Seeing Difference: The Ethics and Epistemology of Stereotyping

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Abstract

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When we call something a stereotype, we tend to mean it as a criticism. If someone says, “Asians are good at math” or “women are empathetic,” for example, I might interject, “You’re stereotyping” in order to convey my disapproval of their utterance. But why is stereotyping wrong? One tempting idea is that stereotyping fails to treat persons as individuals. Yet this idea itself is puzzling. How should we understand it? One possibility, to which many people are drawn, is to articulate the wrong in epistemic terms: we see the world in an incorrect way when we stereotype. Call this the epistemic hypothesis about the wrong of stereotyping. Another possibility is that the relevant failure is moral in nature: stereotyping is always morally wrong. In this dissertation, I consider both the epistemic and moral hypotheses and show that neither is defensible. Actually, stereotyping can be morally and epistemically permissible. One upshot is that we must give up the idea that stereotyping as such is wrong and think more carefully about how to distinguish permissible and impermissible cases. I argue that there will be no simple way to make this distinction, as there is no one wrong—epistemic or moral—that unifies all bad cases. So we must be pluralists about what’s wrong with stereotyping. Moreover, we must recognize that the wrongs of stereotyping are purely extrinsic in nature, i.e., due to bad causes or consequences rather than due to features intrinsic to the very act of stereotyping. A second upshot is that we must think of stereotyping as normatively diverse: sometimes epistemic and moral norms prohibit it; other times, they do not. Epistemic and moral norms also have the potential to conflict in specific cases: a person might be epistemically rational to stereotype even if stereotyping is seriously objectionable from a moral point of view. I examine cases of alleged conflict and argue that, in fact, bona fide conflicts between moral and epistemic norms are far rarer than one would expect. Moreover, I demonstrate that—despite first appearances—they do not present tragic normative dilemmas in which people are forced to choose between morality and epistemic rationality. People can do the right thing without being irrational.
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Introduction

Human societies are marked by diversity and difference: ethnic and racial difference, gender difference, religious difference, sexual difference, difference in age and ability, difference in social status and wealth, in professional status and political affiliation.

Faced with diversity, humans stereotype. We seek to find order in the world, to classify people as types, and to imbue these classifications with meaning. We generalize. We form expectations about individuals based on the groups to which they belong. It is hard to imagine human psychology without these tendencies, essential as they are for simplifying and understanding a complex social environment. But for these tendencies, we would not be fully rational.

Nonetheless, stereotyping is problematic. Stereotypes have the reputation of being false, unreliable views of social groups. Deemed uniformly bad, they have been associated with cultural imperialism, prejudice, oppression, and all manner of moral and political evil. Moreover, stereotyping is thought to be inherently objectionable. “You’re stereotyping,” an interlocutor might interject, if I say something like “Asians are bad drivers” or joke that this or that Asian person will be terrible behind the wheel.

These reflections should bother us. What are stereotypes, exactly? How do they affect judgment and behavior? Is stereotyping always morally wrong? Is it ever rational? In so far as stereotypes are part and parcel of how we cope with a diverse social world, what’s wrong with stereotyping?

In chapter 1, I introduce readers to the psychological literature on stereotypes and stereotyping. Then I argue for what I call the descriptive view of stereotyping. According to this view, stereotypes can be expressed in speech—for example, when we say things like “little girls wear pink” or “doctors wear white coats.” However, we cannot not think of stereotypes as generic propositions about social groups, which are typically expressed in speech acts. After all, we know that stereotypes can influence people’s plans, expectations, and actions even if they are not expressed in public, either directly or indirectly. We must therefore think of stereotypes as having a psychological reality, and it becomes tempting to identify them with concepts or as associated with the use or formation of concepts. To stereotype, according to the descriptive view, is thus to employ a generalized view of groups associated with one’s concepts or their formation or use. In the chapter’s last part, I consider an objection to the descriptive view, namely, that it does not include the idea that stereotyping is always problematic. I argue that this is actually a benefit of the view. Moreover, I demonstrate that the view is not question begging: it is consistent with the idea that stereotyping is, in fact, always problematic. One would have to argue for that conclusion, however; it wouldn’t follow merely from the term’s definition.

In chapter 2, I begin to investigate claim that stereotyping is always wrong. One tempting idea—just mentioned—is that stereotyping fails to treat persons as individuals. Yet this idea itself is
puzzling. How should we understand it? One possibility, to which many people are drawn, is to articulate the wrong in epistemic terms: we see the world in an incorrect way when we stereotype. Call this the epistemic hypothesis about the wrong of stereotyping. In this chapter, I start by looking for a general explanation of why the hypothesis could be true. By a general explanation, I mean one that would apply to each and every case of stereotyping. Exploring seven possibilities, I find that none works. So there seems to be no general explanation of the wrong of stereotyping. Then I consider a second possibility: stereotyping might always involve seeing the world incorrectly but for diverse reasons. I also reject this possibility. Citing examples, I show that stereotyping can involve seeing the world correctly and can be perfectly consistent with epistemic norms. So the epistemic hypothesis fails. We must therefore start distinguishing between epistemically permissible and impermissible cases of stereotyping. I suggest a pluralistic view of what’s wrong with stereotyping in the bad cases.

In chapter 3, I consider the possibility that the alleged wrong of stereotyping—failing to treat persons as individuals—is a moral wrong. Call this the moral hypothesis about the wrong of stereotyping. In this chapter, I start by looking for a general reason that the hypothesis could be true. I begin with the following idea: we have a moral duty to treat persons as individuals. If we had such a duty, stereotyping would always be wrong, and it would be intrinsically wrong. However, I find that we have no such duty. We have good reason to think that moral norms sometimes permit stereotyping. So the moral hypothesis fails: it is not always wrong to stereotype. We must therefore begin to distinguish morally permissible and impermissible cases. I explore four ways in which one may attempt to draw this distinction, and I argue that each of them fails. What this shows, I suggest, is that there is no simple rule for distinguishing permissible and impermissible cases. To know whether stereotyping is morally impermissible in any given case, we must get more specific, appealing to particular features of situations, including the content of the stereotype, who was using it, why it was being used, its effect in particular cases, and the stereotype’s connection to historical injustice. Moreover, I argue that we must be pluralists about what’s morally wrong with stereotyping and accept that these wrongs are extrinsic in nature, i.e., due to the ethically bad causes of consequences of stereotyping.

In chapter 4, I begin by exploring what follows from my previous chapters: that is, if my analysis is correct, there is no general wrong of stereotyping—a wrong that exists in every single case of stereotyping and would render every case objectionable. Instead I've found that stereotyping can be morally and epistemically permissible. The upshot is that we must think of stereotyping as normatively diverse: sometimes ethical and epistemic norms condemn it; other times, they do not. Moreover, we must be pluralists about what’s wrong with stereotyping in the bad cases. There is no single explanation of why all objectionable cases are that way.

One implication of stereotyping’s normative diversity is that the relationship between epistemic and moral judgments about cases may be complex. If both kinds of norms condemn a case, we may lodge both epistemic and moral objections to it. Or we might find that both epistemic and moral norms permit a case of stereotyping. On the other hand, conflict instead of harmony is also possible. Epistemic norms may condemn a case of stereotyping while moral norms permit
it. Conversely, moral norms might prohibit stereotyping even in cases where it would be epistemically rational to stereotype.

The possibility of conflict is troubling. Is it really possible that moral and epistemic norms are not always harmonious? What do cases of conflict look like when it comes to stereotyping? If normative conflicts do occur, are we forced to choose between morality and epistemic rationality, hence between being good and being rational? Is there, as a result, a moral demand for stupidity in some cases?

In this chapter, I divide cases of apparent normative conflict into three types:

Type 1: assertions about social groups
Type 2: forming expectations about individuals
Type 3: stereotyping and policy

Then I argue that first impressions are misleading. Actually, there are no cases of bona fide conflict between epistemic and moral norms when it comes to policy or assertions. Only when stereotyping consists of forming expectation about individuals do we find actual conflicts. But, as I show, even here we have to be careful, because many cases that first seem to be instances of conflict actually are not. Finally, I look at cases in which epistemic and moral norms do actually conflict. Does morality really require stupidity in these cases? I argue ‘no.’

These conclusions are politically urgent. Telling people not to stereotype is unhelpful advice. It doesn’t explain why stereotyping is wrong. Moreover, it will not always be correct advice. Thinking generically about the social world and the individuals in it can be morally and epistemically permissible. It can even be rational and good to stereotype.

