

Free Will, Morality, Bias, Prejudice, and Racism

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Abstract:

This essay is designed to put into perspective bias, prejudice and racism in terms of our human nature. First our nature is discussed to clarify notions of our free will versus the world's determinism, our sense of morality and its desire to promote some equality among us, and responsibility. Morality is then distinguished from moral tenets or beliefs. Biases and prejudices are defined in terms of these beliefs, and racism is shown to be an immoral expression of them.

Underlying Theme

The underlying theme of this essay is to understand bias, prejudice, and racism, and how these notions are related to our natural free will, responsibility and moral sense. A discussion of freedom, consciousness, responsibility, equality, and morality precede the discussion of bias and racism, in an effort to explain the latter.

Introduction

In the first section, human nature is explored, in an ontological sense, to understand the meaning of freedom, free will, and responsibility. A distinction will be presented between free will and its accompanying neuro-chemical processes, residing in the central nervous system. An individual performing an action, described in common human language, characterizes free will. Individual responsibility is inherent in the action. The accompanying neuro-chemical, physical activity is described by causal language, and is potentially depicted by scientific explanations. A constant duality is seen to be present. Finally, freedom and responsibility are seen to be necessary requirements for moral actions.

The second section deals with the differentiation between moral tenets or beliefs and moral actions. Morality can be expressed predominantly by a quest to expand equality to those less favored by genetics and acculturation by the voluntary restriction of some liberties from the more fortunate. The necessity of a moral sense being part of our nature is stressed. The third section is an expansion of the moral discussion to include biases, prejudice, and racism.

Free Will and the Physical World: the Mind Body Quandary

The physical world is the world of our senses, described in causal, everyday language and made intelligible by science. As infants, we apprehend that we can see, touch, hold, smell, hear and taste the physical world, and that our senses complement one another. The tactile shape confirms the visual appearance of a thing. Tasting embellishes the pleasant odor of food. Sometimes one sense modifies our judgment of the physical world ascertained by another sense, as when touch confirms the straightness of a stick in water that is refractively bent as sensed by vision.

The process of experiencing the physical world includes both the sensations and the inferences made about the sensations, which clarify the world. We infer or induce things in explaining them. Concepts of causality, time, space and gravity are not seen directly. Rather they are the fabric of experiences. Things that we sense are contained within space and time, but space and time are not directly experienced. Gravity is always

with us, but we do not touch it directly. Rather, we note the glass crashing to the floor, the strain on our bodies while getting up, the acorn falling from the oak tree. Causality is inferred, as we do not see causality as one billiard ball strikes another; rather, we see the first billiard ball striking the second, then the second moving from the first.

The common sense descriptions of the world are provided by everyday language, consensually reinforced by other people. The words are signs, representing things, and are agreed upon by the use of the same language, a product of our social nature. Involving a third person or a dictionary can often resolve differences of opinions between two humans on things, as the meanings are established by consensus.

The scientific approach to the world uses different procedures in its quest to understand and explain physical processes. Precise measurements of phenomena and mathematical descriptions are components of the techniques involved. Sophisticated technologies are also used. Often, statistical inferences are made. The usefulness of a theoretical description is measured by the extent to which it provides a deeper understanding of a phenomenon. Further, the theoretical descriptions often allow for predictions of future events. The language of science is couched in the inference that the physical world behaves in a causal manner, similar to the common sense language. Understanding consciousness is another thing altogether; it can be elucidated through our seeing red.

The distinction between seeing red and the physical description of the accompanying physical, chemical, and neurological events is readily apparent. When we first understand redness, it is a color present on an object. Infants become accustomed to notions of redness by pointing at objects and by the consensual use of the description, red. Gradations of redness occur as red blends into orange. No one can claim that his perception of red is identical to another, as no one can get inside another's mind to see what the other sees. However, there are enough similarities in what is called red by others to allow for a mutual understanding of redness, expressed in common sense, everyday language. Color-blindness in some can be clarified by enlisting the involvement of others who are not color-blind.

On the other hand, if technology were sufficiently advanced, it might be theoretically possible to have an external imaging technique directed at one's brain that would be able completely to describe all of the physical, chemical, and neurological events taking place while someone sees red. However the physical accounting of the process is distinctly different from the common sense meaning of perceiving red.

