Overcoming Prejudices through Aesthetic Understanding

Sieun Sienne Park
University of Rochester

What does it mean to truly know a person? This question can be examined from two perspectives. The first pertains to information. Information about specific characteristics that make up a person—such as gender, religion, nationality, ethnicity, race, and other such markers—can provide some understanding of that individual. However, knowing a person goes beyond merely knowing such information. This includes grasping the totality of that person in ways that cannot be fully captured by information, categories, or concepts alone. In other words, each individual is far more than the sum of these specified categories; each is a unique being with diverse, multifaceted qualities. Recognizing and respecting a person's wholeness completes our understanding of her. On the other hand, an understanding based solely on information, if it serves to fix or reduce a person to specific categories, risks becoming prejudice or stereotyping. This means that even when information is correct, the way it is applied can lead to an epistemically flawed and morally inadequate view of the person.

In diversity education, the goal should be to cultivate an appreciation of each individual as a whole, respecting them not merely as the sum of certain categories—such as gender, race, class, or ethnicity—but as complete persons with unique and interconnected attributes that constitute their full existence. In the pluralism of the United States diversity has become a crucial component of the educational agenda. However, there has been insufficient discussion of the need for a more nuanced, holistic understanding of human beings, and there has been little focus on how to cultivate this in educational settings.

The purpose of this paper is to illuminate the epistemological and moral issues that prejudice and stereotypes present, while exploring how aesthetic perception can contribute to overcoming these challenges. Prejudice has often been viewed as problematic due to its association with negative emotions; however, recent research in social psychology reveals that even prejudices tied to positive emotions can be troubling. This insight suggests that prejudice is

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morally concerning not only because of its negative affective content but also due to its indiscriminate approach to understanding individuals. I propose that a holistic understanding of a person requires an affective dimension—an empathetic understanding that respects the individual's wholeness without reducing them to predefined categories. This type of understanding, as I will explain through the aesthetics of Immanuel Kant, is attainable when we honor others as unique beings.

THE MORAL AND EPISTEMOLOGICAL IMPLICATIONS OF PREJUDICE AND STEREOTYPING

Prejudice and stereotypes both operate by simplifying and generalizing the individuality of persons, which reduces them to broad categories based on their group memberships. This tendency presents critical issues from both epistemological and moral perspectives. Epistemologically, this approach limits one's understanding of others, preventing a nuanced or accurate understanding. Morally, it overlooks the inherent uniqueness and wholeness of each person, failing to value their complexity and reducing their identity to a narrow set of perceived attributes.

While often interconnected, stereotypes and prejudice are distinct phenomena. Stereotypes are primarily cognitive structures: generalized beliefs about the characteristics of a particular group.[1] For instance, stereotypes like "Asians are diligent" or "women are emotional" reflect the kinds of generalized beliefs that categorize individuals based on group membership. Originally understood as rigid and erroneous cognitive processes, more recent social psychology research emphasizes stereotypes' functional and dynamic roles in simplifying a complex social environment.[2] The associative function in cognition, closely related to stereotyping, acts as a mental shortcut that enables individuals to process complex social information more efficiently. Some researchers consider this function an inevitable outcome of human cognition, as this reduces cognitive burden.[3] Therefore, while acknowledging the moral dangers of stereotyping, they remain not entirely optimistic about the possibility of fully overcoming it.

Prejudice, in contrast, encompasses both cognitive and affective com-

ponents. Scholarly research on prejudice dates back to psychologist Gordon W. Allport, who defined it as "an antipathy based on faulty and inflexible generalization."[4] Following Allport, researchers have continued to associate prejudice with negative attitudes and emotions.[5] While psychologists have predominantly examined prejudice as an intrapersonal process, sociologists have explored its functions within group dynamics.[6] Research also reveals that prejudice can involve positive emotions, such as those found in benevolent sexism, where ostensibly positive feelings and traits are ascribed to women.[7] This approach emphasizes that the moral concern with prejudice lies not only in its negative or positive content but also in its role in upholding hierarchical relations between groups. For instance, benevolent prejudice toward women often frames them as in need of protection, effectively reinforcing traditional and restrictive social roles.

Blum contends that while all stereotypes and prejudices—whether associated with negative or positive content and emotions—are problematic, some are more harmful than others.[8] For instance, negative stereotypes, such as "Black people are lazy," are more damaging than positive stereotypes like "Black people are good dancers." Among negative stereotypes, those suggesting violence—such as the stereotype of Black people as inherently violent—are worse than those implying traits like laziness. This distinction emphasizes that stereotypes and prejudices vary in the extent to which they elicit emotional and social reactions, with certain types more directly fostering fear, hostility, and reinforcing social and systemic injustice.