Nor can we content ourselves with simplistic explanations about why stereotyping is sometimes wrong. Finding an adequate characterization of morally impermissible stereotyping is not easy. Simple appeals to the badness of prejudice, inequalities, or unfairness do not work. None of these are, in themselves, necessary or sufficient for morally impermissible stereotyping. A practical significance attaches to these conclusions as well. If no single wrong unifies all objectionable cases, no singular prescription, e.g., “Don’t be prejudiced” will cover all such cases. The upshot is that the best solutions to the moral dangers of stereotyping will be diverse and will have to be tailored to particulars of cases.

All in all, my work shows that we—as individuals and as citizens in political society—must think harder about the ethics and epistemology of stereotyping. It’s not enough to issue blanket prescriptions against failing to treat persons individuals or to label something “stereotyping” as a way to express our disapproval of it. We must recognize that we all have a tendency to stereotype: sometimes, it’s perfectly benign and even helpful, whereas other times it is both foolish and morally dubious. Our ethical and epistemic situation is messy. It is complicated. We do our-
selves no favors—especially if we are committed to equality and fairness—by ignoring these
facts. We need to think harder about when and why stereotyping is wrong.
Chapter 1

What is a Stereotype? What is Stereotyping?

Expectations both shape and reflect our social world. We expect that certain types of people will look, think, and act in certain ways. We prejudge individuals. We recognize that others have expectations about us, given the kind of person we are, and that knowledge affects how we behave towards them. These phenomena are possible only because we make associations, sometimes tacit, sometimes explicit, with social groups. Psychologists call these associations stereotypes. Everyone knows that stereotypes have costs. They cause us to make epistemic mistakes. They also cause harm: discrimination, unjustified ill treatment, and stigmatization. These harms often affect society’s most vulnerable members: women, ethnic and racial minorities, people with disabilities, the elderly, and the poor.

In this chapter, I introduce readers to the psychological literature on stereotypes and stereotyping. Then I argue for what I call the descriptive view of stereotyping. To stereotype, according to the descriptive view, is to employ the generalized views of groups associated with one’s concepts or with their formation and use. In the chapter’s final part, I consider an objection to the descriptive view, namely, that it does not include the idea that stereotyping is always problematic. I argue that this is actually a benefit of the view. Moreover, I show that the view is not question begging. If stereotyping is generalizing about social groups and applying those generalizations to individuals, it might turn out that stereotyping is, in fact, always problematic. We’d have to argue for that conclusion, however; it wouldn’t follow merely from the definition of the term “stereotyping.”

Human Psychology

Most of us don’t remember early childhood. We don’t remember learning the names of shapes or colors or of most things we take for granted in our everyday lives. Yet there was a moment when each of us began to call objects by their name. There was a moment, for instance, when we looked at something in our hands and realized for the first time that it was a square. Looking around, we recognized other squares in our world. Maybe it was thrilling. As adults, there is no novelty in recognizing squares as squares. It’s an activity that we do instinctively, unconsciously, and without any fanfare.

The activity I’ve just described is called categorization. Categorization is a necessary precondition of stereotyping. When we categorize, we identify things as members of kinds. The human impulse to do this is basic. We are constantly dividing up the worlds into different kinds of things and understanding individuals as part of this schema.

Our categories can be carved up into two rough kinds: social and non-social categories. Social categories apply to people. They include things like “man,” “woman,” “black,” “white,” “professor,” “bank teller,” “trickster,” “shy person,” “friend,” and “enemy.” Non-social categories include things like “tree,” “water,” “asphalt,” “car,” “tropical storm,” “red,” and “square.”
Social categories are special, despite the fact that they function in similar ways as non-social categories. Perhaps this is not surprising. Humans are more complicated than pets or kitchen objects and the ways in which we classify them are too. A person can simultaneously be a human, a woman, a friend, an inhabitant of Pittsburgh, a Chinese American, a doctor, a shy person, a person in her forties, a Baptist, a church-going Baptist, a first-born child, and a regular buyer of the New York Times. The number of social categories into which a person can fall is vast. These categories can combine with others in complex ways, and they don’t fit into a neat hierarchy of generality or informativeness as non-social categories seem to. Social categories can also be value laden and emotionally charged in ways that non-social categories typically aren’t. Some kinds of people get under our skin. Others scare us. Yet others we trust. Social categories are also more political in nature: how we divide up the world into different social kinds is not some neutral fact; a society’s socially dominant groups often influence the kind of categories that are typically used. Because social categorization is incredibly complicated, it is harder to study, and we know less about it than about non-social categorization.

The standard, though not undisputed view, is that both social and non-social categories are constituted by prototypes. Prototypes are abstract mental representations. The category, “red,” for instance, is defined by the most typical example of red we can imagine. The category of “game” is defined by our vision of the most representative game. On this view, when we compare something to our categories, we consider its features, then we consider our prototypes. When something is sufficiently similar to one of our prototypes, we classify it as the same kind of thing. Classification isn’t a cut-and-dry matter here: it’s a matter of resemblance, which can be a matter of degree.

Categorization entails another process, which is conceptually distinguishable from it: the process of associating properties with kinds.

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1 For a brief overview of research on intersectionality, see David J. Schneider, The Psychology of Stereotyping (New York, NY: Guilford Press, 2005), 75-83.


3 A competing view is that exemplars define our categories. The category of “red,” for instance, consists of a cluster of particular reddish hues. The category of “game” is constituted by a set of specific examples that, while different from one another, all count as paradigm cases of games. On this view, when we categorize something, we first consider its features and then we consider the examples associated with our categories. When we find a set of examples with which the object fits, we classify it as the same kind of thing. Some psychologists also suggest a hybrid position. On a hybrid view, some of our categories are fixed by abstract prototypes while others are fixed by exemplars. For instance, some believe that we use prototypes to classify colors (like red) but use exemplars to classify other kinds of things (like games).
Associations aren’t innate. As children, we must learn to associate the category of “square” with the property having four sides, the category of “cup” with the property of being fillable, and the category of “tiger” with the property of having stripes. Likewise, we must learn to associate social categories with properties.

Our associations are a motley crew. Some seem necessary. Having four sides, for instance, seemingly can’t be dissociated from squareness. Other associations are tight but not without exceptions. Cups, for instance, are associated with the property of being fillable. This association is no accident. Being fillable is part of a cup’s function and what distinguishes cups from forks and step stools. Nonetheless, being fillable is not a necessary property of cups: a broken cup is still a cup. Other associations are looser yet. In different places, the same social category may take on radically different properties. In rural Pennsylvania and the Bronx, for instance, public school children may be associated with different behaviors.

Associations can also be distinguished in other dimensions. Some properties may be essential for and constitutive of category membership. For squares, having four sides is an essential property. Other properties won’t be essential; they’ll merely be common in category members. Women, for instance, will often have two X chromosomes, breasts, and ovaries. These properties aren’t essential to womanhood, as “woman” is a category defined by gender and not sex. Nonetheless, many women will have breasts, ovaries, and two X chromosomes. Some of these commonly-occurring traits may also be used to identify category members. Ovaries and X chromosomes are not good identifying features because they are hidden from immediate visual perception. Breasts, however, can be used to categorize persons according to gender-identity.

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4 I have borrowed the distinction between essential, identifying, and ascriptive properties from Schneider, The Psychology of Stereotyping, 90.

5 The distinction between sex and gender can be understood in different ways. Sex is typically understood as a biological category, denoting a group that possesses the same kind of sexual organs, hormones, chromosomes and the like. Gender, on the other hand, is typically understood as denoting a group that shares practices, attributes, and dispositions. On this view, gender is socially constructed whereas sex is not. For a clear, interesting discussion of what it could mean for something to be socially constructed see Sally Haslanger, “Ontology and Social Construction,” Philosophical Topics, 23 (2): 95-125. Some feminist scholars reject the typical way of understanding the sex/gender distinction, arguing that sex is also socially constructed. See, for instance, Judith Butler, Gender Trouble (London: Routledge, 1999) and Anne Fausto-Sterling, “The Problem With Sex/Gender and Nature/Nurture” in Debating Biology: Sociological Reflections on Health, Medicine, and Society (London: Routledge, 2003). For a nice overview of different ways of understanding the distinction between sex and gender in feminist scholarship, see Mari Mikkola, “Feminist Perspectives on Sex and Gender,” in The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Fall 2008 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.)

