

My Prejudices

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I have come to the probably not very original conclusion that we are the sum of our prejudices. Surely some great thinker has discoursed on this notion, and before I proceed I'd no doubt be wise to do a little research and at least footnote the rascal who so unkindly stole a march on me. However, among my prejudices is a distaste for accomplishment derived from hard work. It seems so bourgeois, somehow. I admire the intuitive genius, the "Eureka" shouted from the bathtub.

My Eureka to the self-defining nature of prejudice—by which I mean that it defines not *itself* but *the self*, defines us—came recently when I realized how pointless it would be to try to explain to my wife why I can't warm to our new neighbor. Hal's fatal flaw? He drives a Chevrolet. Why do I embrace Fords and their owners while Chevrolets cause me to feel the same revulsion as seeing an egg-sized wen on a scrawny neck? Actually, I do have a good and highly entertaining explanation, but I'll save it to spice up one of the *longeurs* that will inevitably crop up later in this essay. However, most often the answer for why we are motivated by a particular prejudice is: Dunno.

The "dunno" is crucial to my concept of prejudice, which has nothing to do with those currently in fashion: racial, sexual, cultural, or political (except for the happy coincidence that my prejudice against the color red in favor of blue happens to match my political leanings. Screw those red-staters.) Indeed, perhaps "preference" is a more accurate label for what I mean except preference implies choice, whereas my prejudices present themselves as *faits accomplis*. I have them less than they have me. My preference is to like my new neighbor, Hal. Seems like a nice fellow. But there's that damn Chevy in his driveway.

Most of my prejudices trace to my childhood, and many of these would no doubt be dismissed as mere matters of taste. Oh, ill-considered *mere*. There's nothing at all *mere* about taste. Taste is the dye that marks us, indelibly.

We tend to dismiss the importance of taste, I think, because we can't account for it. Why did that little fellow—me—from my earliest recollections love chocolate ice cream while finding vanilla insipid, hardly worth the effort? Proponents of the "mere taste" theory would say we've taken the chocolate-vanilla issue as far as it need go simply by pointing to it, but I say, not so fast. It's not just the taste but the people who are different. My childhood discovery that there were people who actually liked vanilla ice cream fostered a more important realization: that the world was populated by individuals different from me, whose motives and inclinations I could acknowledge but never truly understand. In other words, there were aliens in my world. Perhaps the beginning of maturity was the understanding that I was also an alien in theirs.

Chocolate ice cream over vanilla; blue over red; Pepsi over Coke; the letters *i*, *s*, *u*, over *e*, *p*, and *t*. This last prejudice is "taste" at its most abstract, arcane extreme, and I will not attempt to justify it except to admit that even today when thumbing through the dictionary I will mentally frown in disapproval to note the bloated half-inch of pages occupied by the corpulent *p*'s. Moreover, I'm willing to bet that there are warped souls who actually like *p*'s while scorning my beloved *i*'s (lower case; I'm indifferent to capital *I*s).

Quite likely many of my gentle readers are right now concluding that my dividing the world into hostile camps of *i* vs. *p* lovers is a subject best discussed with my analyst. Maybe. But I'll wager a good many of those same gentle readers would not hesitate to divide the world between dog lovers and cat lovers, never the twain to meet. Each camp will regard the other as bafflingly misguided at best and at worst not fit to be trusted in any field of human endeavor. The only thing they'll agree on is the absurdity of ascribing it all to "mere taste."*

Not all my youthful prejudices should be assigned to the category of taste, mere or otherwise. The derivations of some are clearer, even if they are not ultimately any more logical. Take, for example, my youthful embracing of all things Dutch and corresponding abhorrence of the Italian.

My family name, Vannatta, is Dutch, got it? Dutch, not Italian. Get it straight and keep it straight. Frequently it's spelled VanNatta. Or VanAtta. I've seen it both ways, but either way it's obviously Dutch. My branch of the family got lazy and dropped the second capital, opening the door for the ignorant who think any name ending in *i*, *a*, or *o* is Italian to assume my heritage reeks of garlic and greasy hair. *Tua madre!* But how many Italians did I know in WASPish Sedalia, Missouri, where I grew up, you ask? How many Dutch? Irrelevant. I felt what I felt.

"Vannatta—that's a wop name, isn't it?" So would my grad school "friend" invariably greet me, knowing he'd get my goat. But my goat was gotten long before then. Even as a youngster, Dutch Masters was my favorite cigar—not that I smoked them, but if I would have, they would certainly have been the best. The few Hudsons that remained on the road were my favorite car because Henry Hudson was Dutch and . . . well, you get it. Rembrandt was my favorite painter even though I wouldn't have known the difference between a Rembrandt and a bratwurst. The Italians, with whom to my chagrin I was often confused? To young Vannatta they were loud, boorish, smelly, dishonest, violent in their personal affairs but cowardly in war, their culture a sad falling off from the glories of ancient Rome. What about the Renaissance, you ask? Don't bother trying to confuse the prejudiced with facts.