Not only are these forms of prejudice more severe, but they also reflect a long history of racial oppression in the United States that has systematically restricted the democratic social power of certain groups.[9] Thus, this form of prejudice and violence is deeply embedded in the social structures, representing a long-standing source of systemic oppression.

More severe forms of negative prejudice demand a more urgent response. Current educational research identifies racial injustice and dominance, particularly regarding strongly negative prejudices toward Black students, as critical issues. This prejudice is problematic not only because it is more intense, but also because it has been reinforced and perpetuated by systemic structures.

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For instance, Black students are disproportionately likely to face harsher punishments than their Asian American and white peers and to be funneled into the school-to-prison pipeline.[10] In this way, prejudices portraying Black students as problematic heighten the likelihood of punitive responses, which in turn strengthens stereotypes of Black students as inherently violent or disruptive. These biases reflect a long history of racial oppression in the United States, which calls for educational interventions that address both the dismantling of prejudice and systemic change.

EDUCATIONAL INTERVENTIONS FOR MITIGATING PREJUDICE AND THE LIMITATIONS OF DEI INITIATIVES

With an understanding of the issues surrounding prejudice and stereotypes, educational interventions in the United States have evolved to address these concerns. Approaches to tackling prejudice and violence have shifted from an initial focus on individual change to an emphasis on social structures. Allport introduced Intergroup Contact Theory, which posits that prejudice can be reduced through positive, cooperative interactions between people from different groups.[11] Multicultural education, which gained momentum in the Civil Rights Movement era of the late 1960s and early 1970s, was designed to promote respect for racial, gender, and cultural diversity within educational settings.[12] However, while multicultural education aims to respect and strengthen the unique values of each culture, in practice it often fails to move beyond assimilationist frameworks, in which inclusion means being absorbed into the existing system.[13] This has led to criticisms that, although multicultural education may alleviate prejudice to some extent, it can inadvertently reinforce the status quo.

In response, educational research has increasingly underscored the importance of critical race theory and critical pedagogy, advocating for researchers and teachers to engage with students in challenging social inequalities.[14] Also, the value of cultural diversity has increasingly been reframed by the concept of diversity in U.S. higher education—an initiative aimed at boosting the representation of specific demographic groups. This approach includes establishing an equitable opportunity structure so that underrepresented groups have equal access to opportunities and experience positive, supportive environments.[15]

Together, these values form what is known as Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI). In U.S. higher education, DEI initiatives aim to foster an inclusive campus culture, cultivate critical thinking and social responsibility through curriculum, and promote social justice by equitably supporting underrepresented groups.[16]

However, addressing prejudice solely on a structural level with a focus on collective identities has its limitations. This macro perspective on diversity often overlooks the ethical dimensions that diversity embodies. From this macro view, diversity primarily refers to efforts aimed at advancing the interests of non-mainstream groups, such as Black, Asian, and Latinx populations—groups that differ from the cisgender, heterosexual white male majority.[17] This approach has contributed to establishing and amplifying the political identities and voices of various subgroups, as seen in the emergence of the "Asian American" identity in the late 1960s.[18] However, it can inadvertently overlook the nuanced differences and complex individuality within these groups, much like positive stereotypes do, leading to a tendency to view them as monolithic minority categories. For example, though Black Americans share a common racial identity, their experiences can differ significantly: African Americans carry the legacy of U.S. slavery and historical oppression, while recent immigrants from Africa and the Caribbean often retain unique cultural identities and distinct social experiences.

Intersectionality has emerged as a critical framework for understanding how overlapping identities—such as race, gender, socioeconomic status, language, and disability—shape individuals' experiences within social structures.[19] However, even with this framework, the primary traditional categories considered are often demographic. From the perspective of justice, recognizing multiple dimensions of oppression is crucial, but overcoming prejudice and stereotypes and truly valuing individuals requires more than this. The task of education in overcoming stereotypes and prejudices must be to nurture respect and valuing of each person as an integrated whole.

Given the reality that DEI initiatives can be seriously threatened by political agendas, pointing out the limitations of the current concept of diversity might be viewed as a less urgent issue. However, the core of my argument is

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not to push back against DEI initiatives, but rather to expand their conceptual framework. This approach is not only ethically sound but also more effective from a motivational perspective. While emphasizing structural solutions may reduce public displays of prejudice and address systemic injustices, such efforts may foster less autonomous motivations for diversity and social justice. According to the motivation continuum in Self-Determination Theory, this kind of approach might lead to an introjected form of motivation for engaging in diversity efforts—where individuals feel pressured to appear accepting without necessarily internalizing the values of justice and diversity.[20] When the motivation to pursue justice and diversity is not autonomous, individuals may act kindly on the surface while still holding underlying biases, mistakenly viewing such actions as an appreciation of diversity, or they may adapt by expressing their biases in subtler forms or unconsciously retaining them.