Similarly, when a human physical action is performed, both common sense and scientific languages can describe it, but the two depictions are quite different. The scientific explanation; including neurological, neuro-chemical, and physical descriptions; is different from the common-sense account of the action. The first is potentially an external study of the physical processes involved; the second involves the internal self, engaged in the action.

The distinction between one's self and the neuro-chemical apparatus that accompanies self-hood can be explicated by some homely examples, such as honking a horn. While driving down a street with your spouse, you honk your horn. Your spouse saw a squirrel scurrying across the street 50 feet away and commented that the honking was unnecessary as the squirrel would have been safely across the street before you would get to it. You reply that you were not honking at the squirrel; rather you were saying hello to neighbor, Joe, who was raking leaves. Let's imagine that a set of scans are available that could have been directed at your brain and would completely describe all of the physical, neuronal, and chemical processes going on before and after your honking. No matter how thorough, the external, scientific review would not get at the reason for the action.

Clearly, the descriptions of the event would be different. Included in the common-sense narration were many things not included in the scientific explanation (honking expressing warning and greeting, depending upon the reason; the disregard of the squirrel's importance; the reason itself). Only a statement in common-sense language explains the action, although the scientific elaboration can describe the hardware employed in the action.

Let's assume that the physical process accompanying the action is different if the reason for the action is different. That would argue that there is a closer correspondence between the common sense and the scientific descriptions, when obviously they are very different. No matter how close the correspondence, the two languages describe different things. Further, envisioning the programming beforehand of a physical process that would correspond perfectly with the host of potential reasons is daunting. One can hypothesize a computer-like physico-chemical processor in the brain in which language could be translated, but it is difficult to envision a program that would include a potential infinity of reasons for an action.

A simpler rendering of this mind/body conundrum is to accept the obvious duality involved. The mind or the self is not the same as the accompanied bodily expressions. However each can interact with and cause a reaction in the other, sometimes simultaneously. Dreams are a reshuffling of our memories, which appear in a type of consciousness, or sub-consciousness, in our minds that is not under conscious control. We cannot control our dreams. Memories can likewise spontaneously enter our wakeful, conscious minds. Conversely our conscious minds are free to bring up memories. Our selves can cause physical processes in our brains and neuro-muscular systems when we do something. On the other hand, our memories stored in our physical brains can cause conscious events in our minds.

The nexus between the mind and the body, mostly the brain, is not clear, but it clearly exists. In the same sense that we do not see the causal nexus between two physical events, we induce or infer it.

Inherent in doing an action for a reason are the notions of freedom and responsibility. It is assumed that we could have done otherwise when we perform an action freely. Since we choose to do the action, we have responsibility for it. Some actions are reflexive, and are best described by external causation rather than by personal reasons for the event. For example, you pull your hand away when you accidentally put it on a hot stove. Then, you are not expressing freedom, as the reaction was outside of your control. Likewise, you cannot be held responsible for the action.

There are many intermediary circumstances in which there are compulsions, biases, prejudices that are genetically and culturally derived over which you have less freedom. Your freedom is more obviously expressed when you act in opposition to these biases. Similarly, freedom and responsibility are displayed more prominently when you are being forced to do something against your will and you refuse to do it.

How does this formulation deal with the social sciences of sociology, anthropology, psychology, and economics? Sociological and anthropological sciences study groups of humans in aggregate and compare their behavior to other groups. Often statistical comparisons and inferences are made. There is a tacit implication that there is a loss of freedom in the group's behavior, and that explanations are best made causally. There is also implied a loss of responsibility for the group, as its behavior is caused by various factors, including genetics and acculturation. The group is compelled to behave in a certain way. Economic theories of behavior have similar assumptions.

Two important aspects of these behavioral sciences need to be inspected more closely. First, human groups are comprised of individual free agents. Although groups of individuals seem to act in a certain manner, there remains an unpredictable element due to freedom exercised by the group's individuals. This is seen prominently in economic theory with the unpredictability of "bubbles," the uncertainty of the direction of the stock market, etc.