But perhaps I'm being too hard on my young self. What could be more natural than embracing one's own ethnic and cultural heritage and not wanting to see that heritage misinterpreted because of the accident of a dropped capital coupled with that unfortunate final *a*? This is precisely my point about some prejudices seemingly being rationally based and not mere matters of taste. But often it is seemingly only. I submit that from my own experience it has not made the slightest actual difference whether one appended "Italian" or "Dutch" to my or anyone else's name. I have never lived in a predominantly Dutch community. I would not know where to find one in the United States. True, I have been to Wop Hill in St. Louis and Little Italy in Manhattan, but other than scoring some excellent ravioli, I was not manifestly affected by the "Italian." It might be relevant here to note that, tracing my family tree back to my great-grandparents, I conclude that I'm approximately 1/4 Dutch, 3/8 English, 1/8 Scots, 1/8 Irish, and 1/8 Austrian. The Austrian comes from my great-grandfather Stadler, from Austria with a German name. According to my mother, he spoke Italian.

I'm sure that in Palermo or Utrecht, the labels Italian and Dutch have true

*The facts are these: cats are sneaky, arrogant, unloving, self-absorbed, and dumb. Dogs are their positive opposites in all respects. Case closed.

significance; but in my home town of Little Rock, Arkansas, in 2012 they are words only, foundationless prejudices which nevertheless in my own mind identify me just as surely as my dark complexion and oily skin. Me, Vannatta: greaser.

While some of my prejudices (chocolate over vanilla) are inexplicable and without discernible effect and others (Dutch over Italian) can be explained but are ultimately meaningless, a third category is tied much more clearly to personality—although which comes first, the prejudice or the personality, I’m not sure. Take my taste in cowboy movie stars.

My father was a school district superintendent, and he and my mother went to several school and social functions a week. The movie theater was my babysitter. In those days Hollywood produced far more movies than today, and I saw most of them. Westerns were far from my favorites, but when it was a Western or nothing, I hoped for Hopalong Cassidy and not Roy Rogers or Gene Autry. What was wrong with Roy and Gene? Well, for one thing they sang, and in my opinion real men didn’t break into song when they could as well be filling Injuns with lead. To be honest, I can’t remember whether Hoppy sang or not, but even if he did, he had another attribute that more than made up for the transgression: he wore black.

I was into black. No white hats for this boy. If the villain wore black (as he generally did), then I was for the villain. If black wasn’t an option, a dark color would do. I think my preference for blue over red stems from my feeling that blue is a dark color whereas red is bright. Hence my prejudice for Batman (not just his costume but those wonderful Stygian cityscapes) over Superman in his tacky red cape jetting across the sunny skies of Metropolis. When *Star Wars* came out, even in my thirties I could feel my deep-seated love of black nudging me into the Darth Vader camp over wimpy, golden-haired Luke Skywalker.

Black over white, dark over light; the bad guys over the good guys; autumn over spring; twilight over dawn; stormy weather over fair; tragedy over comedy; ends badly over ends well: they’re irrational and inexplicable, a personality thing.

Would I be a “Goth” if I were a juvenile today? Probably—although I suppose I’m hopelessly out of date with the Goth reference. That was back in the ‘90s, wasn’t it? I’m willing to bet there’s a version of the Goth today, because youth always finds a way to uniform its loners, its outsiders, and the uniform is invariably dark. Byron would today be a Goth, I’ll bet. And Rimbaud and Kafka.

We proto-Goths are the way we are because of what we like but also because we don’t like what you like. In fact, we don’t much like *you*. We feel uneasy around optimists, for instance, not so much because they’re wrong but because they don’t act right. What in the hell are they smiling at? In the presence of enthusiasm I cringe as if I’m about to be given a hug by a cholera carrier. In the army I didn’t have to be advised not to volunteer for anything; I was born not volunteering. In department meetings, when someone volunteers to help our beleaguered chairman deal with the latest asinities from the administration, I can only look on in bafflement while sitting quite comfortably on my hands. What could possibly possess those deluded souls—it’s always the same ones—to *volunteer*?

Looking at the issue dispassionately (a contradiction in terms in reference to prejudices), I must admit there’s not the slightest modicum of logic in choosing black, dark, twilight, autumn, etc. over white, light, dawn, spring, etc. Furthermore, logic

concludes that it is the optimists, the enthusiasts, the volunteers who get things done, and the rest of us are shifty-eyed malingerers who live off the vitality of those we disdain. Me, vampire.

But I can't help it. It'd not a matter of choice. It's personality. It's prejudice.

The years pass, and I acquire new prejudices: Cognac over Scotch, fountain pens over ballpoint, Post-Impressionism over Impressionism. This is only to be expected. What is more surprising is how many of my older prejudices have altered, in some cases reversed. For instance, years ago I began to prefer Coke over Pepsi even though in my youth I was firmly and passionately in the Pepsi camp. Why? Dunno. Now when the provenance of my name comes into question, I note that it's Dutch but at the same time proudly proclaim that I have Italian blood. My younger grad-student self would be astounded to learn that if I were forced to choose, I would now choose Proust over Joyce. Joyce is still one of my literary gods, but Proust—whom I once loathed with a stomach-heaving intensity—is a god-and-a-half. How did this transformation occur? I could shovel a three-hour-seminar's worth of words on the subject but come no closer to a true justification that I can justify preferring blue to red.