6 My point is this: breasts are an indicator of gender identity, and we can therefore use that feature when we categorize unfamiliar persons, identifying them as having a certain gender identity. However, I emphatically reject the idea that having breasts is necessary or sufficient for self-identifying as a woman.
Other properties will typically not be used for purposes of identification and will not be essential to category membership; nonetheless, we may ascribe them to category members. For instance, we may associate women with the activity of cooking. Cooking is not an identifying feature of women. A person’s style of dress, haircut, way of walking and talking, and body shape are more visually apparent, and they more reliably distinguish men from women. But, if we know someone is a woman, we may nonetheless presume she can cook.

Psychologists typically ask three kinds of questions about our associations with categories. They ask about the underlying neural and cognitive processes that cause us to make and maintain these associations. They ask about the content of our associations. They also ask how we use our associations, in particular, how our associations affect our judgment and behavior.

About the first type of question, this much is clear. At the neurophysiological level, there is no one way in which associational processes work. Research suggests, for instance, that brain systems “operate differently for social as opposed to non-social stimuli.” We should thus expect that the neurological processes by which people learn (as well as maintain and change) associations will be complex and diverse. Likewise, the higher-level cognitive explanations of associations may vary: associations can be learned and reinforced in different ways.

About the second question, regarding the content of our associations, people tend to agree on two things. First, the content of our associations is dynamic. Advertising, television, and other forms of popular culture are constantly introducing new images of social types. Society itself also changes. Technology makes possible new habits and activities; fashion changes; the fortunes of communities rise and fall. People who study associations realize this, and they document how associations change over time and how they stay the same. Second, associations vary across populations. One can’t assume that white college students in the US have the same associations as black college students in the US or that young people have the same associations as their parents or their grandparents. They might. But these are open empirical questions.

Consider some actual data concerning gender and race. In a 1993 study, white, college-aged students in Arizona associated women with the following ten traits: intelligence, materialism, sensitivity, attractiveness, sophistication, emotionality, ambitiousness, career-orientedness, indepen-

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7 Kevin Ochsner and M. Lieberman, “The Emergence of Social Cognitive Neuroscience,” American Psychologist 56 (2001): 719. For another fascinating study, see Lasana Harris and Susan Fiske, “Dehumanizing the Lowest of the Low: Neuroimaging Responses to Extreme Out Groups” in Psychological Science, Vol. 7, No. 10 (2006): 847-853. Harris and Fiske show that extreme out groups, e.g., homeless people are sometimes processed in the brain in the same way as non-social stimuli. The implication is that we perceive such people in a de-humanized way.

8 These are not the only possible points of agreement. For instance, it is plausible that everyone agrees that associations with low status and socially devalued groups tend to be negative. I focus on these two because they are the most general.
dence, talkativity, imaginativeness, and kindness.9 These associations changed when students were asked about black women. With black women, they associated loudness, talkativity, aggressiveness, intelligence, straightforwardness, argumentativeness, stubborness, quick temperedness, bitchiness, and having too many children. These associations would likely change if researchers refined the categories yet again. People may connect different properties with black female teachers than with black women generally, and the same is true for other sub-types: black female lawyers, black female athletes, and so on. In certain cases, associations are exceedingly stable across populations. In the United States, for example, black men have been associated with criminality and aggression for at least several decades, if not longer.10 Whether research participants have been black or white, college-aged or older, they have either implicitly or explicitly made this association.11 Regarding women in general and black women, it is an open empirical question whether our associations are similarly stable.

Having associations is required for categorization. When we categorize, we identify things as members of kinds. Kinds are distinguished by the properties associated with them. With the category “nurse,” we connect a certain set of properties; with the category “doctor,” we connect a different set of properties. If we didn’t have these associations, there would be no basis for seeing one kind of thing as different than another. For categorization to happen, we need category-specific associations.

The question immediately arises: are these associations stereotypes? Reviewing the literature on stereotypes, people argue yes, while disagreeing about the details.

Their seeming disagreements are a result of controversy about the nature of the human mind. Here is a point on which psychologists tend to agree: humans have two ways of processing information: an automatic, thoughtless way and a conscientious, effortful way. But they disagree


10 In early studies of racial stereotypes, from 1933 to the late 60’s, this particular association wasn’t prominent. For an examination of changes in African American stereotypes since the 1930’s, see Stephanie Madon, M. Guyll, et. al., “Ethnic and National Stereotypes: The Princeton Trilogy Revisited,” Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin 27 (2001): 1304-1318; Gina Philogene, “Stereotype Fissure: Katz and Braly Revisited,” Social Science Information 40 (2001): 411-432. Philogene writes: “While some specific group attributes have changed over the past five decades, the overall characterization of black Americans as a racially defined group which is widely inferior has not” (416).

about how these processes ought to be characterized. Some distinguish automatic and controlled processes; others differentiate associative from rule-based processing; yet others say the central distinction is between heuristic and systematic processing, or between experiential and rational processing, or between categorical and individuated processing. This bevy of distinctions indicates significant disagreement among psychologists about how humans process information, and these disagreements carry over to discussions of stereotypes. Everyone studying stereotypes agrees that stereotypes are associations between social categories and properties; but, because of their underlying commitments, they conceive of these associations in quite different ways.

Smith and De Coster, for instance, distinguish associative and rule-based processing. Associative processing, they say, uses information stored in our slow-learning memory system. The job of slow-learning memory is to retain and deploy information about what our environment is typically like. This information is stored in the form of network-like associations. For instance, we may associate “the visual appearance of an object, its name, the action one performs with it, one’s emotional reactions to it, and so on.” These associations reflect our perception of frequently co-occurring properties or events. When we encounter something new in our environment, we deploy these stored associations to help us understand it. Indeed we normally do so non-voluntarily and unconsciously. Rule-based processing, in contrast, is effortful and deliberate. It “occurs optionally” and makes use of, as the authors put it, “symbolically represented and

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12 This is a classic distinction in social psychology. Some theorists think it maps cleanly onto the two ways of information processing; some don’t. For a good discussion of the topic, see John Bargh, “The Cognitive Monster: The Case Against the Control of Automatic Stereotype Effects,” in eds. S. Chaiken & Y. Trope, Dual-process Theories in Social Psychology (New York: Guilford Press, 1999), 361-382.


17 This view presupposes a connectionist understanding of the mind. Connectionism holds that the human brain consists of overlapping series of neural networks.

intentionally accessed knowledge.” During rule-based processing, they write, an individual may “effortfully examine a persuasive argument to determine its validity...[or] form an impression of an acquaintance by considering not only her gender but also available individuating information.”

On this view of the mind, stereotypes are two kinds of things. They are, first, web-like associations stored in slow-learning memory. The content of any given stereotype, in this case, may include images, names, emotions, character traits, tendencies, and causally-related events. This content may not be accurately expressed in the form of a proposition or, even, a conjunction of propositions. Its content consists of an associative web—a web that may feature concepts, images, and emotions—which does not have the logical form or structure of a proposition. In rule-based processing, on the other hand, stereotypes are “symbolically-represented pieces of knowledge.” Understood in this way, they are still associations. When we say, “Women have breasts,” we are still associating the social category of women with the property of having breasts. These associations, of course, are structured in a different way than stereotypic associations in slow-learning memory. They always take the form of propositions, with content that can be true or false. When people use the word “stereotype,” they typically don’t distinguish which kind of thing they are referring to; but, according to this view, they could.

A different, incompatible view, presented by Chen and Chaiken, distinguishes heuristic and systematic modes of processing information. Heuristic processing is typically effortless and automatic. Rather than involving web-like associations of the kind described by Smith and De Coster, the heuristic mode of processing involves “the application of simple decision rules.” These are rules like “women are emotional,” “the majority is right,” “cups are meant to be filled” and so on. Such rules take the form of straightforward generalizations. Systematic processing, on the other hand, involves “a more comprehensive analysis of judgment-relevant information.” Systematic reasoning may lead us to reject our simple decision rules; however, it can use these simple rules as initial input.

On this view, stereotypes can always be expressed as propositions. Sometimes they will function as simple decision rules that we use automatically and without conscious awareness. Other times, they will function as part of deliberate, complex processes of reasoning. Either way,

19 Ibid., 111.

20 Ibid., 111-112. When doing so, a person may reflect on associations in slow-learning memory and form explicit beliefs on the basis of them, even detailed probabilistic beliefs. One can also appeal to information stored in fast-learning memory. The job of fast-learning memory, the authors explain, is to record episodic memories and their unique details.

