
Review

The place of prejudice: A case for reasoning within the world

Adam A. Sandel

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Adam Adatto Sandel begins his fascinating yet flawed *The Place of Prejudice* by observing that prejudice has ‘fallen out of favor’ and ‘understandably so’. From police violence against people of color to wage discrimination against women to persistent inequalities in state-sponsored services, prejudice continues to support structural injustice and inequality around the world. Yet contrary to this bad reputation, Sandel argues that we need a degree of prejudice to judge well, to develop effective arguments, and, perhaps most importantly, to be free. Not all prejudices are bad and indeed some amount of prejudice is necessary, if not sufficient, for a full and flourishing life. To make this case, Sandel draws on Heidegger, Gadamer and Aristotle and mounts a strong case against theories of detached and de-situated understanding and freedom. Although the ultimate political implications of this argument (and in particular how it might change our approach to destructive prejudices) remain undeveloped, *The Place of Prejudice* nonetheless turns attention to the importance of prejudice and the need for a more complex theorization of it.

Sandel sets up his argument against an Enlightenment tradition that condemned prejudice as both a source of error as well as an obstacle to freedom. From different angles, Descartes and Bacon described prejudice as an idol and a modern cave; judgment must free itself from prejudice and be based on clear and distinct perceptions. Along these lines, Adam Smith advanced a concept of moral judgment rooted in the idea of an impartial spectator. Our judgments are most accurate, Smith argued, when we free ourselves from our prejudicial attachments to those close to us. Yet prejudice does not merely prevent good judgment; it also obstructs our freedom. Kant’s ‘demanding’ concept of autonomy makes this clear: unprejudiced thought means thinking for oneself; autonomy comes only from such self-imposed rigor.

Against these criticisms of prejudice, Sandel sets out to make a case for prejudice as necessary for understanding and freedom. Both of these arguments Sandel roots in his reading of Martin Heidegger’s *Being and Time*. Heidegger’s concept of ‘being-in-the-world’ captures the *situatedness* of human existence that shows the necessity of



including prejudices in our understanding of ourselves and our world. ‘Situatdness’ describes how we each exist in situations replete with relations fostered and implicit by virtue of our activities; ‘Dasein’, for Heidegger, illuminates how we exist in a particular place, such that our being (*Sein*) is always there (*Da*). As Sandel puts it:

“Dasein” captures the way in which we are defined by the activities we carry out, by the situations in which we find ourselves, and ultimately, by our comprehensive situation, or life circumstance – what Heidegger calls the *world*. (p. 69)

In other words, Dasein *is* its world, ‘a totality of purposes and ends, a totality that coheres as a lived story’ (p. 73). This situated understanding of what it means to be a human being necessitates a review of the case against prejudice as a source of error. ‘To understand a world, we must live within it’, Sandel writes (p. 79): comprehending the world means clarifying what we already know, not discovering something entirely new; this requires that we turn toward ‘practices, ends, and opinions’ (p. 80) – our prejudices – as the foundation for any understanding.

If we need to engage prejudice to develop understanding, we also need prejudice to realize our capacities for freedom. Here again Sandel enlists Heidegger to make his case. For Heidegger, freedom is achieved through Dasein’s affirmative awareness of the whole; through such awareness ‘Dasein simultaneously develops itself and its world, reshaping ... or ... clarifying ... *the basis* of its own being’ (pp. 118–119). Put starkly, the self alone is inadequate for freedom. Yet Sandel advances neither an existentialist nor a communitarian reading of situated freedom. According to Sandel, Heidegger’s notions of thrownness and projection do not offer examples of passivity and activity but rather the constitutive condition and expression of that condition by Dasein: to be an agent means owning up to a pre-given destiny (one’s thrownness); despite its necessary structure, however, Dasein still holds a ‘potentiality for being’ (p. 129) – a freedom achievable through projection. Thrownness is thus a source of boundless creativity while projection captures a capacity for authorship (p. 135).

The conceptual innovations achieved with Heidegger’s notions of being-in-the-world, Dasein, thrownness and projection – innovations that Sandel seeks to capture with the concept of ‘situatedness’ – do not, however, translate directly to the language of ‘prejudice’. For this connection, Sandel turns to Hans Georg Gadamer. Gadamer uses prejudice in a doubled sense and explicitly links these senses to human understanding: we have comprehensive prejudices or horizons as well as particular prejudices; any act of understanding involves working through both layers. In his critique of historicism in *Truth and Method*, Gadamer argues that claims to objectivity in historical study have missed how we can only ever develop historical understanding in terms of our own worldview. There are no historical objects separate from our preconceptions of them. With these arguments in place, we can see that the task of critical inquiry lies in separating the true prejudices from the false ones: we must identify the questions of our own time and find ways to resist these in



the historical texts we seek to interpret; the meeting between us and the past constitutes a ‘fusion’ of horizons.