This also can be related metaphorically to the individual electron within its atomic electron cloud. Although the electron cloud can be described by statistical, quantum mechanics, the precise location of the individual electron cannot be placed. Group behavior is like the electron cloud. Individual free will is like the individual electron's location.

The electron has a type of freedom, although of a different sort than human free will. The electron's freedom is a type of unpredictability, which is quite different from human free action. We would consider absolute unpredictability in human actions devoid of responsibility. One exercises his free will when he makes thoughtful decisions for which he takes responsibility.

The second issue of the social sciences is the nature of language itself. When a group or a culture has a specific language and social structure explained in that language, it is difficult for an outside observer, with a different native language and cultural

upbringing, to interpret individual actions and actions as a group, unless the outside observer embroils himself in the culture and language of the social unit being studied. This becomes more difficult when various cultures are compared, as each culture has unique characteristics. For example, something that appears to be a bias by an outside observer would not necessarily be considered a bias within the studied culture. Reasons for a group or culture's action are best understood within that culture.

In sum, there are two quite different entities in our world, the scientifically observable, physical one and the world of the mind, consciousness, and free will. The former can be described by causal language, or, in the atomic strata, by probability. Free will, then, is able to make an imprint in the world that is not caused fundamentally by the physical world, but is instigated by free action, described by reasons for the action, not by causes of the action. In a sense, the causal universe folds around the instigation and goes about its causal business, after the fact, as if nothing happened.

It was important to explore our nature, free will, consciousness, and responsibility, as distinct from the causal physical world in order to relate these concepts to morality, the subject of the next section.

Morality Versus Moral Tenets

A burgeoning discipline is moral psychology, which investigates morality in terms of moral belief systems or tenets. An example of this is provided in the delightfully, readable book by Jonathon Haidt, *The Righteous Mind**. The methodology explored utilizes questionnaires of various groups from different cultural backgrounds and other techniques to disclose various beliefs and belief systems embraced by the different groups. Two broad categories are the secular, Western, progressive group; and the more traditional, religious, conservative group. He quite correctly discloses significant differences between the groups regarding their religious, moralistic, beliefs; and he understands these differences in terms of their cultural and genetic development, their innate nature. Finding six major classes of beliefs; fairness in terms of expressing equality or caring, fairness in terms of treating people equally "under the law," liberty promotion, loyalty to clan or nation, respect for authority, and sanctity; he finds that the secular progressive group favors the first category, fairness in terms of equality and caring; and the latter five categories are more embodied in the beliefs of the traditional group. Further, he shows that these belief systems often control our actions in a reflex-like response.

I should like to explore this configuration in four ways. First, the distinction between these six classes of beliefs will be juxtaposed against the concepts of human virtues. Second, these tenets will be discussed in terms of the two major aspects involved in justice adjudication: equality and liberty. The intrinsic human bases of our free will and liberty, and of our quest to promote equality, will be adduced to explain the primacy of these two aspects of our nature in our political promotion of justice. The importance of the profound differences found within our human species will be presented

and related to our moral quest for promoting some equality. Third, the very important distinction between these tenets or canons of our belief systems and our free action as humans will be developed. Fourth, the difference between moral or ethical thinking and these tenets or beliefs will be explored.

Some of these beliefs or canons can be expressed as virtues, each of which has an opposing virtue. An obvious example is pride, which has its opposite, humility; likewise courage has its opposing virtue, prudence. Loyalty to family, clan or nation finds its contrary expression in the virtuous courage to counter loyalty for the right reasons (tyranny, for example). Support for property values might oppose virtuous sentiments of charity or taxation to foster some elements of equality. Finally, the virtues expressed in prayerfulness and religious beliefs might find opposition in the virtuous respect for others' beliefs. Virtue is not an all or none affair; similar to morality itself, virtuous behavior is nuanced. There are opposing considerations involved in choosing to do something and in the judgment whether or not the behavior is virtuous.

Two of these value systems, our freedom and our quest for some equality, are fundamental aspects of our innate nature. Our freedom is discovered early in our lives, as we manipulate our bodies and the world by our free will. Eventually, our freedom is expressed in our language, which is able to provide reasons or explanations for our actions. These reasons are not causes of our actions in the physical sense, as the explanation of the accompanying physical causes (the neurological and musculoskeletal changes, etc.) are different from our reasons; the former being described in scientific, causal language; the latter in common sense, every-day language.

