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Published online: 18 Oct 2023.

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Prejudice, generics, and resistance to evidence

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ABSTRACT
In his book, *Prejudice*, Endre Begby offers a novel and engaging account of the epistemology of prejudice which challenges some of the standard assumptions that have so far guided the recent discussion on the topic. One of Begby's central arguments against the standard view of prejudice, according to which a prejudiced person necessarily displays an epistemically culpable resistance to counterevidence, is that, *qua* stereotype judgments, prejudices can be flexible and rationally maintained upon encountering many disconfirming instances. By expanding on Begby's analysis, I argue that, given the variety of truth conditions for true generic statements, the generic form of stereotype judgements can sometimes make prejudice extremely resistant to encounters with statistical facts about the distribution of the property among members of a certain group. At the same time, I argue that a more careful consideration of the generic form of stereotypes also allows us to recognize that evidence about how many members of the kind instantiate a property is not the *only* type of evidence which could disconfirm a prejudice. Evidence of no explanatory relation between a kind and a property should also have a direct effect on a prejudicial belief. For this reason, things may not look as dim for the standard view of prejudice in assessing paradigmatic instances of prejudicial beliefs as irrationally resistant to evidence.

Introduction

In his book, *Prejudice*, Endre Begby offers a novel and engaging account of the epistemology of prejudice which challenges some of the standard assumptions that have so far guided the recent discussion on the topic. Begby's approach to prejudice also provides an excellent example of what follows from taking seriously the predicament of actual reasoners

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in non-ideal circumstances. One of the main aims of the book is to call into question what is considered the standard view of prejudice, according to which a prejudiced person necessarily displays an epistemically culpable resistance to counterevidence, or a kind of vicious close-mindedness (e.g. Allport 1954; Appiah 1990; Fricker 2007). He argues that, qua stereotype judgements, prejudices are more flexible and resistant to disconfirmation than universally quantified generalizations since they are compatible with encountering many negative instances. For this reason, we shouldn't be so quick to assume that prejudiced people are responding to their evidence inappropriately when they fail to revise their prejudices after encountering disconfirming instances. The role of background beliefs and the flexibility of stereotype judgments make prejudices hard to eradicate even when the prejudiced subject is open to new evidence. Contra the standard view, prejudice *could* be a perfectly rational attitude.

In this paper, I focus on Begby's argument in Chapter Five, and in particular his claims about the generic form of stereotype judgements and how much flexibility that confers to prejudice. By expanding on Begby's analysis, I argue that, given the variety of truth conditions for true generic statements, the generic form of stereotype judgements can sometimes make stereotypes extremely resistant to encounters with statistical facts about the distribution of the property among members of a certain group. At the same time, I argue that a more careful consideration of the generic form of stereotypes also allows us to recognize that evidence about how many members of the kind instantiate a property is not the *only* type of evidence which could disconfirm a prejudice. Evidence of no explanatory relation between a kind and a property should also have a direct effect on a prejudicial belief. For this reason, things may not look as dim for the standard view of prejudice in assessing paradigmatic instances of prejudicial beliefs as irrationally resistant to evidence.

Begby on the generic form of prejudicial beliefs

For Begby, a prejudice is a 'negatively charged stereotype, targeting some group of people, and, derivatively, the individuals who comprise this group' (2021, 8). Stereotypes embody a particular kind of generalization, Begby notes, a *generic* generalization. Stereotypes don't ascribe a property to all individual members of the kind, or to an explicitly quantified partition of them. Stereotypes are generic generalizations expressed by generic judgments, which:

> hold that it is salient, relevant, and typifying of a particular group that it displays a certain trait, without necessarily committing themselves to particular details about just how many members of this group display this trait, or to what extent they do. (2021, 81)

Generic statements like 'ducks lay eggs' or 'mosquitoes carry malaria' are true despite the fact that less than half of the population of ducks lay eggs, and that a very small percentage of mosquitoes carry malaria. For this reason, stereotypes display a certain degree of rational resistance to evidence. Negative instances don't disconfirm generic generalizations in the same way that they would universal generalizations. Generic statements can remain true in the presence of many negative instances, and for this reason beliefs with generic content, including stereotypes, are not directly disconfirmed by encounters with instances of the kind that lack the property in question. Stereotypes have a degree of flexibility which makes them resistant to a good deal of apparently disconfirming evidence.

