

III

---

*The Gentle People of*  
**PREJUDICE**

By H. A. OVERSTREET

---

A HOGG FOUNDATION REPRINT

---

*This article is reprinted with permission of the author  
and THE SATURDAY REVIEW, January 21, 1950.*

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**I**N A WORLD of rampant specialization, Harry Allen Overstreet shines as an inspiring example of one who has succeeded in living out the life of the whole man. A far cry from the proverbial academic and theorizing prototype usually associated with the name, this philosopher not only has a continuing curiosity toward all facets of life, but constantly searches for the interrelationships which synthesize seemingly autonomous realms of knowledge. After winning his academic spurs from the University of California and Oxford at the turn of the century, Overstreet settled down to a ten-year stint teaching philosophy on the California campus. One year his students were astonished to discover that Professor Overstreet had joined the working class; in order to gather firsthand evidence of what life was like in an industrial economy, he spent a year making rubber shoes for the U.S. Rubber Company, polishing bearings in a machine shop, and sewing sacks for the Hawaiian Sugar Company. In 1911 the College of the City of New York beckoned, and there for many years he was head of the philosophy department. Since 1939 Professor Overstreet has devoted himself wholly to lecturing and writing ("Let Me Think," 1939, and "Our Free Minds," 1941). It is this way, he feels, that he can best accomplish his life's purpose, which is to awaken adults to the need for continuing their own education and furthering their intellectual and emotional maturity. "Adulthood," he believes, "is the time for putting into effect a wisdom about life that childhood and youth are unable as yet even to possess." Too few adults take advantage of this opportunity, with results which are often tragic and sometimes alarming. "The most dangerous members of our society," he contends, "are those grown-ups whose powers of influence are adult, but whose motives and responses are infantile." Yet Overstreet is no apostle of doom; indeed, he radiates confidence in mankind. As one of his friends once observed, "To know Harry Overstreet is to know what a better world should be like."

## THE GENTLE PEOPLE OF PREJUDICE

**D**OROTHY BARUCH, in "The Glass House of Prejudice," tells the story of José Morales, a Mexican war worker in the Los Angeles area. José was proud of his war job. He had written his brother, who taught in the University of Mexico, that at last he had work in which he could use his knowledge and skill. One day, after finishing his shift, José took the bus home. When he got off at his street corner he saw some men standing waiting. "They were strangers to him. He had never seen them before, nor they him. . . . But they looked hard at him, and they saw under the light of the street lamp that he was slim and dark. . . .

"One of them cried, 'Dirty Mexican!' And then they were on him. They tore off his clothes. They beat him with chains and iron pipes. They left him naked and bleeding. His back was broken.

"The next morning he died."

A story like this leaves one bewildered. How could human beings do so cowardly a deed? They had never seen the man before. They did not know what kind of person he was. But to them, apparently, he was some form of evil. And that was enough. They killed him.

It does not answer the question to call them hoodlums. In a railway station, a ticket agent deliberately keeps the Negroes waiting until the last minute of train time while he first serves the whites and then sits at his desk chatting leisurely with a pal. He intends to be infuriating. He sees the Negroes at the ticket window, and he enjoys keeping them waiting. He knows they are bitter and relishes their bitterness. He feels big. He is a white man. "Let the damn niggers wait!"

A woman with rooms to rent slams the door in the face of an inquiring couple. "I don't take any Jews here!" She knows her words are an insult. She intends them to be. She feels important, righteous.

The terrifying thing about the cruelty of prejudice is that it justifies itself to itself. It was that way with Hitler's Nazis. To strike down an inoffensive old man, kick him, defile him; that was good, right, beautiful. It was what any well-disciplined Nazi ought to do. It was expected.

How do people get that way?

“Easy,” said the poet, “is the descent to Avernus.” The first slippery step down is the assumption of an unearned right.

The white man can eat where he pleases, live where he pleases, dance where he pleases, enter the occupation he pleases. He takes that right as his—an absolute one unrelated to his own merit or demerit. He does not need to give a thought to the fact that dark-skinned people do not have these rights, nor to the fact that they are denied them not because they are worse people but because they do not belong to the dominant group. They may even be better people—more intelligent, more reliable, more gracious and pleasant to have around. But the white man would be vastly surprised if someone were to say to him: “You cannot have those privileges of yours without earning them. It is on the record that you are an untrustworthy man; you are foul-mouthed and you beat your wife. You’ll have to be put in a Jim Crow car.”

**J**USTICE is a relation between what an individual does and the rewards or punishments he receives. A culture begins to slip morally when it grants special privileges or denies them on grounds that have nothing to do with individual desert. An employer who gave higher pay to an incompetent official of the company merely because the two of them bowled together or hailed from the same town would be an unjust employer. Justice plays no favorites. The basic moral law requires that as a man is and does so shall he be judged.

