

Human Prejudice
Take One Look and You'll See All You Need to Know
By
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It is difficult to fully understand what day-to-day life was like for our hunter-gatherer ancestors. As historian Yuval Harari says, “5 million to 8 million foragers who populated the world on the eve of the Agricultural Revolution were divided into thousands of separate tribes with thousands of different languages and cultures.”¹ What we do know is that they were made up of small clans and tribes, some of which may have rarely, if ever, encountered other humans. So, it would have been difficult for them to understand and trust strangers. Some may have become friendly and lived in cooperation. Some may have been threatened or threatening, resulting in hostility and violence.

In their tiny worlds, anything different or unknown could prove deadly. There was safety in sticking to the tried and true, to being creatures of habit, which meant avoiding strangers and anything else that seemed unfamiliar. That’s an interesting word, *unfamiliar*. It means, “not family.” And our primitive ancestors needed to stay away from anyone who was *not family*. When they encountered others, they may have recognized that they were similar beings, but they had no understanding of what a “species” is, or of DNA, or that all people are genetically related. “Homo sapiens evolved to think of people as divided into us and them,” Harari says. “‘Us’ was the group immediately around you, whoever you were, and ‘them’ was everyone else.”²

This instinctive mistrust of those we are “unfamiliar” with persists today, including the archaic and disproven idea of race that was developed in 1824 by Johann Friedrich Blumenbach, the founder of zoology and anthropology. Blumenbach classified five different human races based upon skin pigmentation, black, brown, red, yellow, and white. By measuring and comparing the craniums of these various “races,” as he put it, he also believed he was able to rank each race by its intelligence. Blumenbach’s bad science was something many people accepted as fact, especially “white” people, who just so happened to be the smartest according to his findings.

It wasn’t much later, in 1859, that Darwin introduced his theory of natural selection, the more substantive scientific idea that all humans evolved from a common ancestor and are related. Six years later, in 1865, Gregor Mendel published his findings while experimenting with plants, establishing the science of inheritance and genetics. Only four years later, in 1869, Swiss chemist Friedrich Miescher was the first to discover nucleic acid, an important step in determining the structure of DNA that was discovered by James Watson and Francis Crick as recently as 1953. So, we now know the idea of race is fiction, yet we still speak as if it is real, just as we still say the Sun rises and sets, even though we know it is really the Earth that’s turning, not the Sun.

And if it's not the illusion of race that we use to divide the human family into "us" and "them," it's something else, like what nation we are from, what side of the border we're on, what religion we believe, what political party we belong to, which kind of economy we prefer, or what identity group we claim to be part of. Yet we know we're one species, one human family, living on one small planet and that we all have far more in common than not. In addition to being so closely related that there's more genetic difference between two chimpanzees living in the same troop than there is between any two human beings living on Earth, these days we are all part of one global community. We have a global economy, global banking system, global businesses, companies, and employment, global communications, global courts and laws, global education, global science and medicine, a global supply chain, as well as global challenges, like war, pandemics, pollution, and climate change. We share all of this in common, as one global human family, yet we still haven't implemented a Universal Declaration of Human Rights even though we've had one ready to go since 1948. It's very first article states, "all human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights." Too many of us still think and behave as if we're hunter-gatherers, "thousands of separate tribes with thousands of different languages and cultures."

There's a saying about horses, that *you can lead them to water, but you can't make them drink*. This is based on the fact that some horses won't drink "unfamiliar" water. When transporting horses, equestrians often have to bring gallons of water with them for this reason. Horses can be as innately wary of unfamiliar water as humans can be of unfamiliar people. Heliocentric notions of our solar system, for instance, have been around since 270 BCE, and were revived by Copernicus in 1543, and popularized by the unjust trial of Galileo in 1633. Yet today we still speak as if the Sun revolves around us, as if our little world is at the center of the Universe, rather than speaking of earthsets and earthrises. Worse, we still speak of race as if it were a reality, two hundred years past the Enlightenment, when genetic science was born. In these cases, we say what is so about horses when what really mean is, *you can lead a person to reason, but you can't make them think*.