21 Chen and Chaiken, “Getting at the Truth,” 262.

22 Ibid., 262.
stereotypes are always expressed as propositions about social groups and their properties. Sometimes the relevant associations will be implicit, and we won’t be aware of them. Other times, the associations will be explicit. Our implicit and explicit views may even contradict one another.

According to a third view, suggested by Fiske and Taylor, the better distinction is between *categorical* and *individuated* processing. Categorical processing is usually automatic and unconscious, and it involves the use of schemas. Schemas have been described as theories about social types. They have also been described as “knowledge structures” that contain category-relevant information.\(^{23}\) Once we categorize an individual, we gain access to the schemas that go with his or her social type. These schemas then affect how we understand that person, and they do so, in part, by activating a range of preferences, evaluations, moods, and emotions. Individuated processing, on the other hand, requires more cognitive effort. It requires more effort, in part, because it involves paying attention to the detailed, unique features of the people around us.

On Fiske and Taylor’s view, stereotypes are schemas. They are cognitive structures that “represent knowledge about a concept or type of stimulus, including its attributes and the relations among attributes.”\(^{24}\) This understanding of stereotypes resembles Smith and De Coster’s view of stereotypes as web-like sets of associations. But the proposal somewhat differs. Unlike Smith and De Coster, Fiske and Taylor don’t say that stereotypes “lack symbolic content.”\(^{25}\) Indeed, the content of schemas might be clearly expressed in a set of propositions. Their view also differs from Chen and Chaiken’s. Fiske and Taylor conceive of stereotypes used in thoughtless, automatic processing as complex knowledge structures, not as simple decision rules.

All three ways of understanding the human mind are significantly different, and they entail different, incompatible conceptions of stereotypes.

The points of agreement are, however, significant. Everyone in the debate agrees that stereotypes, understood in the most general way, are associations with social categories. They agree that stereotypes function implicitly and explicitly. They also agree that our implicit and explicit use of stereotypes should be characterized differently. All parties in the debate can recognize a number of ways in which stereotypes affect our thoughts and actions.

Here are six of them:

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\(^{23}\) Fiske and Taylor, *Social Cognition*, 98.

\(^{24}\) Ibid., 98.

\(^{25}\) To clarify, I don’t think that Fiske and Taylor endorse a connectionist theory of mind, and they therefore wouldn’t hold that stereotypes lack symbolic content. However, their view might be reinterpreted so that it says basically the same thing as Smith and DeCoster. Indeed, Smith and DeCoster explicitly argue that it should be reinterpreted in this way.
Attention. Humans have limited attention. We can’t focus on everything in our visual or auditory field at once. Stereotypes affect what we end up paying attention to and what we ignore.

When people have stereotypic expectations, they pay attention when those expectations are disrupted, and they try to understand the unexpected information. In one experiment, for instance, psychologists instructed participants to listen to two conversations at once, gave them trait information about the speakers (this one is kind, that one is mean), then tracked their attentional shifts as one of the speakers tells a trait-inconsistent story. Inconsistencies invariably held people’s attention.

Stereotypes can also have the opposite effect: that is, they can blind us to information that doesn’t fit our expectations. If the conflicting details are easy to overlook or easy to interpret as stereotype-consistent, we might bypass them, seeing only what confirms our pre-existing views. This effect can be magnified by wishful thinking. Classifying a new acquaintance as straight, a woman may miss the fact that he is making eyes at a handsome man across the bar. Seeing Humbert Humbert as a single, heterosexual man of certain age, Charlotte Haze assumes that she would be the object of his romantic interest, failing to notice his longing stares at her daughter Lolita. Stereotypes, in part, explain why these mistakes happen. They help us form expectations about other people, and, sometimes, we see only what we want and what we expect.

Interpretation of Ambiguous Behavior. Stereotypes also affect our impressions of other people and their behavior. Most behavior is, after all, ambiguous: it can mean different things. A push might be playful or aggressive. A smile could express friendliness or derision. Stereotypes, for better or worse, help us make these distinctions.

Consider research on racial stereotypes. In one well-known experiment, research participants watched footage of an interaction that ended with one man pushing another. Researchers varied the men’s race across different videos. After watching each video, participants describes the men’s behavior. Black men who pushed others were interpreted as behaving more aggressively than white men who acted identically. Similar results obtained with a study depicting elementary-school children. When the student doing the pushing was black, participants tended to say that he was hostile. When he was white, participants tended to say that he was playful. In both

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27 Stanley Kubrick’s rendition of Nabakov’s Lolita captures this nicely: [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nwkeANL6cD8&feature=related](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nwkeANL6cD8&feature=related)

28 Duncan, “Differential Social Perception.”

29 Sagar and Schofield, “Racial and Behavioral Cues.”
studies, people were simply faster and more likely to interpret black men’s actions as threatening, and they did so, by hypothesis, because of stereotypes. In another experiment, participants were asked to play a video game. The game showed a series of men in chaotic urban settings. Men were depicted as either hispanic, black, or white. They held either guns in their hands or benign objects like cell phones or wallets. If a man held a gun, participants were supposed to shoot him. If a man held something else, they were supposed to hold their fire. A reward system was devised to motivate participants to take the game seriously. Results showed that research participants were faster to interpret an object in a black man’s hands as a gun. They shot armed black men faster than armed white men, and mistakenly shot unarmed blacks more often than whites. Research participants’ levels of prejudice did not predict shooter bias, which suggests the implicit operation of racial stereotypes.

In general, stereotypes affect our perception of objects and others. Humans are especially likely to interpret their world in ways that confirm their existing stereotypes when they are busy, under stress, or have limited information about the people with whom they are interacting.

(3) Predictions about Individuals. Stereotypes also help us to make predictions about individuals.

Consider a scene from Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man*. At one point in the story, the narrator, a black man, finds himself at a swanky members-only club full of Communist party bigwigs, all of whom are white. He is introduced to them as a new hire. As he is making small talk, an embarrassing scene unravels:

...A short broad man saw me and waved the others to a halt. “Say, Brother,” he called, “Hold the music boys, hold it!”
“Yes, uh...Brother,” I said.
“You’re just who we need. We been looking for you.”
“Oh,” I said.
“How about a spiritual, Brother?…”
“’The brother does not sing!’” Brother Jack roared staccato.
“Nonsense, all colored people sing.”
“This is an outrageous example of unconscious racial chauvinism!” Jack said.
“Nonsense, I like their singing,” the broad man said doggedly.

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“The brother does not sing!” Brother Jack cried, his face turning a deep purple.31

Focus on the short, broad man. The man knows nothing about the narrator, except what he can see from a distance. Quite immediately, he identifies the narrator’s social category on the basis of his skin color and infers that the narrator possesses a specific property, namely, the ability to sing Southern spirituals. “How about a spiritual, brother?” he yells. If he lacked an association between black people and spirituals, he would not have immediately shouted this request. In general, our associations help us form expectations about what individuals will do, their abilities, and their likes and dislikes.

The same phenomenon appears in Assata Shakur’s biography. Shakur was a member of the black revolutionary group, the Black Panther Party. She was accused of a variety of crimes, including killing a police officer in 1973. While in prison awaiting trial, she remembers feeling uneasy about the prison guards. “I was none too popular with the guards,” she writes, “especially the men. Most of them hadn’t said boo to me and vice versa, but they hated my guts. To them, I was a cop killer and they were cops. Something told me to be real careful.”32 The guards to whom she refers were forbidden from entering her part of the prison, the women’s section. Their job was to guard male prisoners. They hardly had any contact with Shakur, and Shakur had little opportunity to see them. Therefore, it wasn’t so much unique features of these prison guards at this particular prison that told her to take care; it was her associations with prison guards and police officers generally. And she does take care. Every night, as a precaution, she places a table in front of her cell door and piles a stack of cups high on it. “One night,” she writes, “in the middle of the night, the cups came crashing down. I immediately awoke to find four or five male guards standing in the doorway of my cell.”33 “In prisons,” she explains, “it is not at all uncommon to find a prisoner hanged or burned to death in his cell. No matter how suspicious the circumstances, these deaths are always ruled “suicides.”34 Shakur’s stereotypic expectations, in this case, proved correct. She believed that the prison guards might try to hurt her, and they did try.