Similarly, a moral sense is evident as a part of our nature. In the same way that we cannot use reason to prove the existence of reason, we cannot prove our ability to think morally. But, we could not have a normative discussion without our already believing in our ability to think morally. Otherwise there would be no common basis for discussion. There is a relationship between reasoning and thinking morally, as both are intrinsic components of our nature, and parents, teachers, and other authority figures can foster them.

One of the features of this moral processing is a quest to promote some leveling of the obvious inequalities among those of our species. We feel an empathy and sympathy for those less fortunate. However the institution of this leveling process impinges on some of the liberty of those better endowed. There is a tension between liberty and equality. For example, our moral sense would argue for providing a financial safety net for those with disabilities, supported by the government by taxation of those with higher income. The taxation is a form of freedom reduction, as the liberty to use the taxed money is taken from the more fortunate. Most political adjudication is mediated between these two principles. The reason for the degree of difficulty in mediating the process is related to the different mind-sets of the protagonists favoring the maximizing of liberty and those favoring the advancement of equality. Looking at the six categories of moral tenets or belief systems enunciated by Dr. Haidt, one can see that the tenets

embraced by diminishing oppression; loyalty to one's own clan, religion, and belief systems; sanctity, particularly for one's own religious beliefs; respect for the authority of your clan; support for property rights; and equality in terms of equal protection and adjudication of the law; are enunciated by those favoring liberty. Those favoring equality in terms of caring or fairness express the counterpoised position.

These belief systems or presentiments are not the same as our ability to think morally. The most obvious distinction is evident by these tenets not being invariant: they are not unchangeable and they can be taught. Tyrannical governments can convince people about certain beliefs, as evident from the Nazi indoctrination of the Germans to hate all Jews or the Tutsis to hate all Hutus. Although some of the tendencies are probably genetically determined, parental teaching and clan or group culture can modify them. Further, one can train oneself to behave morally, in the Aristotelian sense, so that one routinely behaves in a certain way. Finally, and most importantly, morality is the process by which we weigh the moral behavior of an action. Even though each individual might have different degrees of beliefs or presentiments one can always act differently. One can look at things from many aspects and adjudicate their value, which is the substance of moral thinking.

For example, someone might have a strong feeling that taxation of the rich is immoral, as it is forcefully removing the prerogative of the individual to deal with his rightful property. But the individual might be persuaded that some taxation to provide for orphans would be reasonable. On the other hand, someone who thinks that everyone's financial income should be identical might be persuaded that this could produce a disincentive for work and thus less productivity and income for everyone. The moral thinking is the innately moral process, not the moral presentiments or beliefs themselves.

In conclusion, moral psychologists have made significant contributions in exploring the moral presentiments, beliefs, tenets, or canons in individuals and different cultural groups. Many of these are outgrowths of our natural requirement to protect our family, our clan, and ourselves from "others." Although they are often given as reasons for actions, they do not cause free actions. Our free will is fundamental to our nature, providing us with a unique characteristic that is not shared by anything else in the universe. Our free will provides for much of the nobility of our species, and for much of its ignominy.

Prejudice, Racism, and Morality

In the first two sections, freedom, a moral sense and a quest for some equality, responsibility, and morality are discussed. This section discusses bias, prejudice, and racism in terms of these concepts. Prejudice and racism are pejorative terms. The definition of prejudice is a set belief based upon ignorance. Although the usage of bias and prejudice has merged throughout the years, the original definition of prejudice being based on ignorance is useful, giving it special meaning beyond bias. A bias is a set belief or predisposition, but does not necessarily imply ignorance. Racism is the acting out of these beliefs on other people, the objects of the beliefs, with the intent to do harm by

demeaning them. Racism does not have to be directed at race alone, as its use has been expanded to include gender (for example the female sex, “sexism”), sexual orientation, religion, etc., and its general usage will be maintained here. Racism is also an immoral action. For example, a Caucasian might make a deprecatory comment to a black African or African-American about his skin color. He might say that his Caucasian race is superior in intelligence, which is clearly not true, is prejudicial, based upon ignorance, and expresses racism. He might also say that African-Americans are innately better basketball players than Caucasians, which may or may not be true, and is neither clearly prejudicial nor racist.