This isn't to say that all people are incapable of reasoning or seeing themselves as global citizens, members of our single human family. As the great troubadour of humanity, John Denver once explained, "I'm a global citizen. I've created that for myself, and I don't want to step away from it. I want to work in whatever I do ... towards a world in balance, a world that creates a better quality of life for all people."³ This resulted in songs containing lyrics like, "*Why are you calling this the Third World? | I only know that it is my world | Maybe someday it can be our world | Can you imagine one world, one world?*", from his song, "One World," and, "*There's a man who is my brother, I just don't know his name | But I know his home and family because I know we feel the same | And it hurts me when he's hungry and when his children cry | I too am a father and that little one is mine*," from "It's About Time."

Denver worked to make his vision a reality, but no more so than the great Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. As he wrote in his letter from a Birmingham jail in 1963, "We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly." King's dream of a better world for all of us was rooted in this

same universalistic notion of our common humanity. “I have a dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed: We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal ... I have a dream that one day little black boys and girls will be holding hands with little white boys and girls ... I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character.” During his 1965 commencement speech at Oberlin College, Dr. King pointed out that before most of us even leave for work in the morning we’ve been assisted by people across the globe. Our towels and soap, our coffee and tea, our toast, the toaster, and so much more have been provided for us by people from all over the planet. “And before you finish eating breakfast in the morning, you’ve depended on more than half of the world,” he said. “This is the way our universe is structured; this is its interrelated quality. We aren’t going to have peace on earth until we recognize this basic fact of the interrelated structure of all reality.”⁴

This universalistic understanding of human relatedness is why I attended Singularity University in 2018, a school of thought dedicated to making the world far better for everyone than it’s ever been. As it’s Executive Director (at the time), Will Weisman, said at the start of its 2019 annual Summit, “I’m here because like so many of you I believe in my core that an abundant world is possible in the not too distant future, and I want to do everything that I can to help bring that to fruition. To me that looks like a world where we feed everyone, where we educate everyone, where we shelter everyone, a world where people feel safe and they feel they have a fair shot at living a good life, a world where there are mechanisms to help curb our deficiencies and overcome our most base impulses.” As its founder, Peter Diamandis often says, this mindset is about using our wits and creativity to improve life for the whole of humanity. “Rather than a future of dog-eat-dog, I [see] a world of increasing abundance,” Diamandis says, “a world where we [can] actually imagine uplifting humanity and using technology to meet the needs of every man, woman, and child.”⁵

This principle of universal human dignity is also what attracts me, like a lot of us, to Unitarianism. It’s the starting point of liberal religion and is the reason ours was the first religion in human history to establish a law protecting religious freedom, the Edict of Torda, in 1568, because of the budding Renaissance idea that all people, no matter what they believe, ought to be treated with respect and dignity. This was so no matter their status, whether Catholic or Protestant, Christian or Muslim, native or foreign, rich or poor, king or citizen.

In his international bestselling book, *In Defense of the Enlightenment*, philosopher and historian Tzvetan Todorov includes an entire chapter entitled “Universality,” which begins by recognizing “the fact that all human beings belong to the same species and that consequently they have the same right to dignity.”⁶ Yet he adds that, “This imperative takes on a different meaning if we think of it in terms of the citizens of a country or the inhabitants of planet Earth.”⁷ Human dignity must, by definition, be predicated on its universality. It cannot be confined to the people of one nation, any more than to one tribe, or one person. To be human dignity, and not just American dignity, or Tribal dignity, or “my” dignity, it must apply to all people of all nations and all groups. Such universality, on the

other hand, includes the people of all nations and any group. But it cannot belong to “Us” and not “Them,” to “insiders” and not “outsiders.”

Human dignity further shifts the goal of ethical behavior to achieving human welfare and individual fulfillment, rather than to obeying religious and secular laws. Kant was the first to articulate it by suggesting that *no person should be treated as means to someone else's ends but should be considered and end within themselves*. Violating this principle is what makes Israel's response to the horrors of the October 7, 2023 attacks such a tremendous evil, because, in order to achieve its goal of eliminating Hamas, it has considered the suffering and killing of innocent Gazans, real human beings, mostly women and children, no more than a means to its own ends. Of course, the US has had a history of similar behavior as evidenced by its wars in Vietnam, Iraq, and Afghanistan. There are plenty of examples of how this principle has been violated around the world throughout history, including in our post-Enlightenment modern times. *You can lead a person to reason, but you can't make them think*.