To elaborate Gadamer’s hermeneutical theory, Sandel rereads Aristotle through the lens of prejudice, thus highlighting the necessity of horizons of understanding as well as the potentially constructive ‘place of prejudice’ for human understanding and freedom. On Sandel’s reading, Aristotle also concerned himself with what Gadamer called ‘the hermeneutics of facticity’ (p. 186); moreover, ‘in Aristotle’s conception of the Good’, Sandel writes, ‘we catch a glimpse of Heidegger’s world’ (p. 189). The Good names a practical way of life; knowledge of the Good is thus inseparable from the way of life in which it exists. Grasping the good requires *phronêsis*, practical wisdom, the situated character of which becomes clear in contrast with *technê* or craft-knowledge: *technê* describes formal knowledge such as the workman’s grasp of the table as a concept prior to making it; *phronêsis* involves an agent’s engaged understanding of a particular situation, such as a field hockey player’s awareness of her position on the field of play *vis-à-vis* both teammates and the opposition. The development of excellence requires *phronêsis* – both our understanding and our freedom proceed from an awareness of our situatedness.

Reading Aristotle as part of a broader conversation about prejudice might have served to underscore the usefulness of a hermeneutic approach for the history of political thought. In his account, however, Sandel passes too swiftly over the differences between Aristotle and the received tradition of prejudice. Aristotle’s emphasis on deliberation and its engagement with particulars, for instance, differs from Heidegger’s account of situated understanding and an awareness only elicited by moments of anxiety or experiences of particular art objects. Moreover, Sandel does not distinguish Aristotle’s focus on opinion from the contemporary language of prejudice today. Socrates started with opinions but also sought to clarify them; indeed in *What is Thinking?* Heidegger praises Socrates’ purity as a thinker because the latter allowed the winds of thought to carry him past particular prejudices. Prejudices offer starting points but not ends; Sandel does not clarify how reclaiming the place of prejudice might extend or depart from the kind of *endoxic* project – the working through of opinions – that Aristotle exemplifies.

In his final chapter, Sandel turns to political rhetoric and offers analyses of how great speeches spoke to the prejudices of their times. Sandel reads Lyndon B. Johnson’s speeches given throughout the American South in support of civil rights during the 1960 presidential campaign, Lincoln’s Gettysburg Address, and Frederick Douglass’s Fourth of July speech against slavery. Here, Sandel extends Bryan Garsten’s defense of rhetoric in *Saving Persuasion* as best understood as engaging constructively with popular prejudices and thus drawing out their capacity of judgment. For Sandel, then, suspicion of rhetoric is misguided because it presupposes the possibility of de-situated judgment; rhetoric, moreover, can offer a way of reasoning ‘from within people’s life perspectives’ (p. 234) to engage their situated understandings.



With his debts to Heidegger and Aristotle, Sandel resembles no other contemporary political theorist more than Hannah Arendt. The book's passing references to her work, however, only left this reader wondering how a deeper engagement could have clarified the political implications of Sandel's case for prejudice. Is the political the proper site for engaging prejudice? Could the political provide not merely a place for politicians to craft rhetoric that panders to prejudices but also (or instead) a site for social critics to question and disturb these prejudices? How might Sandel's reconstructed prejudice offer an alternative to the agonist or republican interpretations of Arendt, perhaps a politics more rooted in the tradition but nonetheless with immanent revolutionary potential? To put the question in pointed historical perspective: Why did Heidegger's infamous *Rektoratsrede* not elicit deliberation of the kind Sandel sees connected to rhetoric, and how did his situated understanding lead him to support the Nazi regime? Sandel ends his book with praise for philosophy (and, implicitly, its use of rhetoric) whereas Arendt, drawing on the example of Heidegger, gives good reason for suspicion.

Perhaps most importantly, Sandel does not address the deep concern for world alienation and resentment of the human condition to which Arendt so strikingly calls our attention. As Dana Villa has pointed out in his *Public Freedom*, Arendt's concept of 'wordliness' has a philosophical affiliation with Heidegger's being-in-the-world but also possesses a broader cultural context. Although Heidegger's work possessed strong *völkish* overtones, Arendt worried for the lack of care for the world evident around her. To put this concern in Aristotelian terms, there appeared to Arendt a distinct lack of a conception of the good life that might make situated judgment and freedom possible and intelligible. If we are alienated from the world how can an embrace of prejudice help? In this context, Sandel's turn to rhetoric might have taken a different political direction, namely to look at how rhetoric can build common ground and trust among differently situated populations. As Danielle Allen has suggested (in her wonderful *Talking with Strangers*), the rhetorical tradition can help us imagine forms of political friendship necessary in a distrustful age. Indeed this kind of rhetoric might begin with prejudice but aim toward something more like a *sensus communis* built on inclusive and participatory practices of situated understanding and freedom.

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