33 Ibid, 59.

34 Ibid, 59
These two examples illustrate a ubiquitous phenomenon. Every day and perhaps every moment of our day, stereotypic associations help us predict what individuals are like, what they will do, and what they value.\footnote{35}

A related point is worth mentioning. Our expectations about other people not only cause us to get things right or wrong from time to time; they also help us to create a certain kind of reality.\footnote{36} Smile, as the expression goes, and the world smiles back. It makes sense. Our reactions and attitudes often elicit symmetrical responses in other people. For instance, if we expect an unfamiliar person to be friendly, we’ll behave in a warm and friendly way towards them, which makes it more likely that person will respond in kind, thereby confirming our expectation of friendliness. In this way, stereotypes not only predict but also influence individuals’ behavior and function like self-fulfilling prophesies.\footnote{37}

\textit{(4) Forming Beliefs About Groups in General.} Stereotypes help us make predictions about individuals, in part, because they can constitute hypotheses or, when we have enough certainty in and awareness of them, beliefs about groups in general.

In this guise, stereotypes deeply affect people’s lives. When sorting through stacks of applications, an employer may decide, as a matter of policy, to only interview candidates with test scores over a certain range, on the assumption that individuals with higher test scores will make more competent employees. She may offer female applicants between the ages of thirty and forty lower salaries, assuming that they will be more likely to ask for time off work. When trying to fill an apartment vacancy, a property manager may prefer female over male tenants, assuming that women will be neater and more reliable. People of certain kinds may have a

\footnote{35} Not everyone may use stereotypes equally. Recent experiments, for instance, have suggested that Asian research participants are more likely to explain why people act the way they do by appealing to situations, whereas Western research participants tend to explain people’s actions by appealing to character traits and intentions. See, for instance, Ara Norenzayan et al., “Cultural Similarities and Differences in Social Inference: Evidence from Behavioral Predictions and Lay Theories of Behavior,” \textit{Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin} Vol. 28, No.1 (2002): 109-120. The more one explains actions by appeal to situations, the less one will need to appeal to facts about group membership, hence to stereotypes.

\footnote{36} Ian Hacking has referred to this as “the looping effect of human kinds.” See Ian Hacking, \textit{The Social Construction of What?} (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 33-34.

harder time finding work, a decent place to live, and a salary on par with others who perform identically, in part, because of stereotypes.

Though stereotypes often work like hypotheses, they are not expressed in the form of exact probabilities. People don’t usually say: “75% of women between the ages of 30 and 40 will take at least one maternity leave from their job.” Stereotypes tend to be less precise. They are often expressed as rules of thumb. A father might tell his son: “Don’t trust women, they will lie to you.” He might tell a co-worker: “Watch out for the Chinese. They always demand a discount.” Shakur remembers legions of such adages from her youth: “Don’t trust West-Indians because they’ll stab you in the back.” “Don’t trust Africans because they think they are better than we are.” “Don’t hang out with Puerto Ricans because they all stick together and will gang up on you.”

If people are pressed, they might be able to state more fine-grained hypotheses, perhaps even make guesses about probabilities. When we encounter a specific individual, we might suppose, whether consciously or unconsciously, that it is probable to some or other degree he or she has stereotypic characteristics. As one author nicely puts it, “we often understand that features are probabilistically attached to particular groups. So we enter our interactions with others having suspicions, hunches, or hypotheses that they will have certain features. Sometimes we test those hypotheses directly, but most of the time their effects are more indirect.”

(5) **Categorizing Individuals.** Stereotypes not only help us to make predictions about individual traits and behavior. They also help us to place them in social categories. At a party filled with unfamiliar people, we may give the crowd a once-over. We might classify someone as a straight, unmarried, conservative woman based on her body language, style of dress, and lack of engagement ring. We might decide that someone else is a gay based on the fact that she has a shaved head and is wearing cargo pants. These judgments can be automatic: we may just see that someone fits a social category. Other times, we may have to think. Stereotypes help us make these decisions.

(6) **Memory.** Research also shows that stereotypes affect our memories.

Stereotypes can behave like foils. When people look and act in expected ways, we may give them only fleeting notice, devoting our attention to more interesting matters; but when people don’t fit our stereotypes, they stand out. Alternatively, we might realize our view of the typical is thoroughly wrong, in which case people will stand out for challenging, and perhaps changing, our stereotypes. In Shakur’s autobiography, for instance, she recalls believing that communists

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38 Shakur, *Assata*, 152.

39 Schneider, *The Psychology of Stereotyping*, 227. In chapter 2, I explore this thought by examining the literature in linguistics on generics. That literature suggests that only some generics express probabilistic claims; others express claims about typical or normal group members; some assert claims about only a minority of group members; others make normative claims, i.e., claims about how group members ought to be. I keep the point here brief for purposes of simplicity.
“worked in salt mines, that they weren’t free, that everyone wore the same clothes, and that no one owned anything.” She also remembers coming face-to-face with actual communists for the first time and realizing how distorted her stereotypes were. Her recall is not unusual. People are often good at remembering stereotype-inconsistent information and the situations in which they encountered it. The more time they spend processing unexpected information, the better their recall.

Stereotypes can also enhance recall of stereotype-consistent information. As Shakur lay in a hospital bed, for instance, she saw two men entering her hospital room. She remembers them fitting the stereotype of police detectives, in fact, fitting it to a T. “I knew they’re detectives,” she writes, “because they look like detectives. One of them has a face like a bulldog, with jowls hanging down the sides.” She says nothing about the color of their suits or the people to whom they talked before entering the room. She mentions the “bull dog” face. It alone, when she sat down to transcribe her memory, seemed worth mentioning. Her memory, or, at least what she bothers recounting, is again typical. Studies on memory show that people tend to remember both stereotype-consistent and -inconsistent information about individuals better than information irrelevant to stereotypes.

Research also shows that stereotypes can distort our memories. “When our stereotypes are activated,” writes one author, “we sometimes have trouble remembering which of many possible stereotypic behaviors the person did or did not perform.” When asked about our experiences, we fill in details, some of which never happened. In one study, participants were shown a videotape of a woman having dinner with her husband. When they believed that the woman was a waitress, they remembered her drinking beer and owning a television. When they believed she

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40 Ibid., 151.

41 Ibid., 151.

42 A classic study on the subject, whose results have been widely replicated: Reid Hastie & P. Kumar, “Person Memory: Personality Traits as Organizing Principles in Memory for Behaviors,” Journal of Personality and Social Psychology 37 (1979): 25-38. In certain circumstances, however, the results have been found not to hold. See Charles Stangor and D. Ruble, “Strength of Expectancies and Memory for Social Information: What We Remember Depends on How Much We Know” Journal of Experimental Psychology 25 (1989): 18-35. Stangor and Ruble find that people with considerable knowledge in a particular domain will tend to better remember stereotype-consistent information in that domain.

43 Shakur, Assata, 4.

44 Hastie and Kumar, “Person Memory,” 25.

45 Schneider, The Psychology of Stereotyping, 140.
was a librarian, they remembered her wearing glasses and owning old records. None of these
details actually existed. In another study concerning race, research participants were instructed
to listen to a newscast about a crime. Even though the report said nothing about the alleged per-
petrator’s race, 60% of participants falsely remembered that it did, and 70% of these people
claimed that he was black. These results are typical. Time and again, studies show that people
remember stereotype-consistent information that was never actually presented to them.

The Descriptive View of Stereotypes and Stereotyping
For psychologists, stereotyping is a psychological process that can be described in scientific
terms. Its neural basis can be studied using brain imaging scans and other devices, and its cogni-
tive profile can be ascertained using experiments. Psychologists needn’t make normative claims
or presuppositions to do this work. They don’t have to take a stand on whether stereotyping is
good or bad, epistemically or morally speaking. The normative status of stereotyping is left open
at the outset.

I now want to develop a view of stereotypes consistent with the psychological literature—the
descriptive view of stereotypes.

Start with the idea that stereotypes can be expressed in speech—for example, when we say things
like “little girls wear pink” or “Asians are good at math.” That’s a good starting point. It cap-
tures the fact that stereotyping often involves communication. Nonetheless, we cannot presume
that stereotypes are always communicated or that they are best understood as generic proposi-
tions. We know that views of groups can influence people’s plans, expectations, and actions
even if they are never expressed in public, directly or indirectly. In order to capture the phenom-
ena in which we are interested, we must therefore give stereotypes a psychological reality and to
think of them as concepts or as associated with the use or formation of concepts. All of the
views mentioned last section agree about this, though they articulate the details about what
stereotypes are differently. For my purposes, one needn’t choose between them.

Given the descriptive view of stereotypes, how should we conceptualize stereotyping? There are
several possibilities.

