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The identity theory of prejudice:  
A perspective from the intellectual tradition of India

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ABSTRACT

One of the current trends in social psychological literature locates the roots of prejudice in an individual's social identity or, more specifically, in the identification of a person with a particular social sphere to the exclusion of groups outside it. This paper identifies concepts parallel to this trend in the traditional school of Indian thought called Vedānta. Attempt is made to show that the Vedāntic methods, which are primarily aimed at self-realization, help an individual in transcending the ego's exclusive identification with a limited social sphere and its ideologies. It is pointed out that Vedāntic methods incidentally help rid oneself of all social prejudices. The limitations of such an approach to prejudice reduction are discussed.

THE PURPOSE OF THIS PAPER is to present a perspective on the nature of prejudice derived from the intellectual tradition of India. As used in this paper, the term prejudice refers to the intolerance of or negative attitudes towards outgroups, attitudes which are believed to translate themselves under relevant conditions into discriminatory or aggressive behavior toward those groups (see Allport, 1958:48). In India today, as in most other Third World countries, prejudice and other similar psychosocial problems are studied mostly in the light of conceptual models of Western origin. Insights from indigenous intellectual traditions of India, China, and Japan have largely been neglected. Ever since the Western conceptual models were introduced into the Third World societies by the colonial rulers, they have carried an aura of superiority. However, as the dominance of the colonial mentality recedes, Western as well as Third World scholars are beginning to critically examine the sociocentricity of the Western models. As well, they have begun retrieving significant contributions from the indigenous intellectual traditions which have contemporary relevance. This trend is manifest in psychology (Ho, n.d.; Heelas and Lock, 1981; Paranjpe, 1984), anthropology (Hsu, 1971; Lanterneri, 1980; O’Flaherty, 1980), sociology (Singh, 1970), and in the health sciences (Kleinman et al., 1978; Kleinman, 1980). Modern social sciences have developed a wide range of alternative approaches to help explain and solve the problem of intergroup prejudice and conflict. Extensive surveys of such approaches (e.g. Ashmore, 1970; Austin and Worchel, 1979) indicate that, while some of these approaches...
are more comprehensive than others, none of them can claim to be completely comprehensive and effective. The problem of prejudice is extremely complex and deserves the convergence of perspectives from all possible angles. I expect to demonstrate in the later part of this paper that a distinctive approach to the problem of prejudice is implicit in the Indian intellectual tradition. If my arguments hold good, then it should be possible to integrate intellectual gains of the past with the mainstream of contemporary thought so as to broaden and deepen our understanding of this issue.

Sociology of knowledge: on bridging the cultural gap

As noted by the sociologists of knowledge like Mannheim (1936) and Scheler (1970), the pursuit of knowledge is significantly molded by the sociocultural context of its origin. To be able to appreciate the distinctive aspects of an indigenous Indian approach, it will be useful to note certain features of the sociocultural context in which systems of Indian thought developed in contrast with the institutional context of contemporary social scientific research.

Most modern social scientists are academics working in largely publicly funded universities or research institutes. Such institutions tend to be secular organizations which expect the social scientists to be ideologically non-partisan persons interested in an objective search for truth. In this context social scientists tend to adopt an objectivist, analytical and impersonal stance. Thus, prejudice is viewed as a problem which exists in the society "out there"; it is not to be traced to academia—let alone to the social scientist himself or herself. If and when the social scientist tries to reduce prejudice or resolve conflict, he or she is to be a social engineer, policy adviser, or a technical consultant working for an approved social agency, such as the school system.

Although some of the prominent intellectuals in the Indian tradition—for example Kautilya—were in an advisory or "policymaking" role (he was a prime minister), most prominent intellectuals of pre-British India were private individuals involved in the pursuit of spiritual self-development. Because of this, the common stance adopted by them was subjectivist, existential and personal. Thus, prejudice was considered not so much as a social problem as a personal one. Like anxiety or existential despair, it was a personal shortcoming which must be overcome in order to attain a higher quality of life.