Furthermore, research indicates that suppressing certain thoughts can actually increase their intensity and frequency.[21] Consequently, efforts to curb prejudice-related behaviors without addressing the underlying categorical ways of perceiving individuals may inadvertently reinforce stereotypes and prejudices internally. These internalized biases may remain latent, only to surface in more harmful or violent forms when circumstances allow.[22] This underscores the importance of educational initiatives that address not only overt and negative forms of prejudice but also implicit, benevolent, and seemingly positive biases.

What deserves particular emphasis, however, is the notable lack of understanding within educational studies—and educational contexts more broadly—of alternatives to categorical thinking. What possibilities exist for understanding individuals as multifaceted beings beyond the confines of categories, stereotypes, or predefined identities? Furthermore, can education cultivate a form of understanding and respect for the unique personhood of individuals that intersectionality, on its own, may not fully capture? These are the questions that educational interventions addressing prejudice and stereotyping must aim to resolve.

AESTHETIC UNDERSTANDING: EMPATHETIC UNDERSTANDING OF HUMAN DIVERSITY

I propose aesthetic understanding as a way to comprehend individuals beyond categorical boundaries. My explanation of aesthetic understanding is grounded on Kant's aesthetics and recent neuroaesthetic studies. Kant's concept of aesthetic judgment, presented in his Critique of Judgment, emphasizes a reflective approach to understanding and appreciating objects, including works of art and the natural world. This is a form of reflective judgment, which is defined as searching for and reflecting on the universal, which corresponds to the particular, when the universal is not given.[23] In other words, it is an approach that resists defining an object through any universal concept, theory, or ideology, and instead focuses on grasping the object as it is——a state of simply being present with the object, open to further understanding and appreciation. This approach contrasts with a mechanical, categorical, and rigid way of viewing objects.

Kant describes *reflection* that occurs in aesthetic judgment as a free play of cognitive faculties—namely, imagination and understanding.[24] When facing a particular object, imagination and understanding mobilized by the representation of the object are engaged in the free play, "since no determinate concept restricts them to a particular rule of cognition."[25] This allows the observer to continually seek out universals that correspond to the particulars, rather than subsuming the object under a universal concept. In this way, while she may recognize universal concepts related to the object—such as specific concepts, theories, or ideologies—she does not allow these to define the object itself. Thus, the process of reflection does not produce a conceptual understanding that categorizes the object, such as labeling it a rose or a flower. However, this reflection evokes satisfaction, which is universally communicable. In other words, even if each person's perception of an object—typically objects of nature such as flowers, trees, stars, or mountains, according to Kant—may differ, by appreciating it reflectively, individuals can experience pleasure and empathize with each other. Due to this universal communicability, Kant describes aesthetic judgment as a form of *general perception*. This suggests that aesthetic judgment

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offers an alternative way of understanding an object.

Aesthetic judgment can be best exemplified in our experience of beauty. When one appreciates the sublime of a starry night sky, she can recognize its substance or a particular material; also, when she appreciates a piece of artwork, she can recognize a certain artist from a specific era. However, regardless of these recognitions and any specific concepts related to the object, she is freed from certain concepts about the stars (their substance, age, or name) or the artwork. She can slowly savor and appreciate the various components of the object itself, including the sensations it evokes, and can feel pleasure by carefully contemplating its existence. In this experience, she is liberated from relying solely on specific concepts, rules, or ideas about the object. Instead, her engagement with the object is primarily reflective. When one is reflecting on an object, she can preserve its diverse aspects without obliterating a part of it.

I particularly focus on aesthetic understanding as another kind of perception—a form of alternative empathetic understanding of human beings. This approach involves viewing others without defining them through a few concepts—such as limited identities, stereotypes, or prejudices—and instead appreciating the particularities of the person, experiencing an empathetic understanding of them. The essence of aesthetic judgment lies in the human ability to appreciate various aspects of an individual while preserving their wholeness and not sacrificing the complexity of their identity. Individuals are multifaceted, existing in myriad forms, reflecting the intricate interplay of gender, nationality, ethnicity, race, religion, and so much more. Even within these categories, each individual reveals a unique mosaic of attributes, beliefs, and experiences.