For the purposes of this essay, I should like to keep these definitions of bias, prejudice, and racism as they express three distinct categories. Bias is considered a belief, tenet, or persuasion favoring one group or entity over another, generally determined by genetics or acculturation. Prejudice is a bias based upon ignorance of a known or known facts. Potentially, the prejudice can be ameliorated or eliminated through education. Racism is a hostile exercise to produce harm on a group or entity based upon bias or prejudice. All three of these categories can be directed against another’s race, physical appearance, gender, sexual orientation, nationality, skin color, etc. Again, racism will be used generically for all of these actions.

Beliefs or biases may be fostered by intense cultural activity, or by propaganda, that may be prejudicial. The Nazi regime in Germany prior to and during World War II is a good example. The negative characterization of Jews was clearly prejudicial and resulted in the immoral racism practiced against the Jews.

There are many other presentiments, beliefs, and canons that humans have that are a reflection of genetics and acculturation. These beliefs can be fostered by the immersion in one’s culture and the teaching and examples of parents, teachers, members of family and clan, and other authority figures. Some of the views are natural outgrowths of our survival needs, as we have to provide for food, shelter, water, and clothing for our family, clan and selves. This requires our being engaged in various activities, broadly included in the designation, work. Conflicts can occur between groups or individuals over limited resources. We exercise our freedom in fulfilling these and our other needs, which is a natural process.

In understanding others and ourselves, it is important to realize that each of us has a set of these tenets or presentiments. Having these beliefs is part of our nature. They are more prominent in some, for genetic or cultural reasons, and, consequently, influence actions in them to a greater degree. Each of us carries biases that are components of or, often, reasons for our free action. We are a species with wide differences among us, including our physical appearance, body habitus, intelligence, family structure, sexuality, physical appearance, gender, and beliefs. It is natural for these biases and characteristics to influence our actions toward others. This behavior is not unconscionable in itself. Rather, an action needs to be adjudicated and analyzed thoughtfully, using our moral sense.

In some respects, these predispositions are not our responsibility, as we did not effect them. They are a natural outgrowth of our biologic requirement for survival and satisfaction of our basic and secondary needs, and of the cultural milieu in which each of us lives. Our responsibility in these matters is in how we act. The more our actions are reflexive, the less they reflect our freedom and responsibility. Our responsibility is entailed when we thoughtfully explain our actions in terms of the biases. The most

unconscionable action is one that is based on one of these predisposing values, even when we know, morally, that the action is wrong. The most ennobling action is one that opposes some of these inherent tendencies through analysis of the morality of the action.

For example, someone might join a book club so that he can interact with others of similar interests. Another might belong to a charitable organization as he feels that equality should be fostered. Most of these presentiments are not obviously true or false, so are not necessarily prejudicial. They are not immoral in themselves, but can be the object of moral thinking. The bibliophile might indicate that everyone should read at least two hours daily, which is a reflection of his belief in education. The central government should enforce this by necessitating a two-hour time block for reading for any employment. As this plays out in the political arena, it is obvious that this would unduly restrict the liberty of employers. Although not clearly prejudicial, it would be harmful to the non-bibliophiles, thus racist. The bias toward reading is not immoral in itself. But this execution of the bias would be immoral.

Many individual predispositions are not always prejudicial, in the sense of being founded on ignorance, and are potentially malleable. One might have an underlying belief that expansion of liberty and freedom is preferred fundamentally over the expansion of equality. The morality of the position is evident in its modulation between these two aspects of our nature, both individually and politically.

Further examples make these points more clearly. Does the fact that 96 % of African-Americans voted for Barack Obama mean that African-Americans are expressing prejudice? Or, Americans of Irish ancestry voting overwhelmingly for John F. Kennedy? I suspect both were mostly natural expressions of support for their own bias rather than prejudice. No teaching would alter the fact that they are who they are, and they and the presidential candidate share some mutual identity. Nor do they express racism. Supporting kin and clan is a natural outgrowth of our liberty and freedom, exercised to protect our clan and us. These actions are not racist or immoral unless there is the direct intent to do harm. Some of these biases can be tempered through cultural immersion and familiarity of different people, although, sometimes, the immersion or confrontations may reinforce the biases.

