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A Matter of Attitude

Everybody has social attitudes, and everybody is exposed to them in others. It is wise to be aware of them, for they can be dangerous things. We should keep a close eye on our attitudes lest they lead us to transgress against our fellows. And lest we abdicate our responsibility as thinking beings...

The introduction of the word "attitude" into American slang has piled confusion on top of confusion. To the "gangsta rap" performers who apparently started the trend, "having attitude" means having only one kind of attitude — the belligerent kind. The phrase has since been snapped up by hip advertising copywriters to describe any number of interesting conditions. In the process, "attitude" has become one of those words from the land of Humpty Dumpty that mean whatever their users want them to mean.

It was already confusing enough that there were two different classes of attitudes that are often mistakenly thought of as one — the personal and the social. The former contain an individual philosophy of life; the latter, a view of society. It is personal attitudes that make optimists and pessimists, idealist, and cynics, mavericks and conformists, high achievers and high school drop-outs. It is social attitudes that make liberals and conservatives, moderates and radicals, pros and antis, bigots and bleeding hearts.

In this essay we shall confine our comments to social attitudes, which exert an immeasurable influence on human affairs, both positive and negative. For instance, the economic rise of the Japanese people from the wreckage of World War II has been attributed largely to their attitude towards working hard together in the national interest. In contrast, recent events in Eastern Europe have shown the horrible things that can happen when ethnic and religious attitudes drive communities apart.

In countries such as Canada, attitudes underwrite the

social contract that is the basis of a working democracy. Most of us behave decently in line with an attitude which decrees that the public good must ultimately be put before private impulses or desires. We abide by the laws of the land because they broadly correspond to our own "mindset." We elect our governments on the basis of how closely their declared policies match the attitude of the majority.

But it is beyond the formal boundaries of the law that attitudes have their greatest effect, in the day-to-day relationships among people. They can make the difference between a place where people live together in harmony, peace and justice, and a place racked by ill-will, suspicion and tension, if not actual strife.

In our personal lives, we all carry a package of social attitudes into the world around us. At the same time, the attitudes of others may weigh heavily on our own affairs. Some people, for instance, may refuse to play by the established rules, or try to impose their values or enthusiasms on us against our wishes. Others may discriminate against us, or discriminate against third parties and try to make us do so as well.

Even in an apparently enlightened society such as Canada's, all too many of our fellow residents are subjected to harm because others have attitudinal objections to some feature of their identities. This could be their colour, religion, sex, disabilities, or something else that is equally inconsequential to the worth of a human being.

It might be argued that such overt discrimination could only come from a person who has passed the point

of holding an attitude and moved on to bare-faced prejudice. Still, the seeds of any prejudice are to be found in common attitudes.

Moreover, people are likely to lull themselves into believing that their prejudices are really only attitudes. The words have different connotations; a prejudice is often — though not always — reprehensible. An attitude? Well, doesn't that sound innocuous and benign?

In this regard we should all be aware that "there is nothing respecting which a man may be so long unconscious, as of the extent and strength of his prejudices," to quote the Scottish jurist and editor Lord Francis Jeffrey. The reason for this phenomenon is that seemingly mild attitudes may serve as a mask for strong

prejudices, even in one's own mind.

But then, nothing about attitudes is as it seems, beginning with our fundamental conception of them. Our own attitudes

seem to us to be logical points of view based on knowledge, experience, insight, and ideas. We would, of course, concede that not all attitudes are so purely rational. Being human, we would say that anyone else might hold unreasonable attitudes, but never ourselves or those who agree in detail with us.

In fact, however, whether an attitude is your own or your worst enemy's, it is likely to be equally irrational. A group of Scandinavian and American psychologists said as much a few years ago when they developed a working definition of this confusing word. An attitude, they pronounced, is "a persistent, emotional readiness to think about and behave toward people, institutions, social conditions and so on, in a particular manner." Note the sequence of this scientific choice of language: first we have an "emotional readiness" to proceed one way or another; only then do we proceed.

If questioned on how they go about forming their own points of view, most people in western cultures might argue that the psychologists have got the order backwards. They would say that people first think about a thing, then they develop their feelings about it. Whether they approve or disapprove of something — whether they "like" it or not — depends upon their considered opinion of it (or of her or him or them).

This view is consistent with the background of a people brought up to value intellectual independence.

