one Nights**

In one of the stories from the Book of One Thousand and one Nights, recently translated to Portuguese from the Arabic by Mamede M. Jarouche (Ed. Globo, 2005), a man admits to having murdered his wife and he tells how this happened. He says that she was very ill and he, in his despair and wanting to help her, he said he was willing to make any sacrifice to grant her a wish. She was in bed and very weak, and she manifested the desire to eat an apple. There was not, however, any available

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<sup>4</sup> Unfortunately, nowadays, the names of these cities are associated, in very violent ways, to many expressions of prejudices.

apples in Baghdad. He needed to travel Basra<sup>5</sup> to find the only apples that would be available at that time: these apples were in the caliph's orchard in that city. He traveled more than one month (round trip) to bring three apples for his wife. When arriving, he came across such a weak woman that she didn't have the ability of ingesting any of them. He left them close to the wife's bed, on a small table. The following day he went to the market and when he was there, he came across an unknown black slave of vile appearance<sup>6</sup> with one of the apples in his hand. He became very disturbed and he asked the slave where he had found that apple. The slave answered that he had obtained it from his girlfriend who had made her cuckolded husband make a long trip to bring her some apples. Broken, he went back home where he found his wife in the bed, and, beside her, there were only two apples. He asked her about the third apple. The wife said she did not have any idea of what could have happened to the fruit. Taken by fury, the man decapitates his wife and chops up her body. He then puts the corps in a rolled rug and throws it into the river to hide the crime. After a while, he meets with one of their sons and the child tells him, in despair, that he had stolen one of the precious apples that the father had brought for the mother and ran for street. As soon as he got there, a big and unknown slave took the apple from his hand what made him very frightened. He implored the thief several times to give him back the apple saying that the fruit was the result of a great effort done by his father who had traveled one month to bring it to his mother. Very guilty, the boy went to his father to admit to his crime. At that moment, seeing what he had done due to his precipitation, the father is overwhelmed with despair. The story proceeds, but I leave to Sherazad the task of continuing it.

I think that it is worth noticing that the man from the tale who murdered his wife reasoned but he did not think. He had no condition to think (according to what Bion proposed as thinking). It can also be noticed the similarity between this narrative and that of Shakespeare's play, Othello.

### **The commander that can think and the other that cannot**

W.R. Bion suggested a model, which during a battle the victory tends to lean to the side of the commander of the battalion whom has higher capacity for facing adverse situations while maintaining his ability to think clearly. Amid a bombing raid, we are submitted to very strong emotions, above all the feelings of being threatened and of persecution. The commander that cannot tolerate contact with the violent emotions mobilized by this situation will act in such a way as to get rid of this situation, without thinking, in order to rid himself of the feelings that he cannot bear. He will behave like the ostriches from cartoons that put their heads in a hole so as not to see

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<sup>5</sup> The tales told by Sherazad always portray black people as being slaves and having hideous looks. Women are shown, almost exclusively, as dishonest, unfaithful, evil witches and malignant.

<sup>6</sup> As an example, there was the (in)famous Maginot Line between France and Germany that was projected and built according to former battles and to memories of past situations. It couldn't be thought at that moment that things could happen differently in different times. The Line was developed in accordance to pre-judices.

the danger. Or he will blindly follow what is prescribed by the manuals of war tactics that he has studied without verifying if what is prescribed and was good for previous situations can still be applied in the actual and present context of the battle that is indeed taking place<sup>7</sup>. The commander who can bear to live together with his feelings, to keep in contact and to negotiate with his own feelings, even though as difficult as this can be, can continue to observe the context and, eventually, notice the opportunities that may appear and then take advantage of them. Shakespeare described something similar in the play Henry V<sup>8</sup> where the king of England leading a small troop, surrounded by a much larger French army, and who was in a very unfavorable position, could turn the situation around to his advantage and defeat the French<sup>9</sup>.

A psychoanalysis is not intended to substitute someone's task of thinking or of solving problems, quite on the contrary, it is a work that helps people develop their capacity to think when aiding them to enter in contact with themselves and helping them to know who they actually are, and, consequently, they can develop their own capacities to formulate and to notice which are their own point of views and interests. This is possible only if there is the development of the capacity to keep in contact with one's own emotional experiences. If this happens, the person will find him/herself able to deal with the difficulties coming from adversities with which he/she is confronted and will tend to have a more realistic view of the facts. He/she will also be able to take advantage of the true opportunities that life may present to him/her at the time they actually happen..

