

DeVane Lecture Discussion – 1-25-01

TK We're here this afternoon with Professor Mahzarin Banaji of the Yale Psychology Department, to discuss her extraordinarily provocative and enlightening lecture on Tuesday, "Paradoxes of Mind and Society." Mahzarin's lecture stirred up so many questions in my mind, as I'm sure it did in yours, that I'm not quite sure where to begin, though I suspect one question will lead on to the next and we'll have an opportunity this afternoon to explore a good part of the fascinating territory Mahzarin opened up for us on Tuesday. Following our customary procedure, I thought that Mahzarin and I would talk to one another for ten minutes or so and then we will invite the rest of you into an open conversation about the subject.

One phrase that you used in your lecture, Mahzarin, that made a very strong and deep impression on me, was the phrase "eternal vigilance." You spoke at length and exhibited for us, in the films and the results of the tests you've been conducting, the extraordinary influence of all of those complicated judgments and assessments that we make below the threshold of conscious awareness and I think, by the end of your lecture, everyone sitting in the audience would have to grant that there is an elaborate machinery of judgment concealed from view—from our own view of ourselves. And you used the phrase "eternal vigilance" as a way of expressing your sense that we need to be aware of that hidden machinery, and constantly and consciously be on guard to see that it doesn't carry us in directions that, upon reflection, we would prefer not to go.

The question I'd like to start with today is this: "Eternal vigilance" suggests a personal ideal, an ideal that each of us might adopt on his or her own for him or herself. But it also suggests a whole range of social programs and policies that we might adopt to reduce the likelihood that our unconscious prejudices are influential in the things we do and the way we construct our lives together. For example—just to make the point concretely—jurors sitting in the jury box, evaluating the testimony of witnesses and the like, are making all sorts of judgments all the time, many of them presumably below the threshold of awareness, and perhaps making them in a prejudiced fashion. Wouldn't it be consistent with a program of eternal vigilance to require jurors to submit to an implicit attitudes test or something like that, and achieve a certain score of neutrality or unbiasedness before putting them on a jury, and requiring policemen and policewomen, before we send them out on the beat, to take a similar test, and perhaps to retake it every month or two? What do you think?

MB Well, I think that the term "vigilance" is an interesting one to have picked, and I hadn't really thought about it until the moment came to write this particular lecture. So I should say that, in many ways, preparing for this lecture has made me think about how our data may really extend into the kinds of domains that you're raising, Tony.

The word "vigilance" really has at its heart something conscious. How can one be vigilant unless one is aware? And so to be using the word "vigilance" to refer to phenomena that, by their very nature lie below the surface of awareness is, I think, itself somewhat ironic. But the point was exactly the one that you make, that vigilance in this case may need to take a different form—vigilance first in recognizing that there might be ways in which we deny people mental due process—which is the term I also used in the lecture—might be the very first step. And then there might be different paths to go.

Let's just take two different ones. On the one hand, it may be conceivable that we can do certain things, that we can educate ourselves, place ourselves in environments that may change these implicit thoughts and feelings and so on, such that, over time, the magnitude of these biases themselves may be reduced. That's one way in which we might go. The other is simply to be aware that one might have these biases and to do some explicit sort of correction. So I can mentally say, Well, if my score is a score of X, when I now make a decision—whatever it might be—to use your example—if I'm a juror, a teacher, a police officer—that I'm going to consciously correct—I might over correct or under correct but I'm going to try and do something with this knowledge that I have about the likelihood that I'm going to be biased. So these are both possibilities and these are only two of many ways in which we might proceed. And I think your question about the role of institutions is especially critical because I think that, as one acquires a

position of greater power, the question of how we might change procedures that are inherent in institutions becomes quite important. An individual person can make decisions and follow a certain path of action, but institutions—even more importantly, I think—need to come to terms with eternal vigilance in a new way.

TK Related to this, it occurred to me, when you were lecturing on Tuesday, that one strategy for combating or reducing or containing the influence of these unconscious prejudices is to give oneself more time in the making of decisions where they might be engaged. I was struck by the fact that many people who are conscious egalitarians, who espouse principles of fair treatment and equality as conscious principles of action, are nevertheless just as likely—perhaps even more likely—to be drawn along by unconscious prejudices that conflict with their conscious convictions. And those unconscious prejudices will be most potent when you have to make a snap decision under the pressure of time. So if one can avoid snap decisions or stretch them out a bit, that may be a way of increasing the influence of your conscious convictions in the decisions you make and reducing the influence of the unconscious prejudices.