As noted by Scheler (1970), the cultural ideal which dominated the search for knowledge for centuries in India was that of a saint (rather than a hero). Saintliness implies a genuine and unlimited compassion for all forms of life—which is the exact opposite of bigotry. Even a mention of saintliness is an anathema for modern (Western-style) social sciences. In the West, it is a topic assigned to the church. As I have discussed elsewhere (Paranjpe, 1984), a sharp division between the domain of science (description, explanation, conjecture and refutation) as opposed to that of religion (prescription, virtue, faith) is understandable as a product of the bitter and long-drawn out conflict
between science and religion in the history of Europe. Such a conflict was never witnessed in the history of India, and, hence, there was no need to be ultrasensitive about dichotomous distinctions such as religion versus science, description versus prescription, or an impersonal stance versus a personal stance which are typical of the contemporary Western Zeitgeist.

Against this historical background, it is easy to see why the Eastern systems of thought such as Yoga, Vedānta or Zen are viewed as religions and hence considered beyond the scope of science. Even when they are taken seriously, there is a tendency to consider their ideas "normative" or "not analytical" and thus unsuitable for the rigorous thinking typical of science—i.e. logical analysis and empirical verification. Instead of examining such typically Western concerns (or, shall I say, academic stereotypes and prejudices), I wish simply to state that in this paper we will have nothing to do with the religious implications of Vedānta, which is a system of Indian thought to be discussed later. The only prescriptive bias of the Vedānta which we should be concerned with here is its implicit goal of prejudice reduction—a goal shared by many contemporary social scientists. I would suggest that Vedānta can be taken as a theory of human nature on a par with contemporary theories of personality, although it is beyond the scope of this paper to establish claims to the degree of sophistication of its epistemology or its analytical rigor.

Notwithstanding the many contrasts between the Vedāntic approach on the one hand and modern social scientific thought on the other, the Vedāntic approach is consistent with, and complementary to, the social identity theory of prejudice prevalent in contemporary social psychology. The similarity between them will begin to appear in the separate accounts to follow, and will be clarified in the final section of this essay. I shall begin with a sketch of the social identity theory and then move on to the relatively less familiar territory of Vedānta.

The social identity approach: a distinct trend in contemporary social psychology

In contemporary social psychology there is a clearly discernible trend of thought which may be called "the social identity approach to prejudice." Its basic thesis is that the roots of prejudice are traceable to the social identities of individuals. The social identity approach is best expressed in the work of Tajfel (1974). Tajfel follows Berger's (1966) view of social identity, which, in turn is based on Mead's (1934) "symbolic interactionist" tradition on the one hand, and Berger and Luckmann's (1966) views of the "social construction of reality" on the other. I see Tajfel's work as consistent with the related work of Erikson (1968), Sherif and Sherif (1969), and Zavalloni (1973) among others.

(A) Self and society. One of the fundamental assumptions of the social identity approach is that "Self and society are inextricately interwoven entities." (Berger, 1966:107). This means that individuals—"persons" or
"selves"—are not totally separate and completely independent entities that are cut off from each other, or from the society as a whole. The "boundaries" between individuals or selves are not closed but permeable; the "worlds" of individuals often interpenetrate so that what the husband claims as his is also what the wife can claim equally well as hers—their children, friends, even shared memories of the past and dreams of the future. In other words, selves are like nodal points or regions in a continuous field which encompasses the society; there is a basic continuity between the worlds of the individuals and the society. The identity of the individual implies a "location", a designated set of positions and roles within the social network ascribed to, and/or chosen by, a person.