From this first principle, human dignity, which must be universal by definition (since all people are human), we easily infer the most obvious conditions for such dignity; freedom, reason, and tolerance. Simply put, freedom means being able to speak for ourselves, reason means being free to think for ourselves, and tolerance means being free to participate in all the rights and benefits of society regardless of what we say, what we think, what we look like, or where we are from—free to go about our lives without prejudice.

Tolerance is the most valuable mechanism for achieving human dignity. Some argue that it doesn't go far enough, that we must love one another, and strive to understand each other, and to fully embrace our differences. What a wonderful world that would be, if it were possible. But how could it be and why should it be? How, with more than eight billion people in the world, can any single person possibly understand where every single other person is coming from? Why would I want to embrace ideas and customs I consider fundamentally false or even detrimental to human welfare and progress? Must I embrace the perspective of flat-earthers? Must I embrace Donald Trump's lies about Haitians eating our pets? Must I study and embrace all the religions of the world? If creating a peaceful world in which all people are treated with dignity requires us to understand and embrace hundreds of millions of ideas and ways, then we are all doomed. But if we all accept that every person should be tolerated based upon the principle of human dignity—on the basis that they are human beings—then it should not matter what they believe or how their country and culture might differ from our own. We can take one look at them and know all we need to know, that as a fellow human being they deserve to be treated with worth and dignity.

As for love, if by “love” it is meant that we must all have warm sentiments for every person we encounter no matter how loathsome they might be, forget about it! But if, by love, we mean the humanistic ethic that requires all that we do to be for the purpose of promoting

human welfare and individual unfolding, then tolerance remains more than enough. We don't have to like everyone, agree with everyone, understand everyone, and, certainly, not embrace everyone—but we do have to tolerate them because they are human beings and, therefore, deserve to be treated with dignity. And this means, no matter what we know about them or how much we might disagree with them, we respect their freedom to speak, to think, and to freely go about their lives without prejudice, enjoying the same rights as ourselves. Tolerance, further, means that each of us has a duty to guarantee that the freedoms and rights we enjoy belong to everyone, including, especially those we may vehemently dislike or disagree with.

If, in the process, we learn to befriend and love some of them, and come to better understand and maybe even embrace them and their ideas, fantastic! But let's concentrate on getting the tolerance part down first—after nearly five centuries since the Edict of Torda, let's make it happen. To do so, and to begin to wrap up, I think it's important to understand some of the common logical fallacies that get in the way of seeing the dignity of those with whom we dislike or are dis-like.

In last week's sermon I quoted *Twilight Zone* creator, Rod Serling, who said, "I happen to think the singular evil of our time is prejudice. It is from this evil that all other evils grow and multiply."⁸ From a humanistic perspective, rooted in the humanistic ethic requiring us to work for human good, prejudice is the mindset that prevents us from recognizing the humanity of others and that excuses us to deny their worth and dignity. This is obviously true of racism, but even the slightest differences (and skin color is just that—a slight difference) can give rise to prejudice. This is why I believe Donald Trump's promise to make America great again, at the expense of people elsewhere in the world, is doomed to failure, because it is not based in the reality of our universal humanity, that we are, as Dr. King said, "caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny." We cannot make one people great without working to make all people great, because one people is really all there is. We must, rather, as Diamandis says, work to create a world of abundance that uplifts every man, woman, and child on the planet. We must work to make every nation great.

So that's the first fallacy, the fallacy of "Us and Them," disproven by the science of Darwin, Mendel, Watson and Crick. Every person on this planet, no matter what they look like, where they are from, or what they believe, is human and, thus, deserves to be treated with dignity. Take one look at anybody and you'll see all you need to know.