MB That's right, that's very plausible. I think that extending things out in time, thereby giving the individual person or mind the occasion or the opportunity to be able to call to mind conscious values of egalitarianism and so on is certainly one possibility. Each of us, under time pressure, can think of things that we've done and said that we might later regret. And the reason is that, in that moment, we didn't believe that we had access to our conscious, deliberate thoughts and so on. But it well may be the case that what I spoke about is not restricted to only those types of situations. It may well be that, even if one had all the time in the world to make a decision, that one might still be biased because one is simply not aware of those forces that are influencing a particular decision. So I could, with hours of time, come to a conclusion that may be quite biased because, at each step, I am simply not aware of what it is that is influencing my judgment.

So philosophers and psychologists who study consciousness speak about different components of consciousness. There is the component of awareness and, if one is not aware, then one cannot do very much about the behavior simply because the connection between the cause of the way in which one is thinking and how one actually thinks—that connection is simply not made. The other aspect of consciousness, and that's the one that you're raising when you talk about time, is the component called control. I think when one drives a car or whatever, you come to terms with the degree of control one can exert on a particular action in an obvious way. And that part of consciousness is, indeed, what we have been studying in the kind of experiments that I spoke about.

And then, of course, there is another component of consciousness—intention—the ability to be able to perform the act that one intends to perform and, again, time would be something that would help. And finally, of course, this uniquely human capability to self reflect—a fourth dimension of consciousness. And I think all of these are ones that go into this mix of what produces a particular set of thoughts or behaviors and I think each of them has kind of different downstream effects on behavior.

TK Before we open it up for general discussion, there is one optimistic premise in what you have just said that I'd like to draw out a bit. If our unconscious prejudices were uneducable—if there was nothing we could do to reform them or reshape them or retrain them—then it's not so clear what the point or purpose would be of bringing them to consciousness. They would just be just kind of like a lump there in our lives and we'd have to accept the fact that they're there and they influence us and direct us in various ways. If there's nothing we can do to reshape them in a direction that we would approve, then one is left, ultimately, feeling rather hopeless about their place and potency in our lives. So you're assuming—I would like to be able to assume, too—it's an optimistic and reassuring and inspiring assumption—that these prejudices can be educated, and educated in the light of our rational convictions. So that it's a circle that you describe, really. Our conscious life is driven along by these unconscious judgments, shaped by them in important ways. But when they're brought to light, they are amenable to being reshaped themselves in light of our conscious conviction. So they act on our reasoning—the reasoning part of the soul, as Plato might have said—but the reasoning part of the soul can act on them, or react on them as well.

MB That is among the most encouraging things that we've seen the last few years in doing this work. I have to say that, at the beginning of this research program, there was very little cause for this kind of optimism because we certainly hadn't done the experiments and hadn't even imagined, ourselves, that we would be able to do experiments in which we could look at change. And I think we're just still at the very beginning of this whole line of work that I believe will be the exciting next phase. But it takes me back to the early part of our conversation again.

There are two ways, let's say—very simplistically speaking—in which one might expect to see changes in implicit prejudices. One of those has to do with the environment in which one lives. Generations, people who were born at different times, will certainly show evidence of different types of both conscious and, I would argue, implicit sorts of prejudices simply because their minds reflect the worlds in which they live. So one way in which implicit prejudices and these simple associations may change is in response to or in reflection of the world that we're in. So one passive way to bring about change is simply to change people's worlds. Somehow, you engineer a world in which the normal sets of associations get turned around in some way and then those will, at some level, just simply passively be reflected in one's implicit or automatic beliefs and prejudices and so on.

The alternative, or the other way—and I think these are compatible—is to use reason, is to use one's conscious beliefs to come to an assessment—again, because we're capable of having conscious thought and the ability to self reflect. The advantage of a species that can do that is that we may be able to use reasoning as a way of changing attitudes. The work that I spoke about has to do with the first. We've shown that by showing people pictures or images of strong women, of admired black Americans, and so on, that we can change these implicit associations without the person who is taking this test even aware that that's what they're doing. They have no awareness that having seen pictures of Denzel Washington and Michael Jordan and Martin Luther King, Jr., and so on are reducing the strength of the associations that we're seeing on these tests. That's happening outside their own conscious control and that's one way. But the other way might be one that actually requires conscious awareness and control. In that sense, I think one would say, "Look, I am aware that this is a prejudice and this is what I'm going to choose to do," and gets back to your lecture and the question of will and choice and so on.