Begby considers the case of Solomon – originally presented by Nomy Arpaly (2003) and then discussed by Miranda Fricker (2007) – which is typically considered a paradigmatic case of prejudice: Solomon is a boy who lives in an isolated community in a poor country where women tend not to engage in abstract thinking, and he holds the belief – well-evidenced in his environment – that women are not as intelligent as men. However, Solomon leaves his community to go to university, and there he encounters many intelligent women. Solomon now seems to have evidence that women are in fact just as intelligent as men, and so his failure to update his belief makes him epistemically culpable, and he reveals himself as prejudiced. This is the diagnosis given by the standard view of prejudice: prejudice is defined by an epistemically culpable resistance to evidence. Begby disputes this. He rightly notices that Solomon's prejudice can hardly be plausibly conceived as a universal generalization – it's not as if he believes that *all* women are less intelligent than *any* man. On a plausible interpretation of his belief, Solomon holds a stereotype which can be expressed by a generic generalization that *women are less intelligent than men,* with some women being more intelligent than others, and some being even more intelligent than some men (Begby 2021, 82). So understood, Solomon's belief does not seem to be so easily disconfirmed by any encounter with an intelligent woman, especially given the circumstances under which Solomon encounters intelligent women in the case. When coupled with other background beliefs that Solomon can very plausibly hold in his situation – the belief that, since

the university selects people for their intelligence, then the distribution of intelligence that he encounters at the university will not be a representative sample of how intelligence is distributed among men and women – the encounters with intelligent women at the university are irrelevant to his belief that women are less intelligent than men. As Begby notes, Solomon's prejudice combined with his background beliefs may very well *predict* that he will encounter intelligent women at the university (2021, 84).

Clearly things would be different if Solomon encountered a sufficient number of intelligent women outside of university – in shops, cafés, or on public transport. In that case, his background beliefs wouldn't be sufficient to screen off this evidence (2021, 90).[1] However, Begby notes, it's only after a certain number of such encounters that it would no longer be rational for Solomon to hold his prejudice that women are less intelligent than men, and this allows for Solomon to remain rationally prejudiced while dismissing at least some contrary evidence. In addition to this, he observes, the evidence that he would gather in these mundane encounters might be quite weak. First, it's likely that the majority of overheard conversations in mundane settings will be inane conversations that provide little evidence of people's intelligence. Moreover, overheard conversations may be rationally given less weight than other evidence Solomon might acquire, such as evidence acquired through conversations with other men in his social circles (2021, 92). So, while it is true that not all evidence against Solomon's prejudice can be rationally dismissed, the social circumstances in which Solomon lives make it unlikely that he would be rationally required to abandon his sexist prejudice after leaving his village to go to university. It is even more unlikely when we consider the fact that prejudiced societies tend to reflect these prejudices in their structures, such that random encounters that would be considered as evidence against sexist prejudices are precluded (2021, 93).

So, Begby concludes, even in paradigmatic cases of prejudice like that of Solomon, where a subject seems to display a high level of resistance to disconfirming evidence, the subject may be responding to their evidence in a perfectly rational way. The flexibility that generic stereotypes have, together with background beliefs one might rationally hold, and with the complexities of non ideal epistemic environments, make prejudice a very insidious attitude without a necessary epistemic culpability on the side of the prejudiced subject.

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[1] As argued by Silva (2018)

While I find Begby's analysis largely compelling, I would like to focus on one of the main points that he makes, that prejudices take the form of generic generalizations, and as such they are resistant to a certain degree of disconfirming evidence. I want to expand on his analysis by drawing our attention to the existence of different types of generic relations that stereotypes can predicate. With this, I aim to show that stereotypes might be even more flexible than Begby recognizes, while also showing that Solomon's evidential situation, even in non-ideal circumstances, might be different and ultimately more hopeful for the standard view of prejudice than Begby allows.