Once the dubious principle is accepted that group privileges need have no relation to individual merit, the descent into immoralism is easy. The Nazis made that descent, with a cruel arrogance unmatched in history. No Nazi needed to give the slightest thought to the individual Jews he was herding into the freight car. They might be the noblest persons in the world or the most scoundrelly. So far as he was concerned, all human distinctions among them had vanished. “In the night,” wrote Hegel, “all cows are gray.” In the night of race prejudice all persons in

the despised group are alike. When that happens there is no more morality.

Happily, not everyone who is afflicted with race prejudice goes as far down as did the Nazis. Most people who are prejudiced merely take this first slippery step down: as members of the privileged race they assume the right to have and to hold their special privileges irrespective of their own merit, and they deny these rights to others with a like disregard of individual worth. This may not seem a dangerous downward step to take since so many otherwise respectable people do take it. But note what it involves. Everyone who accepts for himself the special privileges that go with denying them to people of a subordinated race makes possible all the cruelties that arise out of such unjust discrimination.

**T**HUS, for others less kindly disposed than himself, he makes possible the next downward step: scapegoating. A basic requirement of the moral life is to make sure that the person blamed is the person who merits the blame. Here again the Nazis were flagrant offenders. "It was the Jews who did it." That applied to all situations where the Germans, individually or collectively, had suffered frustration. Half-starved after World War I, unemployed, dispirited, ignorant of the reasons for their plight, bedazed by a mystic sense of their own greatness, Germans did not take the sturdy course of seeking out the real causes of their defeat and distress. Had they done so they might have found many causes within themselves. But it takes moral maturity to declare oneself in the wrong. The morally immature person finds it easier to put the blame on someone else. Children do this. "It was Johnny spilled the ink; he joggled my elbow."

Scapegoating is dangerous because it leads easily to violent acts. Where society condemns a certain group as inferior and rightless, it provides an area of permitting insult and cruelty. The man who has lost a business contract cannot go out and kick a white passerby; he might get kicked back. But in certain parts of America he can punch a Negro and

call him a black bastard. The Negro has no right to hit back or even to answer back. So, in like manner, the poor white can take out his poverty-frustration on his more well-to-do Negro neighbor by joining with the night riders to burn the Negro's barn. The California "vigilante," burdened with his mortgage and his envy, can empty his revolver through the windows of the returned Nisei farmer. Scapegoating is a way of releasing our own hurt feelings onto someone else.

After scapegoating, the next step down is not difficult: justifying one's acts by lies. The Protocols of Zion were deliberately forged to prove the case against the Jews. To the Jew-hater, however, this was not dishonesty in the ordinary sense of the word; it was "pious dishonesty." You *had* to make the people hate the Jews; so the end justified the means. But wherever evil means are used, no matter what the ends, they become a moral infection. The story of race prejudice is one long, sordid tale of the use of lies to support a hate.

**T**HE prevailing stereotypes about the Negro—that he is by nature shiftless, lazy, mentally inferior, lawless, sexually unsafe to have around—have no basis in truth whatsoever. The best that can be said against those who continue, in the face of disproof, to use these stereotypes is that they are self-deceived or ignorant or duped; the worst is that they are deliberate perverters of the truth.

Finally, the last slippery step down—and here again the Nazis provided us with the most shocking examples. This last step down is to make self-importance out of cruelty. It is bad enough for a person to be unjust, to take privileges for himself and deny them to others without regard to individual merit, to put blame on others when the blame rests elsewhere, and to justify all this by lies. But complete moral disintegration comes when to all this is added a glorying in cruelty and a sense of greatness achieved by inflicting it. The most nauseating parts of the testimony of the war criminals was their repeatedly expressed pride in what they had done. Low as men may fall, moral sensitivity remains as

long as shame remains, but when, instead of shame, there is a glorying in foul deeds, the creature is no longer moral.

**I**T is the willingness to hurt and be happy in the hurting that is the deepest condemnation of certain forms of race prejudice. The men who broke the back of José Morales and gloated in doing it were at the beast stage of life. But one does not have to break a man's back to achieve moral degradation. The ticket seller who enjoyed being cruel and made importance out of it for his own ego was himself already well on the way.

All of this will seem to have nothing to do with ordinary, kindly people who happen to have a streak of the anti-Jew or anti-Negro—or anti-Japanese feeling in them. Such people would never for a moment descend so far as to do cruel things for the fun and the glory of it. Happily, these people are a majority even among the prejudiced. Why worry then? A little prejudice now and then might well be allowed the best of men.

Is the matter as unimportant as that? It might seem to be harmless enough for a man to say: "Well, I don't like Jews, that's all, and I surely have the right to choose the people I want to associate with, haven't I?" The answer to that, of course, is yes. The right to choose the people with whom we wish to associate is undeniable. But if we choose (and exclude) on a principle which, when magnified, makes not only for injustice but for inevitable cruelty, then we are helping to create an evil, and, as willing creators of an evil, we have evil in us.