A related concept is what may be called the "extension" of the self. In William James' words, "[A] man's self is the sum total of all he CAN call his, not only his body and his psychic powers, but his clothes and his house, his wife and children, his ancestors and friends, his reputation and works, his lands and horses, and yacht and bank account." (James, 1890, vol. 1:291) A man identifies himself with a sphere of the social world so that, for a nationalist, for instance, an attack on his country which he will defend at the cost of his own life is an attack on him. In other words, the region of the social world which is incorporated within the boundaries of the self is "owned", fortified, and defended from attacks from the outside. The implication of this to intergroup prejudices and conflicts should be obvious. A person who hates outgroups generally identifies himself or herself with a particular section of humanity, shares goals and values in common with this sphere of the "we", while perceiving the sphere of the "they" as dissimilar and threatening. Humanity is fractionated into many small groups because individuals somehow or other fail to identify themselves with the whole of humanity. Prejudice and conflict exist insofar as individuals perceive persons of a particular caste, class, religion, language and so on as truly human while thinking of others as somewhat less than human (Erikson, 1963).

A basic assumption about social identity is that it is a product of socialization. It is largely learned or acquired through experience, although the role in identity formation of unlearned tendencies of genetic origin is also recognized. Erikson (1968, p. 93) notes that during the course of growth individuals develop a "...readiness to be driven toward, to be aware of, and to interact with a widening radius of significant individuals and institutions" (emphasis added). The problem is that most individuals do not develop a capacity to identify themselves with a social sphere wide enough to encompass the whole of humanity. Therefore, one of the ways of solving the problem of prejudice is to help individuals extend the sphere with which they are able to identify themselves.

(B) Roots of prejudice in the cognitive aspects of the self. Rokeach's (1960) well-known research has shown that individuals differ greatly in their styles of cognitive organization and that prejudices arise from the lack of capacity to deal with...
cognitive ambiguity and an attendant tendency toward "black-and-white thinking." He showed that cognitive rigidity and intolerance of ambiguity are common features of persons who adopt totalitarian ideologies of both the extreme left as well as the right. More recently Greenwald (1980) has marshalled converging evidence and arguments from several different lines of social and psychological research to show that totalitarian tendencies are far more widely spread and more deeply rooted than a few ultraconservative or radical political activists, as Rokeach's work would lead us to believe. Greenwald's argument is that ego, or self, is an organization of knowledge which is often biased in favor of pre-established beliefs. He further argues that "totalitarian" biases characterize the organization of knowledge not only at the level of the ego, but also in extra-individual levels, such as in political ideologies and scientific paradigms.

In case this comparison of organization of knowledge at the levels of individual ego on the one side and political ideologies and scientific paradigms on the other seems far-fetched, one needs to compare the biasing nature of information processing at the level of the individual cognitive processes such as memory (Mischel et al., 1976), political ideology (Orwell, 1949; Arendt, 1966), and paradigms of science (Kuhn, 1970; Lakatos, 1970). The basic point is that new information tends to be filtered through existing modes of knowing such that it can be fitted into the existing world-view. Although accommodation, i.e., reorganization of the existing knowledge, is necessary, possible, and usually accomplishable as Piaget's studies show, there is, nevertheless, a strong common tendency toward conservatism. Thus, major reorganization of the world-view is traumatic as in the case of individual "conversion" experiences or in political and scientific "revolutions."

Rejection of alternative or contradictory propositions is a product of the self-preservative tendencies of the organization of knowledge at all levels. If we accept Berger and Luckmann's (1966) view that getting to "know" the world is always a process of "cognitive construction of reality," then intolerance is understood as a built-in resistance by the existing cognitive constructs against alternatives which threaten to replace them. It is difficult to reorganize (and more so, to admit) that what was once taken for granted individually and/or collectively as real or true is in fact not so. Given that modes of knowing the nature of the world and of one's place within it occurs during the process of socialization, then, in Berger's words: "...successful socialization shapes a self that apprehends itself exclusively and in a taken-for-granted way... that 'knows' this self-apprehension to be the only 'real' one, and rejects as 'unreal' any contrary modes of apprehension or emotionality." (Berger, 1967:107).