People that don't develop the condition to stand frustrations and their associated feelings, fear the intensity of their emotions, even the emotions of happiness, of satisfaction and of joy, so they need to be separated from them<sup>10</sup> (through splitting, projective identifications, repressions, etc.). Therefore they tend to distrust, in an accentuated way, their own discernments. Getting rid of their function of making judgments of what is actually going on because this function requests contact with one's own emotional experiences. This also happens because they may verify in the practice of their very lives and also in part to an internal perception, although diffuse, they cannot count on a sufficiently developed psychic apparatus to allow them to give meaning to what they live. They end up needing "authorities" and looking for them. The "authorities" will tell them what is "right" and what is "wrong". Prejudices also

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<sup>7</sup> Defenses originated this way tend to stereotypy and, due to its rigidity; use to be equivocal and inefficient. (Transformations in rigid motion - Bion, 1965).

<sup>8</sup> Shakespeare W., Henry V . Paris, LGF - Le Livre de Poche.

<sup>9</sup> See also Druon, M., 1977.

<sup>10</sup> Intolerance to experiences of satisfaction and joy, according to Cecil Rezze (training analyst of the Brazilian Psychoanalytic Association of S.Paulo), can happen not necessarily due to its association with envy, jealousy or rivalry, but due to the lack of condition to bear the intensity of the very emotions of joy, satisfaction and happiness that is felt as disruptive.

establish goals and aims to be followed, so in this way, they "organize" the person's life. This does not mean that, even though we become free of prejudices, we can afford to live without relationships and that we do not have to take into account somebody else's point of view. However, this is very different from feeling that we cannot reach our own conclusions (and to assume their consequences) and that we are in the dependence of an "illuminated guide" that is going to tell us the way to be taken.

### **The search for authorities**

Very often, explanations obtained by reasoning but not as a result of an insight obtained through actual contact with ones own experience and discernment give the impression that a meaning for a phenomenon or for an experience was found, but actually, it is an artifice that hides the incapacity of really finding a meaning. The prejudice also works in this way. - Not being able to see a meaning to ones life, one need's "authorities" or closed systems of faiths to give guidance as to what action to follow or, to establish some organizational routine. As long as people do not develop the capacity to work or to negotiate with their own emotions, what implicates them to enter in contact with themselves, and, consequently to develop their capacity to think (as proposed by Bion<sup>11</sup>, what is very different from ratiocinating or from becoming erudite<sup>12</sup>), they cannot give up their prejudices. Nor can they give up submitting to these closed systems of faith and convictions. Because they fear to be without direction and therefore would feel completely lost. They can feel like a gas that is without a rigid structure to contain it or to give it form, it would expand and it would disperse in a disconnected way in the infinite - in other words, they experience the fright of a psychotic disintegration.

### **Rêverie**

It is not the task of the analyst be a substitute for the "authorities" to whom the patients falls back upon. The analyst can show to his patients their search of someone to substitute their own authority by somebody else's and then help them to develop their resources to welcome their own emotional experiences. This could be done, above all, through the analyst's capacity for what Bion called rêverie<sup>13</sup>, which would be a condition to welcome and to digest the emotional experiences mobilized by contact with the patients. If the analyst can assimilate and digest the emotional experiences, he would have the possibility to attribute meaning to what is happening

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<sup>11</sup> Bion, 1970.

<sup>12</sup> This could be seen in the Grid as belonging to the Column 2 (Bion, 1963). In an other way, the Column 2 can be seen not with the purpose to avoid truth, but also as a category in which a scientific theory that has many well known incoherences is maintained because no better one has already been found to substitute it.

<sup>13</sup> Bion, 1962.

in the encounters between him and the analysand. When the analyst grasps a meaning he needs to attribute a form to it, an image, so that he could perceive what he has grasped with clarity and, consequently, be able to speak of it. This would happen when dreaming (awake during the session or sleeping at night) the experience and what was observed through the senses is possible. The dream would propitiate a form, a visual image, a metaphor, for what is ineffable<sup>14</sup>. If the analysand develops his condition to enter into contact with himself and to undergo digestion and to dream (reverie) his emotional experiences, he may become apt to grasp his own meanings to what lives, to the facts with which he is confronted to, without the need of authorities and of pre-established systems of rules.