Having been conditioned to keep an open mind, we operate on the assumption that we arrive at our opinions by observing or discovering a body of facts and systematically placing them in logical order. We then check the facts and conclusions against independent criteria to make sure that we have got things rights.

We may indeed take such a dispassionate approach to questions in which we have not emotional stake, but when it comes to social attitudes, the impression that we have thought things out logically on the basis of verified facts is almost always a delusion. Psychological research shows that only a small proportion of the so-called information that goes into forming attitudes comes from personal observation or fact-gathering.

Attitudes establish a predisposition to think and act a certain way by first establishing a set of beliefs that steer those thoughts and actions. Beliefs by definition need to be objectively true, as long as they are true in the believer's mind. In the formation of attitude, they are passed along within a group, and are subject to both embellishment and over-simplification in the process. Often they are sheer myths which celebrate a group's past glories and perpetuate its enmities.

There is an especially high mythological content in the attitudes of families and traditional closed communities. In the old days, the religious, social and political beliefs acquired in the family and homogeneous communities were more or less fixed for life. This is still the case in many parts of the world, but the coming of pluralism in western societies has meant that traditional attitudes may be altered or abandoned. Exposure to diverse cultural and intellectual influences has caused many otherwise dutiful sons and daughters to refuse to go along with the inhibitions and taboos of their native groups, particularly in affairs of the heart.

In places where the influence of the family and the traditional community has waned, the urge to adopt attitudes has found new outlets. Some of the strongest social attitudes in Canada, for instance, are regional, generating loyalties which transcend ethnic and other social differences. As people go through life, they adopt the attitudes of the groups they join: associations, labour unions, political parties, corporations and what-have-you. When people talk about "corporate cultures" and "party lines," they are really talking about attitudes.

Our occupations may also affect the way we view the world; there are, broadly speaking, a set of farmers' attitudes, artists' attitudes, physicians' attitudes, and so

The collective beliefs that make up attitudes are often sheer mythology

on. The opinions that arise from these are no less sincere for supporting the practical self-interest of the group. We can also adhere to the attitudes of groups that are so amorphous that there is no formal membership in them. Still, belonging to a particular age group or income group can profoundly effect your approach to life.

“The race of men, while sheep in credulity, are wolves for conformity,” the biographer Carl Van Doren wrote. People have a natural desire to associate with one another. This instinct makes them reluctant to assert themselves for fear of being excluded from groups. Hence individuals may ignore known facts and suppress independent judgment when their groups are discussing questions or attitudinal thinking. Experiments have demonstrated that group members will change their conclusions to avoid disagreeing with the majority even when they know that they are right.

But attitudes are more than just a matter of “like thinking alike.” They are really whole systems of thinking. They determine how individuals interpret all the information they receive. They act as the sentries of the consciousness, allowing impressions that support them to pass in, and rejecting or ignoring impressions that do not support them. This selection process can play some strange tricks on the mind.

For one thing, it can lead to thinking that is blatantly self-contradictory. In a study of attitudes towards ethnic groups, for instance, respondents were asked to rank their characteristics on a checklist which included the words “aggressive” and “cowardly.” It would, of course, support the negative attitude of a person towards a certain group if

What makes you blame the governments if lightning strikes your house

its members had both these undesirable characteristics. Sure enough, some people rated certain groups as both cowardly and aggressive, totally ignoring the fact that the two traits are logically opposed to each other. Their prejudice towards the despised group of their choice made them eager to believe anything bad about it whether it made sense or not.

Attitudes fine-tune people’s social antennae, giving them a particular sensitivity to the subjects of their preoccupations. People heavily committed to an attitude are constantly on the look-out for evidence to support it; often enough they find it, if only in their own interpretation of events. Attitudes can lead to a mild

form of mania in which the person holding them relates things to them which most people would regard as irrelevant. A man who hates the government, for instance, will find a way to blame the government if lightning strikes his house.

In the physical sense of the word, an attitude is the way you stand, and where you stand socially affects the way you see life around you. For example, a study in the

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United States took groups of management and unionized employees from a cross-section of industries and asked them to estimate how much money had been

lost to the economy from strikes in a year. The management people vastly over-estimated the actual figure; the unionized people just as vastly under-estimated it. The results demonstrated that people will see what their attitudes tell them to see.

They will then proceed to talk themselves into believing in what they see, although the facts may stand absolutely against it. This self-deception is at its most obvious in cults and radical movements of various kinds. The spectacle of intelligent people insisting on theories that are demonstrably false is a tribute to the incredible power of group pressure and brain-washing. As we watch, we more normal and sensible people assure ourselves that we would never be as gullible as that.