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View #1: Stereotype activation as stereotyping. In social psychology, theorists distinguish stereotype activation and stereotype application. When people activate stereotypes, they gain access to type-relevant information, either consciously or unconsciously. In a study mentioned earlier, for instance, when research participants thought of black women, words like “bitchy” and “aggressive” and “too many children” sprung to mind. You might think that these people are stereotyping, even though they are merely reporting the content of their associations. Activation of such stereotypes doesn’t necessarily imply their application or use. One might be able to prevent their associations from influencing later thoughts and actions. One might consciously disavow their associations and regret their mental presence. Still, even in such cases, the fact remains that one’s mind contains these associations, and one has access to this information when thinking of black women. And, on the view being considered, when they gain access to such information, even if the information has no further effects on their cognitive states or emotions, they count as stereotyping.

View #2: Stereotype use as stereotyping. Another view denies that stereotype activation counts as stereotyping. Consider the research participants just mentioned. They have associations with black women; but, in order to count as stereotyping, you might think, they must do something with those associations. They can’t just activate their associations and proceed to ignore them. They have to use them. For instance, an employer might consciously endorse the idea that black women are aggressive and use this piece of information when she is hiring. Or, she may consciously disavow the idea but nonetheless be influenced by it, feeling on-guard and defensive around black female job candidates.

According to the most basic version of this view, stereotyping occurs when people use stereotypes as reasons or when, in a more passive way, stereotypes play a causal role in their cognition and behavior. This statement, though it may seem uninteresting or cliché, has radical implications. It implies that stereotype use, whether implicit or explicit, is necessary and sufficient for stereotyping. On this view, anyone who makes use of stereotypes in any way whatsoever, even in the smallest possible way, would count as stereotyping.

View #3: Primary Influence of Stereotyping. A third kind of view sets the bar for stereotyping higher, taking a cue from discrimination law. In employment discrimination cases, a prosecutor


50 For there to be a real distinction between the first and second views, it must be the case that activated stereotypes could be causally inert. If activated associations always influence later thoughts and actions, the distinction between stereotype activation and use blurs. People like to distinguish activation and application, in part, because it suggests that humans could potentially render their negative associations inert in their cognitive and emotional lives.
must show not only that employer has thought about stereotypes or that stereotypes have had some influence on his or her decisions. One must show more, namely, that stereotypes played a primary role in the decision, that the decision happened because of stereotypes. This idea leads in two directions. Stereotyping happens, on one view, when stereotypes are, or would be, given as the primary justification for people’s thoughts and actions. On this view, to figure out whether someone has stereotyped, we could ask a person to carefully reflect on his or her motives. Late Supreme Court Justice William Brennan puts the idea like this:

In saying that gender played a motivating part in an employment decision, we mean that, if we asked the employer at the moment of the decision what its reasons were and if we received a truthful response, one of these reasons would be that the applicant or employee was a women.51

According to a second variation on the primary influence view, stereotyping happens when stereotypes play a primary causal role in people’s thoughts and actions. This view includes the kind of case that Justice Brennan has in mind, where an individual either does or would cite stereotypes when honestly explaining her behavior; however, it also includes the kind of case where an individual does not and would not cite stereotypes in such explanations. As we saw earlier, stereotypes can affect what a person pays attention to and ignores, how one interprets evidence, and one’s immediate inferences about others. Often people will not be aware that stereotypes are playing this role; that fact is not accessible on the basis of reflection alone. The latter view recognizes that stereotypes can play a primary causal role implicitly, as well as explicitly, and it counts both cases as instances of stereotyping.

**View 4: Stereotyping as Communication.** A fourth view draws on the idea that stereotyping involves communication. We stereotype, the view says, when we publicly express the generalized views of groups associated with our concepts or with their formation or use. Public expression of stereotypes can take many forms. A cartoonist might give visual expression to stereotypes, drawing Polish babushkas, American fraternity boys, or Italian lotharios. A screenwriter might create characters that embody stereotypes. A woman might whisper to a friend—“Persians are such materialists”—as they pass a Persian woman in Beverly Hills bedecked in designer clothing. A journalist could cite stereotypes in an online column. Regardless of the mode in which the stereotype is expressed, we can call the act of expressing it “stereotyping.” Communication of stereotypes can also be indirect. Instead of saying “Asians are bad drivers,” someone might simply say “Steer clear of that guy,” pointing to Asian person driving alongside them on the freeway. His utterance conveys to his interlocutor that he is forming an expectation based on the person’s apparent group membership. In such a case, we refer to both the act of forming the expectation and its expression in speech as “stereotyping.”

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The four views I’ve just described can be seen as mutually exclusive. Indeed, many people might be disposed to understand them in this way. However, one can also understand them as complementary—for example, as different stages in a process. Each stage adds something new to the last. At the first stage, a person’s stereotypes are activated; at the second, a person uses the activated information in cognition; at the third stage, stereotypes become the primary cause or justification for further thoughts, emotions, and action; at the fourth stage, the stereotypes are publicly expressed. At every stage, people do something that can be considered “stereotyping,” but at each stage they are doing something unique.

Understood in this way, the descriptive view of stereotyping is powerful.

Recall an earlier-mentioned scene from *Invisible Man*: the scene where a short, broad man rudely demands a song from the novel’s narrator. When he shouts out his request, the short, broad man has not personally heard the narrator sing, nor is he relying on testimony from his comrades, nor has he witnessed anything that would indicate that the narrator sings spirituals. He simply spots an unfamiliar black man and yells out his request. Clearly, the sight of a black person activated the man’s stereotypes, which he put right to use. When Jack faults him for it, the man is defensive: “Nonsense,” he replies, “all colored people sing.”

In this scene, we find all four kinds of stereotyping. The short broad man explicitly utters a universal generalization: “all colored people sing” to justify calling out the narrator. This is an obvious case of stereotyping as communication. The thought process leading up to the utterance can also be described as stereotyping. The short, broad man expected that Ellison’s narrator sings spirituals because he is a black man. He explicitly justifies his expectation by citing a universal generalization. Of course he would ask a random black man to sing, he says, *all colored people sing.* Here we’ve got a clear case of stereotyping in the third sense: stereotypes are the primary justification for someone’s expectations. Stereotyping in the two earlier senses immediately follow: because stereotypes are the primary reason for the short, broad man’s judgments, he also must be accessing and using stereotypes.

Contrast this with Shakur’s first encounter with communists. At the time, she associated communists with trench coats, salt mines, and, implicitly, with whiteness. These associations were clearly in her mind when she met actual communists, and she used her associations to try to understand her new friends. But her expectations were frustrated. Her new acquaintances were normal-looking students, black men who grew up in Africa; they had never seen salt mines and did not slink around in trench coats. She quickly realized that her stereotypes were the result of caricatures, and she writes, “I felt like a bone fide clown.”

Unlike Ellison’s character, Shakur does not stereotype in all four senses. Though she begins with stereotypes, she does not automatically and thoughtlessly rely on them. She pays attention to her

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52 Shakur, *Assata*, 151.
new acquaintances. She listens to them and tries to get a sense of them as individuals. She
doesn’t say “Oh, these people are communists. They must be like this and that.” She has a criti-
cal attitude towards her stereotypes. She tests them, and, in the end, rejects them. Stereotypes
are therefore not the primary cause of her judgments. So, she is not stereotyping in that sense.
Nor does she provide us any evidence that she communicated her stereotypes to her friends, ei-
ther directly or indirectly. So we lack evidence that she has stereotyped in the fourth sense.
However, she does report that she initially formed expectations about her friends based on the
fact that they were communists. This provides evidence that she both accessed her stereotypes
and used them in cognition. So, we might say, initially Shakur stereotyped her friends, even
though she did not stereotype as their interactions continued.

A descriptive view of stereotypes allows us to carefully think through these cases. In one way,
Shakur stereotyped; in another way, she did not. However, the short broad man stereotyped in
every possible way. These are the right results!

The four-part descriptive view also helps us to better understand why stereotyping may fail to
treat persons as individuals. That charge should sound odd, initially—even metaphysically con-
fused. If we form an expectation about someone, we are implicitly recognizing that the person is
a numerically discrete individual. We single them out as the object of perception or cognition.
How, then, does it make sense to allege that we fail to treat that person as an individual when we
stereotype? Using the four-part view, we can better explain the charge at hand. When people
fail to treat others as individual, they don’t merely access or use stereotypes. Their impressions,
expectations, judgments, and predictions are being driven by generic views of the group to which
the person belongs. Moreover, their interactions with that person are structured by their expecta-
tions. As a result, their judgments and interactions are not individualized to this person and his
particular features; they are driven by views of what typical group members are like. That’s the
sense in which they fail to treat someone as an individual.