The implications of this for prejudice should be obvious. What is given in the belief system of one's community tends to be taken to be necessarily true, so beliefs of outgroup members which do not conform with the world-view of the ingroup must be false. The natural self-preservative tendency of cognitive constructs sets barriers to understanding and appreciating alternate viewpoints. Since outgroups hold different views from those which I "know" as the correct ones, they can perpetrate nothing but falsehood!
(C) The role of ego-involvement. Although it is useful to emphasize the roots of prejudice in human cognitive functions, the role of motivational factors can hardly be deemphasized. Traditionally, psychoanalysts have construed the ego as the agency of the unconscious id, whose pleasure-seeking impulses are often blind with respect to the often dangerous consequences. Freud (1901) showed how the ego's mechanisms of defence, such as repression and projection, lead to cognitive biases in everyday life. Adorno et al. (1950) used the same basic approach to show that habitual rejection of outgroups, characteristic of bigoted persons, is a consequence of repression of anger against disciplining authority during early childhood. Whatever the relative merits of the Adorno et al. (1950) research (Christie and Johoda, 1954; Brown, 1965), the role of emotions and natural "drives" in the preservation of the ego and rejection of the alien cannot be denied.

A perspective on prejudice derived from the Indian intellectual tradition

The Advaita Vedānta: a theory of the self and pathway to self-realization. Vedānta is an ancient body of thought which derives from the Upaniṣads, philosophical texts composed sometime in the early parts of the first millennium B.C. The "Advaita" or non-dualist interpretation of the ancient doctrines of Vedānta was popularized by Śaṅkara (788-814 A.D.), and till this date it continues to be one of the most influential schools of thought in India. In addition to being a formal system of philosophy, Advaita Vedānta (hereafter simply referred to as Vedānta) is a living tradition which provides a practical way of attaining spiritual self-development through self-realization. It is impossible to give a comprehensive account of such a complex system in a short space. The following account of it is necessarily selective and inevitably sketchy. (For an introduction to Vedantic thought see Dasgupta, 1922; or Radhakrishnan, 1929).

The basic doctrine of Vedānta is that there is a single principle which pervades the entire universe, although the phenomenal world, or the world as given in ordinary experience, appears to be multifarious. Thus, although in daily experience the "I" appears to be inextricably identified with various aspects of one's "personality" (jīva) such as the body and the mental states, the true self (ātman) is essentially the same as the ubiquitous single principle of reality (called the brahman). So long as the ego is involved in, and identified with, a particular sphere of individuality, it strives to perpetuate itself and to enhance the sphere of its influence. According to Vedānta, such egoistic self-seeking always perpetuates false pride and a sense of finiteness and incompleteness, no matter how successful one may be in practical life. Lasting happiness is said to be attainable when the individual self is dissolved in the Universal Self (paramātman). Vedāntists claim that the realization of the true nature of the Self as the undivided single principle (brahman) occurs in an altered state of consciousness or a trans-cognitive experience, called "samādhi."
The construction and fabrication of the views of the world. It is difficult to briefly summarize the complex and elaborate epistemology of Vedānta, and even more difficult to translate its theses in the language of the contemporary social sciences. For our purpose, it will be acceptable and adequate to sketch only selected aspects of Vedāntic views of knowledge in terms of their closest Western parallels. By and large, the Vedāntists recognize that knowing is an active process (in somewhat of a Kantian fashion) rather than a matter of passive reception (as in the Lockean model). (For a discussion of Lockean and Kantian models see Rychlak, 1981.) Thus the Vedāntic discussions of epistemology often use the examples of the misperception of a rope for a snake, or of a pillar for a man, thereby suggesting that the world as we know it is “cognitively constructed.” In fact the Vedāntists convey the idea that we fabricate, rather than discover, the nature of reality in that they consider the phenomenal world to be a grand illusion (māyā).

The Vedāntic notion of the world as an illusion implies a kind of subjective idealism. This is a controversial thesis which need not be either criticized or defended for our purpose. An important implication of the “constructivist” view of reality held by Vedāntists is that the same object can be constructed differently. The Rg Veda (10.114.5), which is the most ancient text of Indian origin, states that “The one truth is construed differently” (ekam sat bahudha kalpayanti). Vedāntists follow this early trend of thought to develop a relativist view of all empirical knowledge such that no particular view of reality is considered wholly and absolutely right. (See Radhakrishnan, 1919, Vol. 2, p. 519.) Further, it is suggested that absolute reality (parā sattā) is beyond cognition. Whatever we claim to know about the practical world (vyāvahārika sattā) may be pragmatically more or less valuable, but empirical knowledge must always convey a partial truth rather than an absolute one.