Racism need not be directed at another's race per se. It can be directed at some other characteristic. An obese person can be called "fatso," or a "pig." A person of short stature might receive the epithets, "shorty" or "shrimp boat." In each case, there is an intention to compartmentalize the person in a demeaning manner. People are insulted when they are considered by one characteristic alone, especially when expressed in a deprecating manner.

Although a racial slur by a Caucasian to an African-American would be racist, the same term might not be racist if used by an African-American. The importance of intent to do harm or to insult is necessary for the racist label to be used.

Religious beliefs provide other examples of bias that are not obviously prejudicial. No amount of teaching can definitely settle the question of the existence of God. Further, the truth of some of the teachings of religion cannot be settled intellectually, although there can be some modifications of the beliefs through acculturation and teaching. Some of the food proscriptions of some religions have been modified with education. For example, the Roman Catholic faith has modified its fish on Fridays rule.

Religious beliefs also become reasons for actions. It is in these actions that morality is tested. Roman Catholic voters favored John F. Kennedy by a large margin. This is not immoral in itself, but it can be adjudicated, especially if potential reasons for doing otherwise are convincing. Your good Protestant friend could convince you that there might be repression of freedom of Protestants with a Roman Catholic president; or he might indicate that a Roman Catholic president would do the bidding of the Pope rather than represent the entire populace. (Even though, these fears never materialized, they still could have been reasonable subjects for consideration). The morality of the action is not immediately evident, but requires judgment, whether or not there is intent to do harm to a group, based upon a biased belief.

There are other situations where the morality involving religious beliefs is more serious in which the beliefs provide justification for mortal conflicts with others. Christians during the Crusades, holy Islamic wars against non-believers, and the killing of Protestants by Roman Catholics in Northern Ireland and vice versa are obvious examples. These demonstrate religious expansionism coming into direct conflict with other basic, religious tenets. Our moral sense argues for equality among humans. The commandment not to kill and the virtues of forgiveness, charity, and humility are in contradistinction to war and hostile behavior.

Similarly, the religious belief in the sanctity of heterosexual marriage is conflicted with the belief in egalitarianism in the approach to same-sex couples. The morality is nuanced and plays out both individually and politically. The basic religious belief in God is not challenged in this intercourse, nor is it prejudicial. But some of the teachings as bases for actions may be reasons promoting racism and immorality. Seen from the other side, legal encroachment on religious beliefs about the sanctity of heterosexual marriage might be viewed as racism against the religion and its practitioners.

Prejudice, bias, racism, and morality are more complex with beliefs that are not acted on others. Further, another might not know the reasons for an action, as the reasons are not public unless someone chooses to give his reasons. Even then, is it immoral or racist for someone to have a prejudicial bias against another race, so long as it is not acted out in the human stage? Is it obviously immoral for someone to share these beliefs with his trusted family? One is not generally responsible for his beliefs or biases, which may have been largely out of his control (genetically or culturally developed).

In conclusion, biases and prejudices are natural expressions of our nature, resulting from our need to protect ourselves from "the others," especially when resources are limited. We are not clearly responsible for most of these beliefs, as they are largely the result of genetics and one's culture. The beliefs are not immoral themselves; racism and immorality occur when they come into play in human interaction. They can be modified by our moral sense and reason. We are mostly ennobled when we examine our underlying presentiments, and then act accordingly, when morally adjudicated appropriate.

How should we deal with ourselves in the light of this discussion? First, self-examination allows us to see our own biases. Part of this examination would include separating out prejudices from biases, when additional knowledge would be illuminating. Most of our biases are harmless and should be perceived in that light. Rooting for a college football team should not be considered immoral or racist. Likewise, voting for someone of your ethnic background is natural and not overtly harmful to others. Biases

per se are not immoral or racist. However, judging the morality of how biases play out in human actions is sometimes difficult and should be based upon whether actions are done to promote harm to others or not.

*. Jonathan Haidt, *The Righteous Mind*, Pantheon Books, New York, 2012.