Generic generalizations and stereotype judgements

Generic statements can express different types of generic generalizations. Consider the following generic sentences, from Lemeire (2021):

1. Sea turtles are long-lived
2. Sharks attack bathers
3. American barns are red
4. Bulldozers are yellow
5. Ravens are black
6. Birds can fly

As Lemeire observes, every semantic theory which attempts to reduce these three types of generic statements (1–2, 3–4, 5–6) to a single kind of relation faces counterexamples (Lemeire 2021, 2296). For instance, sentences like 1–2 and 5–6 can be successfully understood to express the existence of a suitable causal-explanatory mechanism (Nickel 2008, 2016). But sentences like 3–4 cannot be explained in a similar way, as statistical facts about the distribution of the property among the members of the kind seem to at least partly determine why 3–4 strike us as true (Lemeire 2021, 2297). At the same time, a statistical condition[2] doesn't seem able to explain minority generics like 1–2, which are true even though the vast majority of sea turtles don't live long and the vast majority of sharks never attack bathers (Lemeire 2021, 2298). At least two different kinds of generalizations are expressed by generic statements. One kind of generalization has to do with a *causal-explanatory link* between the property (or properties) determining the membership

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[2]Like the one proposed by Cohen (1999)

to the kind and the instantiation of the property amongst some members – those sea turtles that are long lived are so *in virtue of being sea turtles.* Another kind of generalization is one having to do with a metaphysically robust *statistical prevalence* of the property among the members of the kind – American barns are red because the majority of them are, and they would still have been if things had gone slightly differently and people had built other barns than the actual ones (Lemeire 2021, 2301).[3] It also seems to be the case that *the same* generic sentence can express these different generalizations. Sentences like 5 and 6 are true both in virtue of an explanatory relation, and in virtue of a statistical relation.[4]

Leaving the semantics of generics aside, what this discussion shows is that saying that a belief has generic content leaves underdetermined which generic relation it expresses. While so far I have talked about generic propositions in general, it also seems to be the case that social stereotypes can take all three forms discussed so far. Stereotypes can sometimes be beliefs about the existence of causal-explanatory relations. People don't typically believe that the majority of Muslims are terrorists, and yet they may hold the stereotype that Muslims are terrorists because, even though only a minority are, they believe that those Muslims that are terrorists are so in virtue of whatever property or set of properties make them Muslim. A 'tradwife', a woman who has rejected feminism and embraced traditional gender roles,[5] may believe that, in virtue of being women, women are homemakers, even though the majority of women nowadays work and have financial independence. Other times, stereotypes seem to be beliefs in mere (robust) statistical relations. For instance, the stereotype that men are bad at talking about their feelings seems to be a belief about a property, being bad a

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[3]Glossing on a number of complications, this is the way Lemeire (2021) identifies the two different generic relations. But other categorizations have been proposed. For instance, Leslie (2008) talks of striking property generics, majority generics, characteristic generics. Prasada and Dillingham (2006) distinguish instead between statistical and principled connections expressed by different generic statements. Not a lot hinges in this context on how exactly we identify the different generalizations expressed by generic statements. All I want to point out is that there doesn't seem to be a single generic generalization expressed by generic statements, and that in some cases the same generic statement can express at least two different propositions, one having to do with some kind of explanatory relation or principled connection between kind and property, and another one having to do with facts about the distribution of the property among kind members.

[4]Several authors have argued for this variability among truth-makers for generics: the same generic statement can be made true by different facts. Different accounts spell out the variability among truth-makers for generics differently. For instance, some think that generics are context-sensitive (e.g. Nguyen 2019; Sterken 2015), semantically ambiguous (e.g. Greenberg 2007) or have indeterminate meaning (Lemeire 2021).

[5]https://www.theguardian.com/fashion/2020/jan/27/tradwives-new-trend-submissive-women-dark-heart-history

talking about feelings, that a robust majority of men instantiate. And one could hold this stereotype in the absence of beliefs about whether a deeper property which makes men into a kind determines that a majority of men are bad at talking about their feelings – in fact it seems perfectly possible to think that it is *not* virtue of being men that men are bad at talking about their feelings, but rather it is in virtue of contingent things like societal norms and upbringing. Finally, and perhaps most often, stereotypes can be beliefs in the existence of both a statistical and a causal-explanatory relation. As Anne Bosse notices, truth-makers for generics not only often co-occur, but they also typically explain one another – most dogs bark because, by their nature, dogs are capable of and disposed to barking (2022, 9). Given this, she hypothesizes that, in the absence of other background beliefs, people will typically expect the different generic relations to co-occur (2022, 10).[6] This explains why stereotypes are typically beliefs about both a statistical and an explanatory connection, though they can also be beliefs in either generic relation individually.