This form of understanding calls for an expanded meaning of diversity in education. Diversity must transcend demographic categories like race, ethnicity, and gender to embrace the complexity that constitutes a single person's various aspects. It acknowledges that an individual cannot be reduced to one or more fixed traits. To truly appreciate diversity, education should foster holistic understanding by embracing individual particularity within the larger tapestry of collective identities. Nevertheless, understanding others based solely on their collective identity can be fraught with the risk of distortion, as exemplified by

Orientalism's pitfalls, which perpetuate bias and inaccuracies. It is a stark reminder that reducing human beings to mere categories is the root of prejudice. A genuine appreciation of diversity requires moving beyond the confines of categorical judgment.

One might question whether I am arguing that we should see everyone as beautiful. The everyday use of the word *aesthetic*, which typically implies visual or auditory beauty, can lead to this misunderstanding. Aesthetic understanding of human beings does not imply imposing a form of positivism—that is, it does not suggest that we must view all individuals as beautiful in a visual or sensory sense. Rather, it signifies adopting a reflective attitude in understanding others. In other words, it means refraining from jumping to conclusions when trying to understand a person, enhancing the resolution of her particularity more clearly without defining her in fixed terms, and appreciating her unique existence as an individual.

My argument that aesthetic understanding can extend to the understanding of human beings is grounded in recent neuroaesthetic research. Neuroaesthetics defines aesthetic experience as a psychological process that arises not only through interactions with art but also with various elements such as nature, mathematical objects, and moral actions.[26] For example, aesthetic experience can be evoked by the stars in the night sky, the green of a grassy field, the sound of children's laughter, sunlight streaming through a window, or altruistic actions that save others. In other words, aesthetic experience is determined more by the way one engages with an object than by what the object is. This mode of experience, being reflective, empathetic, non-judgmental, and liberated from specific categories, suggests an alternative approach to understanding others. Particularly in education, it offers a concrete approach to getting to know and respecting a person. Such knowledge offers a stronger foundation for overcoming stereotypes and prejudices than direct instruction and social pressure to avoid them.

Then, how can aesthetic understanding, which does not yield conceptual understanding, become a form of cognition rather than a mere transient experience? This is possible because such understanding can be universally

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communicable to others. For any understanding to become a form of cognition, it must be universally communicable. A concept abstracts the particularities of objects associated with it, allowing it to hold general communicability. For example, while the specific image that comes to mind when people think of the concept of a dog may vary, they can all communicate under the general concept of dog. In contrast, aesthetic understanding is not mediated by a general concept like dog. However, Kant argues that since aesthetic reflection inevitably produces a sense of satisfaction, this satisfaction is universally communicable. In other words, when we reflect on an object without being constrained by specific concepts, theories, or rules, satisfaction naturally arises. I argue that the pleasure humans feel in appreciating beauty arises because they are liberated from any preconceived ideas, concepts, or ideologies about the object. Aesthetic reflection ensures the freedom of cognitive faculties, fulfilling the psychological need to feel autonomy, which in turn generates pleasure. The need to experience autonomy and the satisfaction derived from it are universal to human beings.[27] Thus, even if aesthetic understanding of a person is not about specific information about the person, I argue that understanding human beings can attain the status of cognition.

Furthermore, aesthetic understanding of human beings is an empathetic understanding. Empathy is not limited to the emotions felt in specific situations—for example, feeling anger upon witnessing injustice or sadness upon seeing someone experience loss. The empathy toward others encompassed by aesthetic understanding can be described as a sense of connection felt while getting to know someone. Just as viewing an object without the intention to judge it naturally satisfies the need for autonomy, this attitude can also fulfill the need for connection. This can be explained by the sense of connection one might feel with nature when appreciating it with a similar non-judgmental attitude.[28] The approach of understanding the organic wholeness of a human being, which cannot be divided into separate pieces of information, involves emotions. Therefore, respecting a person's diversity means feeling empathy with them, and thus, diversity education cannot be separated from the cultivation of empathy.

CONCLUSION

Prejudice and stereotypes, whether positive or negative, present moral issues. They not only contribute to perpetuating social power structures but also fail to respect the diversity of human existence in its entirety. Judging an individual based on stereotypes or prejudice devalues the person's totality. Therefore, education should focus not only on mitigating systemic and explicit prejudice and stereotypes but also on teaching ways to understand and respect individuals beyond categorical thinking. Aesthetic understanding offers an epistemological alternative for capturing the wholeness of an individual, enabling people to appreciate each person as a unique being who cannot be fully encompassed by categorical identities. It also highlights the necessity of empathy in understanding an individual's full, indefinable totality. This understanding complements the current demographic-focused perspective of DEI initiatives by fostering a culture of empathetic respect for individuals in all their diversity.

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