Of course, not all cases will be as clear as the two I’ve just mentioned. The line between cases of
mere stereotype use and cases in which stereotyping primarily influences judgment can be fuzzy.
Psychologists will not be surprised. Theorists tend to think we are always processing informa-
tion in individualized and stereotype-driven ways. Some claim that the two modes of processing
occur simultaneously. Others argue that we go back and forth: starting with automatic,
thoughtless processing, following that up with more deliberate consideration of our individual
situation. If there is not a fit between stereotypic expectations and reality, we transition between
the two modes until we reach a satisfactory resolution. Almost every case will thus be hybrid.

53 For instance, see: Ziva Kunda and P. Thagard, “Forming Impressions From Stereotypes, Traits, and Behavior: A

54 See Brewer, “A Dual Process Model of Impression Formation”; Susan Fiske, S. Neuberg, and A. Beattie, “Cate-
gory-Based and Attribute-Based Reactions to Others: Some Informational Conditions of Stereotyping and Individu-
We might still, however, think of cases as inhabiting points on a spectrum. There will be clear cases of stereotyping at one end of the spectrum, clear cases of individuated processing on the other, and a whole range of mixed cases in the middle.

An Objection to the Descriptive View

Some may object to this way of understanding stereotyping. A purely psychological understanding of the phenomena, you might think, misses something essential. As Lawrence Blum puts it, “to call something a ‘stereotype’, or to say that someone is engaging in stereotyping, is to condemn what is so characterized.” On this kind of view, stereotyping is a “thick normative concept.” The latter term, famously coined by Bernard Williams, is meant to apply to concepts like courage, cruelty, and kindness. These concepts are not merely descriptive; they also contain an evaluative component. To call someone courageous is to praise him; to call someone cruel is to condemn his behavior. Similarly, one might think, with stereotyping. To say someone is stereotyping entails that he or she is worthy of criticism.

Because the term seems to have normative baggage, some theorists may want to avoid a descriptive conception of it. For example, in her ground-breaking book *Why So Slow: The Advancement of Women*, Virginia Valian frames her discussion of gender inequality in terms of schemas rather than stereotypes. “The term *schema* is broader and more neutral than the term *stereotype,*” she writes, “which tends to connote an inaccurate and negative view of a social group.” Such usage, you might think, pays homage to the term’s heritage and accords better with a common sense understanding of stereotyping.

But matters are not so simple. The terms “stereotype” and “stereotyping” originated in the French publishing industry. In the late eighteenth century, French printers developed a new technology that allowed books, journals, and newspaper to be cheaply and easily mass produced. They fashioned thin metal plates and affixed images and words to them, in effect, creating stamps, which could then be used in printing presses. Printers called the metal plates “stereotypes” and the process of printing with them “stereotyping.” By 1850, people had begun to use the terms to refer not to just the plates that printers used but also to the images produced. They also used the term metaphorically, applying it to anything that was continued or constantly repeated without change.

The word didn’t acquire its psychological trappings until 1922. In that year, in a short monograph called *Public Opinion*, Walter Lippman, a Pulitzer-winning journalist and a former student

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57 The OED states the first recorded use of the term in 1798. See http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/189956?rskey=uHbEVK&result=1&isAdvanced=false
of Harvard psychologist William James referred to stereotypes as “the pictures inside the heads of human beings.” His book was a reflection on the power of propaganda and social media; but, just as much, it was a reflection on the nature of the human mind. In a perceptive series of essays, Lippman described stereotypes and explained their function. For the most part, the book reads like an indictment. Stereotyping comes off as a corrupt process, something that keeps us from perceiving what is true and beautiful and real in the world, something that leaves us vulnerable to manipulation at the hands of others. However, it would be a mistake to read Lippman as condemning stereotypes. He writes:

Were there no practical uniformities in the environment, there would be no economy and only error in the human habit of accepting foresight for sight. But there are uniformities sufficiently accurate, and the need of economizing attention is so inevitable, that the abandonment of all stereotypes for a wholly innocent approach to experience would impoverish human life.

This is a stunning endorsement, despite its ambivalence. Without stereotypes, life would be impoverished.

In the 1920’s and 30’s, stereotyping became a subject for the burgeoning field of social psychology, where it was linked closely to prejudice. In 1935, in the *Handbook of Social Psychology*, Gordon Allport wrote about stereotypes, calling them “attitudes that result in gross over-simplifications of experience and in pre-judgements.” By Allport’s account, stereotypes were the epistemically and morally suspect kind of generalizations, and stereotyping was the bad kind of gen-


59 Ibid., 88. “There is economy in this [using stereotypes]. For the attempt to see all things freshly and in detail, rather than as types and generalities, is exhausting, and among busy affairs practically out of the question.”

60 For an early study of stereotypes, see Daniel Katz & Kenneth Braly, “Racial Stereotypes in One Hundred College Students,” *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology*, 28 (1933), 280-290. Allport says that prejudice requires a hostile attitude or antipathy. Contemporary psychologists tend to open up the definition so that prejudice can also exist when people have positive attitudes towards their own group members, e.g., favoring or preferring or liking. See Rupert Brown, *Prejudice: Its Social Psychology* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 7. “As a working definition for this book prejudice will be regarded as any attitude, emotion, or behavior towards members of a group, which directly or indirectly implies some negativity or antipathy towards that group.”

eralizing. By mid-century, the terms entered popular lexicon, and they have firmly remained there, negative valence intact.

The point of recounting this very brief history is this: the normative view cannot be argued for by appealing to how the word “stereotype” was originally used. You won’t find decisive evidence for the normative view of stereotyping if you look to historical origins. Originally “stereotypes” and “stereotyping” were technical terms. When the terms were popularized by Lippman, it was with the recognition that stereotyping has benefits as well as costs. The strictly negative valence and the idea that stereotyping is inherently objectionable come only later.

One might respond, “Fair enough. But what if we care about right here and now? In a world where people use “stereotyping” to refer to all and only the bad kind of generalizing, why swim against the tide? Doesn’t it court misunderstanding to adopt a descriptive view of stereotypes and stereotyping?”

Here is what is true: people have a moralistic impulse when they hear the word “stereotype.” They tend to jump to the conclusion that whatever is being described is objectionable. But rarely do they hold this position firmly. Someone will call something a stereotype then add “but it’s true” or “but it’s not bad.” Such amendments suggest that people are not closed off to thinking of stereotypes in a descriptive way, i.e., as group associations that can be good or bad, true or false or neither. It also suggests that falsity and moral objectionableness are not built into the very idea of a stereotype. The idea in common sense merely seems to be that stereotypes are often epistemically or morally problematic, not that they are by definition that way. The descriptive view of stereotypes is well suited to capturing this aspect of ordinary ways of thinking and speaking about stereotypes.

One may object, “but you are begging the question against us! We say that stereotypes and stereotyping are always bad, and you are merely presupposing that they are not.”

The descriptive view doesn’t beg any normative questions. The descriptive view of stereotyping says that to stereotype is to employ a generic view of groups associated with one’s concepts or with their application or use. For people who adopt this view, it can—and should—be an open question whether stereotyping always involves epistemic or moral failure. The view itself says nothing about this. It is neutral on normative questions. Its neutrality is consistent both with the conclusion that stereotyping is sometimes permissible or good and with the conclusion that it is always bad. Neither conclusion is initially ruled out. Both are possible, pending further analysis.

We have come to the heart of the matter. The initial objection to the descriptive view was that it leaves out an important thought, namely, the thought that stereotyping is inherently problematic. But why should we endorse this thought? If it is to have any persuasive force and not be a mere stipulation, it must be supported by arguments. We can’t simply think in a circle: defining stereotyping as the bad kind of generalizing and then explaining what makes certain cases of
generalizing bad by labeling them instances of stereotyping. That kind of strategy explains nothing. A better strategy would be to argue that the very act of stereotyping involves moral or epistemic failure. If so, we would be justified in using the term “stereotyping” as a thick concept. In such a case, we’d be justified in investing certain kinds of cognitive activities or actions—for example, seeing people primarily in terms of group membership and letting that recognition structure our interactions with them—with a negative valence. “That’s stereotyping,” we might say as we criticize someone, explaining that stereotyping is objectionable because it fails to treat persons as individuals.