In fact, I don't. My earlier comment that I would choose blue over red applied to my youth and political convictions but not to my current color preference. I'm wearing a solid red polo shirt as I write this. I think I look good in it. Blue? Not so much.

Why have many, though certainly not all, of my prejudices altered, some doing a complete one-eighty? The answer varies with the pair in question. With some we are obviously back to that taste thing. No use trying to explain it. With others—Proust over Joyce—a long, involved explanation can surely be offered, but in the end I suspect we'd conclude the answer is, once again, taste. A third category is more clearly explicable, the cause of the reversal rooted in experience.

When, for example, I admitted that I can't warm to my new neighbor because he drives a Chevy while I'm a Ford man, this is a relatively recent development. I was a Chevy fan as a boy. My best friend, Bill, favored Fords, and we'd fall just short of blows over the relative merits of "our" cars. "Chevys use oil," Bill would sneer, to which I'd hurl back, "Fix Or Repair Daily!" Showed him. I didn't know a thing about cars, doubt if Bill knew much more. But my father always bought General Motors products while Bill's dad bought Fords, so that was it. It was in our blood.

Back in the '80s, though, I bought a new Chevrolet Celebrity, and in the first year alone I had it in the shop twelve—count 'em, twelve—times for repairs. At about the same time, I bought, for a second car, a Ford Pinto. Pintos had a horrible reputation, and in fact they were in their last year of production. It was the single cheapest car marketed in the United States, the only way they could get somebody to buy one of the things. I drove my cheap Pinto five years and never had more go wrong with it than a dead battery. Since then I've championed Fords and ridiculed all General Motors products as only a person can who made twelve visits to a service department in one year.

One might argue that the Ford-General Motors dispute shouldn't be included in my discussion of prejudices the way I've defined them because my preference for Ford products is not only explicable but logical, defensible, backed by statistics and service department invoices. But the logic and statistics are specious. Are all General Motors vehicles Chevys? Of course not. Nor are all Chevys, Celebrities. Are all Celebrities

monthly visitors to the service department? Of course not. Did Pinto owners *characteristically* have my good fortune? Not the ones who rode that unholy flame-wagon to their deaths, certainly. I'd flog a student who offered a literary interpretation based on such fatuous reasoning. It's not logic and it's certainly not maturity that causes me now to choose Ford over Chevy. It's prejudice. I'm still a kid choosing chocolate over vanilla.

I see I've almost gotten off track here. (That damn Celebrity still makes my blood boil.) The prejudice-reversals I'm most interested in are the ones that illuminate and identify *me*. If my prejudices have changed, does that mean I have changed? I think it surely must. I am absolutely stunned to realize, in fact for years now have been astounded by the mounting personal evidence that, a person can *change*!

For at least half of my life—throughout the entirety of my intellectually formative years—I was a dyed-in-the-wool determinist. I'd bombard you with Aeschylus (“soldered in sockets of doom”), James (“One's in the hands of one's own law”), and the immortal Popeye (“I yam what I yam”). What I am is a product of forces beyond my control, and there's not a damn thing I can do about it—that's what I would have argued until I was blue in the face. But now I'd choose red.

I tell a lie. True, it was blue over red in my youth, and then for a time red over blue, but for the last twenty years or so yellow has taken over as my favorite. I've resisted acknowledging this truth because it undermines the conveniently symmetrical binary, zero-sum game, this vs. that, Hegelian thesis vs. antithesis (but no synthesis) structure of this essay. I swear to you the deception was not premeditated, the binary not just a compositional choice but a true reflection—as I understood it, as I understood *me*—of how I saw the world. If I went this way, I could not go that; if I chose this, I had to turn my back on that. But now I realize that the either/or has for some time now been breaking down, opening up my prejudices to a greater (potentially infinite?) variety of possibilities. Opening up my *life* to a greater variety of possibilities.

I had planned to tell you that in contrast to my younger self, I now opt for dawn over sunset, spring over fall, light over dark, and so on; but this is not, I realize, correct. In fact I love dawn and dusk but also midnight and high, bright sunny noon. Fall is indeed beautiful but no more so than spring. Fireflies on a summer night! The winter sun breaking on trees after an ice storm! I still like chocolate ice cream better than vanilla, but better than either is hot fudge on vanilla. And how about peppermint? Black walnut! Give me a tiny sample of each. Sample, hell, let me feed until I burst!

I have spent too much of my life dividing the world into what I liked and what I didn't like. There was a lot more that I didn't, and what I did was mostly dark, cynical, bitter. That unhappy little man. Am I a better man today? Yes! I still fight the old demons, the old prejudices, but it's a fight I at least sometimes win.

What has happened? Have I turned into a gushing, sixty-three-year-old Pollyanna? Hardly. The new sunny me is possible, I'm very much afraid, only because the darkness is so near. Oh, my friends, I have grown old. I feel the world slipping away, and I would like to hold on. Hold on to all of it, all that I love. And I love everything.

(Well, you can keep the goddamn Chevys.)