So, while Begby is right that the generic form of stereotypes contributes to making them epistemically robust and rationally difficult to disconfirm, different considerations hold for the different types of stereotypes. Stereotypes involving generic generalizations of the statistical kind should be disconfirmed by facts about the prevalence of the property among the kind and its metaphysical robustness. So, if Solomon's belief about women's propensity for abstract thinking was a stereotype of this sort, encounters with disconfirming instances ought to be epistemically significant, though with the complexities which Begby observes and which we discussed earlier.

However, I am inclined to think that generic generalizations of this merely statistical kind don't seem to be the kind of attitudes we would call *prejudices*. This is so for two main reasons. First, like Begby claims, prejudices seem to '[target] some group of people, and, *derivatively*, the individuals who comprise this group' (2021, 8, my emphasis). Negative stereotypes expressing mere (robust) statistical relations don't seem to target a group and *derivatively* its members. Instead, it seems that in these generalizations, the members are the primary target, and the group is targeted as a result of a generalization from individual instances. Contingent social facts make individual men bad at talking about their feelings, and a robust majority of them are, which makes it the case

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[6]This in turn would explain the inference patterns identified by McKeever and Sterken (2021).

that we judge of men as a kind that they are bad at talking about their feelings. Secondly, as Begby himself stresses in a number of instances, many negative stereotypes of the statistical kind might be true precisely because of the prejudices that permeate our societies: it might be true that black people are less wealthy than whites, or that women engage in abstract thinking less often than men, or that men are bad at talking about their feelings. And we can surely imagine contexts in which the ascription of these properties to the groups would be seen as negative (for Begby prejudices are negative stereotypes, where 'negative' is to be understood in this context dependent way). But I think we would hardly call these *prejudices* when interpreted as positing a generic generalization of the statistical kind. And, given that holding these beliefs is crucial for instilling positive social change, we probably shouldn't consider them as prejudices. Take again the case of Solomon. Solomon is prejudiced because he thinks that women are less intelligent than men. From the perspective of social justice, we would want Solomon to abandon his prejudice. But, if it was true due to historical and social factors that women engage in abstract thinking less often than men, we may not want him to abandon *this* belief, as recognizing this fact is crucial for understanding women's experience and contributing to changing it. But setting this issue aside, statistical generalizations are only one form that stereotypes can take.

Stereotypes involving explanatory relations and resistance to evidence

Stereotypes of the statistical kind, as Begby claims, are epistemically robust because they are flexible. But stereotypes involving explanatory relations seem to be even more robust, as they can be *completely immune* to facts about the statistical distribution of the property among the kind members. If someone believed that Muslims are terrorists, because those Muslims who are terrorists are so in virtue of the same properties that pick out Muslims as a kind, pointing to instances of non-terrorist Muslims should be epistemically irrelevant to the stereotype. The relevant fact that would make true the explanatory stereotype is that those Muslims who are terrorists are so because they are Muslim – regardless of how many or how few Muslims instantiate the property. Similarly, women who have a career and are independent don't disconfirm the stereotype that women, by their nature, are homemakers.

These stereotypes are perfectly compatible with the vast majority of the members of the kind not exhibiting the property in question.

However, stereotypes of the explanatory kind like those above are not completely immune to other kinds of evidence. They are in fact subject to being disconfirmed by facts regarding the absence of an explanatory relation between the kind and the property. For instance, as Lemeire points out, one could argue with someone who holds the belief that Muslims are terrorists that, whatever religious beliefs that cause some Muslims to become terrorists also cause some others to lead a peaceful life, so their religious beliefs cannot explain why some Muslims become terrorists (Lemeire 2021, 2309).