An important consequence of the adoption of a relativistic view of knowledge is the willingness to take competing world-views as only approximate alternatives so that no single theory may be wholly right. Nor could promising alternatives be wholly wrong, because each one of them may have construed the same truths—or half-truths—somewhat differently. The Bhagavad-Gītā, which is perhaps the most influential of Indian texts, conveys the conciliatory spirit of the Rg Veda. It tries to reconcile dualistic theories with monistic doctrines, the path of action with that of renunciation, and declares that only the ignorant think of the atheist Sāṅkhya philosophy as significantly different from the theistic Yoga. The Bhagavad-Gītā (5.4-5) asks us to note that, despite their doctrinal differences, the competing viewpoints of Sāṅkhya and Yoga nevertheless lead to the common goal of self-realization. Such an approach obviously avoids pitting theists against atheists, believers against non-believers.

That the Bhagavad-Gītā teaches tolerance does not mean that its preaching has been able to eliminate sectarian rivalries from among its followers, for, in India as elsewhere, preaching is not an effective way of promoting tolerance. The purpose of referring to the relativist approach here is not to extol the vir-
tudes of a particular tradition which preaches them; its relevance for our purpose lies in the systematic theory of the self it proposes, and in the methods of prejudice reduction derived from it.

b) The construction of images of the self and its implications. Vedāntists emphasize the fact that our images of the self keep on continually changing. It is implied that our views of our self are cognitively constructed and repeatedly revised just as our world-views are. A sharp distinction is made between the changing versus unchanging aspects of selfhood, suggesting that the body, possessions, social roles, and every other aspect of selfhood changes, save the self-same ‘‘I,’’ a transcendental center of awareness. The Vedāntic search for an indubitable basis for selfhood has led to the realization that ultimately the self is based on our capacity to be aware. This capacity is the very bedrock of our Being; it lies beyond the process of Becoming a person. In itself it is indescribable, since it is like a blank slate on which we are able to fabricate the innumerable cognitive constructions designed to give meaning to life. The Vedāntic view of the continual reconstruction of the images of the self is somewhat similar to the views of George Kelly (1955) and Erik Erikson (1968). (For a detailed comparison of Eastern and Western views in this matter see Paranjpe, 1984.) The main differences between such contemporary theories and the Vedāntic viewpoint is that, as we shall soon note, the latter points to distinctive implications of the changing nature of self-images that are relevant to prejudice.

In Vedānta it is noted that the ‘‘thinker’’ continues to identify himself or herself with the ongoing thought, although what is believed to be true now may be the exact opposite of what one thought of as truth the moment before. The problem is that one becomes so infatuated with one’s current beliefs and values that anything to the contrary seems necessarily wrong, even when one knows that one has, oneself, held contrary beliefs very dearly perhaps for years in the past. One does not easily reconcile to the fact that one’s current beliefs are as self-created and revisable as those of the past and cannot be guaranteed to remain unchanged in times to come. In other words, we are wrapped up in a world-view of our own creation. In his book called Vivekacudāmani (Verse No. 137), Śaṅkara conveys this idea with a metaphor: We get trapped in a world of our own creation—like a moth in its cocoon.