Another fallacy excusing indignity is called the *fallacy of composition*. In technical terms it occurs when the qualities attributed to individual members of a class are attributed to the class as a whole. If, as Trump has done, for instance, we take the criminal activities of a very small percentage of immigrants and conclude that all immigrants are criminals, then we wrongly demonize most immigrants and justify treating them like criminals.

This example also illustrates a fallacy of confusing a correlation for cause. Just because a criminal happens to be an immigrant doesn't mean they are a criminals because they are immigrants. Most immigrants are not criminals, and most criminals are not immigrants.

Closely related to the *fallacy of composition* is the *fallacy of division*, which, conversely, occurs when one takes the qualities attributed to a class as a whole and attributes them to its individual members. Take, for example, male and female stereotypes. If we think men are generally masculine, driven, and tough, we might question the manhood of a male who isn't. Or, if we think women are generally maternal, nurturing, and selfless, we might judge or dislike individual women who aren't (women who "don't know their place").

Another fallacy used to justify prejudice is using a *strawman argument*. This is when one, not wishing to address the argument at hand, shifts to another weaker argument that can be more easily handled. For example, upon questioning Israel's indiscriminate killing of tens of thousands of innocent civilians, we often hear, "Israel has a right to defend itself." Few if any have said it doesn't. But defending itself doesn't mean wiping out everyone who stands between Israel and its goal. It doesn't mean Netanyahu's government can treat innocent people as a means to his own ends. Because Palestinians are human beings, they must be considered and end within themselves, instead of having had their precious lives brought to a permanent end.

Scapegoating may be the fallacy most often used for justifying prejudice and is precisely what Hitler, his Nazi regime, and others around the world did to the Jews, leading to the most cold-blooded genocide in human history. It occurs when we want to avoid taking responsibility for our own problems by falsely blaming them on somebody else.

A lesser-known fallacy is the Latin phrase, *to quoque*, which means, "you too." It's what happens when we justify treating someone with indignity by blaming them for doing the same thing we're doing. Children often defend themselves in this way. "He started it." "She said it first." But it can be extremely troubling when adults justify cruelties and inhumanities against others by saying, "everybody does it," or "they do the same thing." George W. Bush's preemptive strike against Iraq, was partly based on this thinking. "Strike them before they strike us." It just blamed them for doing the same thing before they could have done the same thing.

I don't want to leave out the fallacy of *affirming the consequent*. To illustrate, if we agree that "misogynists are males," then conclude John is a misogynist because he's a male, we've committed this fallacy. It's like saying, "Rainbows contain purple. The bouquet contains purple; therefore, the bouquet is a rainbow." Yet this is a very common way of thinking and leads to lots of prejudice. It's the fallacy of the thinking of some on the left nowadays who claim that all white people are white supremacist, on the basis of being white. Or that all white people are privileged, on the same basis.

I've taken the time to point out these fallacies because, as we move more deeply into the 21st century, soon to have reached the 25-year mark, we need to promote a more reasonable approach to the future and to establishing the kind of peaceful and prosperous world humanity longs for. We need to purge ourselves of the bad thinking that leads to prejudice against our fellow human beings and learn to see our common humanity and the dignity that goes along with it in the faces of every person on this planet. Prejudice in favor of humanity is the only prejudice we can tolerate. No matter what else you may know or not know about them, when it comes to dignity, just one at any other human being and you'll see all you need to know.

¹ Harari, Yuval Noah. *Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind*. HarperCollins. Kindle Edition.

² Ibid.

³ <http://www.johndenver.com/philanthropy/phil.html>

⁴ Dr. King first delivered this sermon at Ebenezer Baptist Church, where he served as co-pastor. On Christmas Eve, 1967, the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation aired this sermon as part of the seventh annual Massey Lectures.

⁵ <https://www.diamandis.com/blog/scaling-abundance>

⁶ Tzvetan Todorov, *In Defense of the Enlightenment*, Atlantic Books, London, England, 2006, p. 111

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Sander, Gordon E., *Serling: The Rise and Twilight of Television's Last Angry Man*, A Dutton Book, (Penguin Group), 1992, p. 207.