And, for those stereotypes which posit an explanatory relation between kind membership and the property in question, and which are held in the absence of background beliefs about why only a minority of the members of the kind instantiate the property, then both facts about statistical distribution of the property and facts about the existence of an explanatory relation should be relevant to disconfirming the stereotype.

Where does this leave us with our discussion of Solomon's case? Solomon holds a sexist stereotype that women are less intelligent than men. Plausibly, his belief embodies both generic relations: women are less intelligent than men in virtue of being women, and (for this reason) a robust majority of women are less intelligent than men.[7] As Begby claims, his belief should be subject to revision upon learning statistical facts about the equal distribution of intelligence among men and women. But, as he argues, these facts are hard to come by, even after going to university. So, it seems that, if Solomon is prejudiced – which he really seems to be – it cannot be in virtue of a failure to respond to his evidence appropriately. However, there is more evidence that we should plausibly imagine Solomon to acquire after leaving his isolated community and going to university which is relevant to his prejudice. Solomon will learn about women's social history, systematic oppression, and traditional exclusion from many academic disciplines. As he moves around his environment, he will likely act in ways that betray his sexist prejudice and encounter at least some social sanctioning for the belief

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[7]Begby wants to leave it open that Solomon may have a belief that he considers true only in virtue of facts about the contingent social history of women (2021, 81, footnote 6). However, as I argued earlier on, I doubt that mere statistical stereotypes can and should be considered as prejudices. If Solomon believed that women tend to perform worse than men at abstract thinking because of the oppression that they experience in society, I think we would (and should) be reluctant to consider his case as a paradigmatic case of prejudice.

that women are by nature different in intelligence, and, plausibly, some testimonial evidence that they are not. And, he will encounter at least some intelligent women for which he is unable to identify an intervening condition that would explain why they do not display the property of being not inclined towards abstract thinking. This additional evidence bears on the explanatory generic generalization that *in virtue of being women*, women are less intelligent than men. And sufficient evidence of this kind should be taken by Solomon to disconfirm his prejudicial belief. So, once we recognize the relevance of this type of evidence, it seems that Solomon's evidential situation after going to university is one which would require him to revise his prejudice, or at least become less confident in it.

Here it may be useful to compare Solomon's case to the case discussed by Begby (2021, 87–88) of Harry Potter's belief that Slytherins are slimy, which Harry justifiedly forms on the basis of Ron's testimony before going to Hogwarts. Begby argues that, even though we seem to have the intuition that Solomon is prejudiced while Harry is not, Harry's epistemic situation seems to be analogous to the situation of Solomon, and just like Solomon, Harry seems to be rationally required to retain his stereotype after encountering negative instances. What might explain our different intuitions between the cases, according to Begby, is that Harry's belief is true while Solomon's is false. But, if Begby is right, then we cannot evaluate the epistemic standing of Solomon and Harry differently, as they are in analogous evidential situations. In fact, just like Solomon with his sexist belief, after going to Hogwarts, Harry will meet many Slytherins, including some non-slimy Slytherins, but:

> (i) he can think, in line with Solomon's reasoning above, that while Slytherins are slimy, not all Slytherins are equally slimy; further, (ii) he can reason that their sliminess manifests in different ways and that I, Harry, lack the social acuity to tell which are the relevant contexts in which to judge them; finally, (iii) he can assume that Slytherins might have strategic reasons to appear to him as non-slimy, even though in fact they are. (Begby 2021, 87–88)

So, Begby concludes, Harry seems rationally justified in maintaining his belief after encountering non-slimy Slytherins. I think Begby is right about this, but just as with Solomon, I would like to focus on the fact that Harry's belief doesn't seem to be a mere belief about the statistical distribution of sliminess among members of the House Slytherin. It also, importantly, seems to be a belief about the fact that *it is in virtue of*

being Slytherin that Slytherins are slimy. So, a crucial difference between Harry, who doesn't appear to be prejudiced, and Solomon, who does, is that in the case of Harry it's hard to imagine that he will encounter evidence that Slytherins are not by their nature slimy, since they are – or so we are assuming. To make the case truly analogous to Solomon's, we'd have to imagine that, in addition to negative instances, at Hogwarts Harry would plausibly encounter evidence that slimy Slytherins are not slimy in virtue of being Slytherin. For instance, Harry's evidential situation would seem to be analogous to Solomon's if at Hogwarts there was a widely accepted and circulated explanation for why Slytherins tend to behave in a slimy way despite not being so disposed by their nature. My guess is that the more we try to construct a case like this, the more Harry would appear to us to be just as prejudiced against Slytherins as Solomon is against women if he fails to revise his belief.