When I say that I have a right to choose the people I want to associate with, I make a true judgment if I imply that I make my choice in terms of the qualities of those I choose. But when I say that I don't want to associate with Jews, I actually imply something quite different. I imply that I don't even stop to consider them as individuals. I shut my eyes and say: "The whole bunch is not for me!"

Magnify this: let every individual say to himself: "I choose my associates by first excluding a whole group of people whom I don't know and don't intend to know," and a cultural pattern is created that is fraught with the profoundest evil.

This is what ordinary, kindly people, with their seemingly harmless streak of racial prejudice, do: they permit the immoral principle of *condemning people in the mass* to take root in society. Once that principle takes root, other things inevitably follow. It becomes then a permitted thing to look down upon certain groups of people. When this permitted way of looking down becomes an established habit, the consequent habit follows: of regarding these despised people as permitted objects of insult and humiliation. Then the next thing follows: these people—because they are in effect rightless—provide an outlet for pent-up hostilities. They become whipping boys for those members of the dominant group who need to project their frustrations upon others. When society makes an area where hostilities can freely be vented on others it provides for its own moral disintegration.

He who permits evil commits evil. This is what makes for the haunting sense of guilt in our culture. Many a member of the dominant group will earnestly aver that *he* never intended it that Negroes should be insulted and maltreated on buses, in railroad stations, and on public streets; that *he* never intended it that Mexican-Americans should be brutally beaten up; that *his* heart is sore and ashamed when he reads of the defiling of Jewish synagogues by hoodlums. He did not intend these things. *But he created the social sanction for these things.* By adopting a twisted principle of human association he and the people like him opened the Pandora's box out of which have flown the intolerances and cruelties that have defiled our culture.

There is a deep wisdom in the negative clause of the confession: "We have left undone those things which we ought to have done." The moral sickness that is in most prejudiced people of the dominant group is that they have learned to stand by and do nothing. They do not go to lynchings, but they do nothing to create a condition of human dignity that would make lynchings impossible. The reason why they do not create

such a condition of human dignity is that in their heart of hearts they do not believe in the equal rights of all human beings to human dignity. Deep and seemingly ineradicable in them is this twisted view of their fellow men. This is the intellectual and moral sickness in them. Out of this sickness comes their effortlessness, and out of their effortlessness come the revolting cruelties of our culture.

**W**E HAVE become familiar through psychiatry with one peculiar pattern of inertia: the inertia that comes from two conflicting and compulsive drives which, because they are conflicting, make it impossible for the individual to do anything. The irresistible force meets the immovable body within a human mind that cannot seem to throw the weight of decision on one side or the other. Out of such inability to resolve a conflict comes one pattern of neurosis: neurotic inertia. If we look long enough at this pattern it may afford us a peculiar insight into the kind of social inertia we have just mentioned. This type of inertia cannot technically be called a neurosis, but, existent in multitudes of citizens, it pulls down the standard of their common behavior and makes for an increasing obtuseness toward moral values. Caught between ideals that they cannot give up and habits and practices that are equally entrenched, they develop a protective unresponsiveness to events within their society that should properly fill them with horror and induce action. But they do not know how to act nor what price they might have to pay for action. Hence they cannot feel an appropriate responsibility for action. Consciously or subconsciously, the sense of responsibility is dimmed out in them. The power to feel is blurred. The issue is befogged by rationalization. The more often this inertia-response is made, the more satisfactorily, in short-range terms, it reduces the conscious unhappiness and guilt of the person who makes it, and the easier it is to make it on the next similar occasion. So the guilt feeling is diminished on the surface but the guilt remains and works its corruption at a deeper level of consciousness.

Thus it is the mild and gentle people of prejudice, with their compulsive effortlessness, who must bear the burden of the moral guilt. They have given the green light, and the legion of low hostilities has broken through on the run.

“The corruption of the best is the worst of corruptions.” It is the college president who earnestly justifies the quota system who is inwardly corrupt, because, supposedly enlisted in the age-long struggle for human dignity (the Great Tradition), he rationalizes himself out of the struggle when it goes counter to the local mores and the prejudices of his board. It is the minister of the church who timidly suggests that Negroes go elsewhere who is inwardly corrupt, because he denies the Master he asks people to serve. It is the respectable people who would not dream of letting a Negro enter by the front door who are inwardly corrupt because they are willing to insult without even knowing what they insult.

What prejudice does to the prejudiced is, in subtler or in grosser ways, to work this inner corruption. This is the image we need to build of the people who claim white supremacy and Christian superiority. They are intellectually and morally sick people. What is worse, they are sick people who try to make their own sickness the measure of their society's health.