It is not by chance that psychoanalysis is felt as a great threat to the Establishment and to all religious systems of thought. Psychoanalysis, when genuine, is also a threat to the very psychoanalytic Establishment itself and so there is an incessant effort to vulgarize it and to turn it innocuous, since Freud's times.

## **B: Clinical examples**

### **First clinical episode**

I have in mind a situation where the patient, according to my perception, makes an effort to transform all and any communication that I make to him into a personal attack that disqualifies him. He presents himself, in an obstinate way, as a victim of my injustice (and also the injustice of his relatives). I verify, however, that his behavior hides his maneuvers to "reduce to bits" the insights that I can reach and that I offer him through my communications. When he is confronted with this perception of mine, he gets perplexed. He knows neither how to act nor how to react. I propose that instead of acting in some way, that he should allow himself time to reflect on the situation, or at least, to allow himself the privilege of having a doubt. This doubt would be the recognition of the possibility that my communication to him could portray the truth. He feels very uncomfortable in bearing the thought that he can indeed, act in the way that I have described to him and he tends to exclude any uncertainty about his convictions of what really happens (that he is mistreated).

### **Second clinical episode**

The patient enters my consulting office and comments during our conversation that he considers that the abstract pictures I have hanging on the walls of my waiting room are for some value other than the aesthetic, possibly they are there for sentimental reasons, since there was nothing beautiful about them. He then refers to engravings that he has at home and that, according to him, are impressionist and consequently beautiful. In my response, without entering into a discussion regarding the merit or value of the work, I call his attention to the fact that his mind cannot accept the possibility of the existence of other aesthetic patterns than his. He considered his aesthetic sense as being universal and as the only true one. There is no

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<sup>14</sup> Bion, 1992.

place for another opinion. There is a one and only point of view and this view is universal: no other is possible. Considering this postulate, in a certain way, he is confused with the universe itself - he and the universe are the same thing because there is no other place different from the one he occupies where things could be seen differently from a different angle. With the evolution of the conversation, (I am synthesizing the situation), the patient declared that it was very frightening to conceive the existence of other manners of perceiving facts other than his own. It was frightening to think that the world was not what he believed it to be. He considered that he would see himself as very vulnerable if he realized this. In a summarized way, I considered that his imprisonment in his convictions worked as a protecting shell, as a survival tool. However, even the mollusks need to change their shells from time to time in order to grow and not to be suffocated by their very instrument of survival. During the shell change (either if it is produced by the animal itself or if it is acquired from another animal), there are, indeed, moments that they are really very exposed and vulnerable. However, if this is not done, they can be squeezed and annihilated by their very protection apparatus.

### **Third clinical episode**

It took me a certain amount of time listening to a patient's constant complaints regarding his submission to his family group, no matter how much he lamented about the cruelty of his relatives and of the damage he suffered due to their alleged cruelty, to realize that there was a strong need for him to keep the situation going on.

I verified that this person did not feel that he possessed an organization of his own and an own discernment. The interior of his personality was constituted by several isolated elements (not configuring a grouping like an archipelago, but rather of isolated islands) or lines of experience without any connection of one with the others just like certain African countries or others in the Middle East that are units only from the formal point of view, having been created by the European metropolises at the time of the colonies. In reality, they are constituted artificially and maintained united, generally, by ferocious dictatorships. In the absence of the dictators or of the colonial metropolis, they end up disrupted, because of their different ethnicities and tribes that have never really integrated or mixed in a way as to compose a true nation. The patient not tolerating his emotional experiences (in our encounters he was horrified by the possibility of verifying which feelings he could be having towards me and which feelings could be associated to the facts that happened during the session) could not count on them to attribute a meaning to his experiences in life - the meanings are reached through the emotional experiences, not by reason. Reason only organizes what is perceived and noticed in an intuitive way. Meaning is obtained through the emotional experiences.

When I presented the patient to the model of the countries that I have just referred to, he felt shocked and uncomfortable at being seen this way. Not much later, however, he affirmed that, in spite of the discomfort and shock, he felt, for the first time in his

life, that there was really somebody existing inside of him; he felt himself as being actually real, even though he did not have words to describe what this is (being real).

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## Notes

[1] Klein, 1946.

[2] Bion, 1962, 1963, 1965, 1970.

[3] See Segre, M. & Cohen, C., 1995, and also Cornford, F.M., 1932.

Bion, 1967, 1970.

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[13]Bion, 1962.

[14]Bion, 1992.

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