The roots of prejudice lie in being so wrapped up in one’s world-view that anything unlike it seems necessarily wrong, or at least implicitly so. This is the condition which Rokeach (1960) has described as closed mindedness or dogmatism. Granted that the Vedāntists had set out on a path of spiritual upliftment rather than one aiming at a theory of prejudice such as Rokeach’s, their examination of the nature of self nevertheless resulted in not only an implicit theory of prejudice, but also a method for reducing the same. This implicit theory and method follow from the Vedāntic approach to self-realization which asks us to examine and continually re-examine—or meditate upon—the meaning of selfhood. As a general guideline for this exercise in self-examination an acid test for ‘‘a wise discrimination between the true self and
not-self’ (ātma-anātma viveka) is provided. Whatever is subject to change is not the true self; the true self never changes (nitya-anitya viveka). Relentless search for the true self, thus guided, gradually leads to the realization that no particular images or definitions of the self in terms of roles, attitudes, values and so on can be ultimately and absolutely true. Although having clear and specific self-definitions is essential for living in a society, all definitions of an empirical self are relative to time and place. Problems arise if one acts as if they are absolute rather than provisional.

The recognition of the relativity of empirical knowledge is not a sufficient condition for the eradication of dogmatism, nor is the mastery of a transcendentalist theory sufficient for self-realization. In Vedānṭa it is believed that no amount of erudition or thinking can itself guarantee self-realization. There are, after all, scholars who teach transcendentalism, and even missionaries who preach Vedānṭa, who behave as if their own views reflect the ultimate truth, and who treat rival viewpoints with contempt. True self-realization, it is said, involves a complete transformation of one’s mode of being in the world, and it manifests itself in genuine and unlimited compassion for others. To attain such a state, it is necessary to remove an obstacle in the way, namely attachment or ego involvement.

c) Ego-involvement: the main obstacle in self-realization. Although there is a cognitive basis of intolerance as clearly shown by Rokeach (1960) and implicitly recognized in Vedānṭa, cognition provides but one aspect of the complex phenomenon of prejudice. In their own way the Vedāntists recognize the importance of affect. Thus, the investment of affect (āsakti) in narrow conceptions of the self is regarded as the most basic obstacle on the path to self realization. In Vedānṭa, as in Yoga and other systems of Indian thought, the root of ego-involvement is traced to desires and pleasure-seeking tendencies (vāsanā) which arise from the history of the organism long before conception. During the human life cycle these desires are manifest in a predictable form—play in childhood and lust in youth and so on. As the individual seeks objects of pleasure and succeeds in accumulating them, the ego is, so to speak, inflated by successes and deflated by losses. Pride and prejudice, complacency and jealousy, infatuation and fear, love and hate, are seen as products of the fluctuations of the ego through the changing fortunes in the course of life. In Vedānṭa, as in many other spiritual disciplines, the liberation from desires and from the resultant ego-involvements is considered an important means to self-realization. Needless to say, those who can win over their own desires and ego-involvements can rise above rancour, false pride and prejudices of all sorts.

d) On expanding the domain of the self. Śaṅkara (in Vivekacūḍāmāni, 297) specifically suggests that a person who aspires to self-realization must cease to identify himself with his family, his clan and so on. Nevertheless, in Vedānṭa, the overall emphasis is not so much on ego-involvement in social groups, as it is on
the elimination of egoism from life in general. It appears to me that, by and large, the Indian cultural tradition tends to foster strong loyalties to family and clan, especially to caste groups. Notwithstanding this overall cultural emphasis on communal identities in Indian society, there are, nevertheless, a few theoretical concepts which emphasize a person’s identification with widening social spheres. There is a trilogy of concepts: individuality (vyaṣṭि), collectivity (samaṣṭि), and the Supreme Being (paraṃeṣṭhi). Using these concepts, a guideline for an individual’s spiritual self-development is suggested. Thus, an individual should expand the boundaries of his/her selfhood by becoming progressively identified with a widening sphere of collectivity so as to ultimately merge into the Supreme Being, which pervades the whole of existence.