Admittedly, this discussion does not provide definitive reasons against Begby's claim that prejudice *could* be rational. But I want to draw to our attention the fact that prejudice seems to embody a stronger generalization than a mere (robust) statistical one. Prejudice seems to involve a belief about what properties individuals have *in virtue of being members of a kind*. And this opens up the possibility that evidence other than statistical should disconfirm a prejudice, namely, evidence against the existence of an explanatory relation between the kind and the property – such as, for Solomon, evidence that women's oppression historically determined their lower inclination towards abstract thinking.[8]

We can surely imagine a case where Solomon goes to university but never encounters any of the relevant evidence against the existence of an explanatory relation between being a woman and being less intelligent than men. Begby's case of Ahmed, who moves from his village to study at King Abdullah University of Science and Technology – the only mixed-gender university campus in Saudi Arabia (2021, 93) – could be a case like this. Here, as Begby notices, Ahmed is unlikely to have encounters with intelligent women outside of campus, and perhaps we could assume that he is also unlikely to encounter evidence that women's oppression, rather than their nature, is why women tend to exhibit less proclivity for abstract thinking. But re-imagining the case in this

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[8]This is not to exclude that statistical evidence itself may be relevant to a belief in a causal-explanatory link. The existence of negative instances without identifiable intervening conditions, in the absence of additional background beliefs should also be taken to be evidence against the existence of an explanatory connection between the kind and the property in question.

way this seems to beg the question against the standard view of prejudice. The standard view of prejudice claims exactly this, that before encountering evidence against the belief, we cannot tell whether Solomon is prejudiced. He reveals himself as prejudiced when, after leaving his community, he encounters evidence against his belief but fails to abandon it. So, the defender of the standard view of prejudice may just want to say that we don't yet know whether Ahmed is prejudiced.

Conclusion

Begby's account of prejudice has it that prejudice need not be epistemically irrational. A person could be prejudiced while responding to their evidence appropriately, and this is so because of the flexibility that prejudices have qua stereotype judgements which embody generic generalizations. I have tried to dig deeper into the idea that prejudice embodies a generic generalization to show that, while Begby is right that statistical information has only limited rational impact on beliefs with generic content (and in fact, in some cases, even less than he recognizes), other kinds of evidence ought to rationally disconfirm prejudicial beliefs. I argued that in the case of Solomon we can reasonably imagine that he will have access to at least some of this evidence, and thus that a version of the standard view's assessment of the case as one in which the prejudiced subject reveals themselves as prejudiced upon failing to revise their sexist belief on the basis of the counterevidence available to them, may still hold some plausibility.

I have also suggested that not all generic generalizations seem to be the possible content of prejudice. Beliefs in robust statistical distributions of properties among members of a kind – like the belief that due to historical oppression women are less represented in highly theoretical disciplines, or the belief that due to past and present systemic racism black Americans are less wealthy than whites – don't seem to be the kind of things we would plausibly want to call prejudices. This is especially the case when these beliefs express true generalizations about social kinds, and having these beliefs is instrumental for improving our social reality. This puts some pressure on Begby's definition of prejudice as any negative stereotype. On the face of it, negative stereotypes that express mere statistical generalizations don't seem to be candidates for prejudice, while their more robust explanatory counterparts do – like the belief that by their nature

women are less inclined towards abstract thinking, or the belief that black Americans possess identifying features (like being bad with money or being lazy) which explain why they tend to be less wealthy than whites. What exactly grounds our intuitions about these cases, and whether additional epistemic characterizations are also necessary for a satisfactory account of prejudice, is an open question. But, as Begby's work successfully shows, this issue requires much more careful consideration than has so far been suggested in the philosophical discussion of prejudice.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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