But, in the words of the modern philosopher Rollo May, “the ultimate illusion is the conceit that you are free from illusion.” It is natural to think that attitudes are something that only other people have; natural and false. For better or for worse, we all have attitudes. It is impossible not to have them. And attitudes can be just as good as they can be bad.

But whether an attitude is good or bad, the important thing is to recognize it. The opinions that flow from it should be identified as the intellectual conditioned reactions they are. This applies not only to the opinions of others, but to what we think and say in our own right. The question is: “Is this my attitude talking, or is it me?”

How do you recognize the kind of thinking that comes from an attitude? Not easily, since it can so smoothly pass itself off as reason. The more pronounced attitudes do, however, have certain earmarks that give them away. You can be fairly sure that you are listening to the authentic voice of an attitude when:



It makes everything sound simple. Attitudinal opinions often state that there is a single big problem which cries out for a single big solution. Simplicity is seductive, which is why views of this kind so often meet with unanimous agreement. If you find yourself nodding and murmuring assent with everyone else in a room, you are probably indulging in an attitude.

It has all the answers. A convinced attitude-holder always has plausible pat answers to criticism, and is adept at glossing over any weak spots in his arguments. He maintains that his point of view is the absolute truth, and discourages the search for the evidence on which this truth is supposed to be based.

It shouts down criticism. Some attitude-holders feel that their views are so transcendently right that freedom of speech must be suspended out of respect for their rightness. They worship sacrosanct icons, and reject as "unacceptable" facts or opinions that run counter to their beliefs.

We must guard against replacing intolerant old attitudes with intolerant new ones

It strains credulity. People with reformist attitudes on subjects like health and ecology use hair-raising

statements to whip the apathetic public into line with their causes. Millions will die if we do not go along with this point of view; we will totally destroy our environment, or some section of it, if we do not go along with that. Those making such apocalyptic claims have lost their sense of proportion in the depths of their attitudes.

It reaches for justification. Attitude-holders will go to great — and sometimes ridiculous — lengths to give an air of legitimacy and fairness to their causes. One of the most cherished American attitudes of the 20th century held that it was all right to segregate black from white people, and to keep blacks in inferior positions. In their arguments against desegregation, southern white leaders implied that black people rather enjoyed being persecuted; they were happier "staying in their place" than assuming the full rights of American citizenship.

Its speaks of 'them and us.' Group attitudes often dwell on grievances stemming from real or supposed ill-treatment by another group. If you hear a lot about what *they* are doing, in particular about what *they* are doing to *us*, you are listening to an attitude.

The above are just a few of the ways in which you can tell when a person's opinions have their roots in attitudes. That person, don't forget, could be you.

But why should you care whether your attitudes are doing your thinking for you? Well, one good reason is that, by thinking and acting without a fair appraisal of the facts, you might be doing people an injury or an injustice. And we should all keep in mind that it is in attitudes that such foul states of mind as bigotry, racism, vindictiveness and xenophobia get their start.

Another reason to check on your attitudes is that they can always be improved. Though some would argue the contrary, a case can be made for saying that we live in an age in which bad old attitudes are steadily being replaced by the good new ones. In the western world in recent years, attitudinal changes have led the way to greater humanity and equality. It was not too long ago, for instance, that popular attitudes here in Canada decreed that a physically disabled person could never hold a "normal job."

Even in striving for improvement, however, constant vigilance is in order. New attitudes can be just as intolerant as old ones, especially when they have overwhelming public support. We must be careful that, in doing what the majority attitude deems to be the right thing, we do not expose minorities to injustice. No matter how unexceptionable they may seem when they are adopted, popular attitudes should be regularly re-examined to see how they stand up in practice and in the light of emerging realities.

The habit of monitoring attitudes, especially your own, cannot help but make you a better member of society. Indeed, you have a positive duty as a responsible citizen not to accept attitudinal thinking at face value; to do your own homework, come to your own conclusions, and try as far as possible to distinguish truth from falsity.

And as a bonus, doing so can make you into a better and more contented private person. "Of all exercises, there is none of such importance, or of so much immediate concern, as those which let us into the knowledge of our own nature," wrote the wise old English bishop, William Warburton. Any investigation into our innermost natures must begin with those strange phenomena we call our attitudes.