It may be noted that the idea of merging with the whole of humanity is consistent with the basic principle of Vedānta, namely that the individual self is only a manifestation of the single principle of reality which pervades everywhere. How is this feat of merging into the whole to be accomplished? It is not easy to find a guideline in the usual Vedāntic literature, but a verse from the epic Mahābhārata suggests a course of action. When a royal family in exile is confronted with a marauding demon who had menaced a helpless village, the five brothers of the family are given the following advice: For the sake of family an individual may be sacrificed, a family for a clan, a clan for the village, and a village for a country. This advice may be interpreted in the light of Allport’s (1958, pp. 41-45) discussion of loyalties of individuals to widening circles of ingroups as follows: The problem of human conflict can be solved if individuals learn to subordinate the interests of a smaller ingroup for the sake of a more inclusive ingroup. No matter how difficult it is to translate this “iffy” proposition into practice, the rationale of this approach to prejudice is no different from that of Sherif and Sherif’s (1969): To help solve the problem of prejudice, induce people to pursue “superordinate goals”—which means goals common to the whole of the human species, not to “pseudo-species” which consider only a certain type of people as truly human.

Discussion and conclusion

Despite vast differences in their historical and sociocultural origins, the Vedāntic and social identity approaches are strikingly similar. Both locate the roots of prejudice in the conceptions of the self, and both consider self-concepts as largely acquired and cognitively constructed. The recognition of the acquired and cognitively constructed character of the self opens up the possibilities for the reduction of prejudice. The parallel forms of conceptualizing the problem have led to contrasting but complementary forms of solutions in the East and the West. By and large, the Western types of solutions implicitly adopt the stance of a therapist or a “consulting social engineer” who deals with prejudice as a problem belonging to someone else (a patient or an unwitting “client”) rather than to himself or herself. All of the social scientific methods of reducing prejudice surveyed by Ashmore (1970) fit this
characterization. By contrast, the Vedantic approach focuses on hatred and other similar problems as they manifest within oneself rather than others. Accordingly, its prescription for the reduction of hatred involves a program initiated and administered by and for oneself.

It is not common for people to recognize bigotry or prejudice as an undesirable aspect of themselves and to strive to rid themselves of it with or without the help of expert advice. In many countries the development of modern mental health professions has created an atmosphere such that “nervous breakdowns” and other similar problems are beginning to be recognized as aspects of one’s condition that deserve to be corrected by means of one’s own effort and expert intervention. However, social scientists have not yet been able to create a matching sense of public awareness such that bigotry or hatred are considered an affliction deserving of treatment. As such, there is neither a widespread “demand” for self-administered methods of prejudice reduction, nor a “supply” of such methods. For those few who wish to become unprejudiced, Vedanta, Buddhism and other Eastern approaches provide some help.

As noted, Vedanta tries to strike at the deepest roots of prejudice, aims at a complete riddance of all forms of prejudice, and encourages us to aspire to infinite compassion characteristic of the saints. Such ideals would appear outlandish, unreachable, and simply out of scope for psychology when judged by modern Western standards. Although saintly compassion is an attractive ideal, it is by no means easily attainable. According to the Bhagavad-Gita (VII.3), an ancient and influential text of the Indian tradition, one in a thousand persons tries to be self-realized, and among those who try, a rare one succeeds. Indeed if it was easy to eliminate prejudices through self-realization as suggested in Vedanta, the land where Vedanta flourished would not have been so badly conflict-ridden as we see it today. To make matters worse, an understanding of the principles of Vedanta is not enough; it is not difficult to find erudite preachers of Vedanta who are extremely intolerant of “rival” schools of thought such as Yoga! Prejudices can be eliminated only through sincere examination and active effort, not by merely studying the theories of their origin. This is true whether the beliefs and behaviors in question pertain to the fields of ethnicity, religion, politics, or science.

Richard Ashmore (1970) has coined the term “engineering validity” to designate the ease of practical application of a theory. None of the contemporary (Western) theories surveyed by him have promising levels of engineering validity, and we may certainly conclude likewise in regard to traditional Eastern approaches, as far as large scale social applications are concerned. However, the Vedantic approach promises to be an effective method for those who may wish to take upon themselves the arduous task of critical self-examination and self-development. Indeed, prejudices are as deeply rooted as they are widespread. That is precisely the reason why we need the convergence of all types of approaches: ancient and modern, Eastern and Western, self-directed as well as other-directed.
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