Notice, however, that this strategy for defending a “thick” concept of stereotyping only works if the substantive normative claims justifying it are correct.

In the next two chapters, I investigate this thought to see if we can validate it. The first hypothesis I consider is this: we see the world in an incorrect way when we stereotype, so failing to treat persons as individuals is an epistemic failure. The second hypothesis is moral: failing to treat individuals is a moral failure because we have a moral duty to treat persons as individuals. I argue that neither hypothesis can be validated. So we must give up the idea that stereotyping as such—in and of itself—is wrong. As a result, we cannot justifiably infer that someone is worthy of epistemic or moral condemnation from the fact that she has stereotyped in any of the four sense outlined earlier. The epistemic and ethical terrain surrounding stereotypes thus becomes complex and ripe for philosophical analysis.
Chapter 2

What's the Wrong of Stereotyping?

The Epistemic Hypothesis

Whenever we call something a stereotype, we tend to mean it as a criticism. If someone says, “Asians are good at math” or “women are empathetic,” for example, I might interject, “You’re stereotyping” in order to convey my disapproval of their utterance. One tempting idea is that stereotyping fails to treat persons as individuals. Yet this idea itself is puzzling. How should we understand it? One possibility, to which many people are drawn, is to articulate the wrong in epistemic terms: we see the world in an incorrect way when we stereotype. Call this the epistemic hypothesis about the wrong of stereotyping.

In this chapter, I will test the epistemic hypothesis. I’ll start by looking for a general explanation of why the hypothesis could be true. By a general explanation, I mean one that would apply to each and every case of stereotyping. I explore seven possibilities. However, I find that none of them raise objections that apply in all cases. So no single problem seems to explain why stereotyping is always objectionable from an epistemic point of view. Then I consider a second possibility: stereotyping might always involve seeing the world incorrectly but for diverse reasons. I rule out this possibility as well. In the last part of the chapter, I draw the obvious conclusion: the epistemic hypothesis fails. We must therefore begin to distinguish epistemically permissible and impermissible cases of stereotyping. I suggest that no unified account of the distinction is possible.

1. Stereotypes Express False or Unjustified Claims About Groups

An initial thought is this: stereotyping always involves false or unjustified claims about groups. Ellison’s example is a case in point. The short, broad man cites a universal generalization to justify his expectation of Ellison’s narrator. “All colored people sing,” he says.

If stereotyping were a matter of employing universal claims about groups, it would always be epistemically dubious, and it is obvious why. Universal generalizations state claims about all group members and are true if and only if each and every group member has the property in question. However, traits are rarely, if ever, held by all group members. There are always non-conformists and outliers. Moreover, even in cases where universal claims about groups are not blatantly false, people will almost never be justified in asserting them because they are almost never in a position to have evidence about all group members.

Stereotypes aren’t best understood as universal generalizations, however. They are associated with what linguists call generics. Generics lack quantifiers like “some,” “most,” or “all,” and they do not make claims about specific individuals. Instead, they state general claims about
kinds. “Tigers have stripes,” “Cups are made for drinking,” “Chickens lay eggs,” and “Mosquitoes carry the West Nile virus” are all examples. Stereotypes can be characterized as a subclass of generics that make claims, specifically, about social kinds. “Black men are criminals,” “Women have babies,” and “Doctors wear white coats” are cases in point.

Not only do stereotypes expressed in speech tend not take the form of universal generalizations because they do not feature the quantifier “all,” they do not seem to be universal generalizations in disguise either. Competent language users often endorse generics while rejecting the corresponding universal generalization. So, for example, a speaker may endorse the claim “women have babies” while granting that not all women have babies. This indicates that generics are not equivalent in meaning to universal generalizations and have different truth conditions.

What do generics claims mean? Under what conditions are they true?

One prominent theorist—Sarah-Jane Leslie—is a pluralist. Leslie divides generics into three types: majority generics, characteristic generics, and striking-property generics. Majority generics express statistical claims and, thus, have statistical truth conditions. “Police officers wear blue uniforms” is true, on Leslie’s view, if and only if “a large majority,” e.g., sixty percent of police officers wear blue uniforms. Characteristic generics make claims about typical group members, claims often related to a group’s function or role. Think about “women cook and clean.” This claim—if it really is a characteristic generic—would be true on her view if and only if some group members possess the property and counter-instances are negative rather than positive, meaning that outliers tend to lack the property rather than having a striking alternative to it. The third kind of generic asserts claims about dangerous or appalling characteristics. For example, “Mosquitos carry West Nile disease” and “Muslims are terrorists.” These sentences don’t make claims about typical or most group members. These generics are true, on Leslie’s view, if and only if some group members have the property and those that don’t are disposed to have it.

In her most recent work, she further adds to her theory, arguing that generics can have normative meanings as well.

62 The kind of generic on which I am focused is called a bare plural generics. There are two other kinds of generics: habituals like “John smokes” and definite generics like “The computer is responsible for students’ short attention span.”


64 For example, “women wear lipstick” might express the claim that women who live up to the true ideals of womanhood wear lipstick. Leslie does not commit to a definite account of when generics of this kind are true. However, she does say that certain generic statements will have dual senses, making claims that are at once descriptive and normative. See S.J. Leslie, “Real Men: Polysemy or Implicature?” Analytic Philosophy, Special Issue on Slurs, Forthcoming.
Other theorists carve up the domain differently. Ariel Cohen, for example, argues that generics are of two types: absolute and relative. Both kinds of generics have probabilistic truth conditions. Absolute generics, on his view, are true if and only if fifty-percent or more of group members have the property in question. Relative generics are true, roughly, if and only if group members possess the relevant trait at a rate higher than non-group members. Yet other theorists argue that there is only one set of truth conditions that apply to all generics. A common claim here is that generics are true if and only if “normal” group members in “normal circumstances” possess the ascribed property.

Here is what to notice: according to any of theories in question, the generic claims associated with stereotypes can be both true and justified.

Think about the short, broad man in Ellison’s novel. After singling out the narrator, he needn’t have justified himself by citing a universal generalization. He might have just said: “C’mon, black people sing spirituals.” At the time during which the novel was set—the late 1940s—his claim would likely have been true if meant as a statistical claim about most African Americans. Moreover, the short, broad man could have been justified in endorsing the stereotype. “I grew up in the South,” he might have said, “I’ve spent time with black people. My nanny was black and sang me spirituals. The vast majority of black people know these songs.” This strikes me as potentially adequate evidence for endorsing the stereotype. We might even just stipulate that it was adequate. In such a case, we couldn’t complain that his stereotyping was underwritten by false or unwarranted views of African Americans.

We can take this basic point one step further. It is possible that even the most contentious, offensive stereotypes could be true or warranted. These are stereotypes like “Black men are criminals” or “Gay men carry HIV.” If you endorse something like what Ariel Cohen says about relative generics, the first statement would be true if and only if group members have the ascribed property at a rate higher than non-group members. For example, on his view, “Black men are criminals” is true if and only if black men commit crimes at a rate greater than white or Latino men. If you endorse what Sarah-Jane Leslie says about striking-property generics, the statements are true if and only if some group members have the property and those that don’t are disposed, in the right conditions, to have it.


Here is the upshot: stereotypes, even the most socially-problematic stereotypes, needn’t be false or unwarranted. They have the potential to be both true and justified. So we cannot always objection to stereotyping—even the most socially problematic stereotyping—on the grounds that stereotypes being employed are false or unjustified.

2. Stereotypes Are Never Maintained With Proper Regard For Evidence

Here is a second alleged problem with all stereotyping. It’s commonly noted that stereotypes are, as philosopher Lawrence Blum puts it, “held in a manner that renders them largely, though not entirely, immune to counter-evidence.”

In colloquial terms, stereotypes are prejudices. As Miranda Fricker explains in her book Epistemic Injustice:

The idea of a prejudice is most basically that of a prejudgment, where this is most naturally interpreted in an internalist vein as a judgment made or maintained without proper regard to the evidence...

If stereotypes are prejudices, stereotyping would always be epistemically criticizable.

Think about Ellison’s case. The short, broad man has evidence for his stereotype, and the stereotype is likely true. However, we might complain that his view of African Americans and spiritual singing is not sufficiently sensitive to evidence. Even when presented with a large number of counter-examples, he might have maintained his view. “That’s just how stereotypes work,” one might say, “they are insensitive to counter-evidence.”

While the criticism is partially correct, we cannot write off all stereotyping as epistemically defective on the basis. Consider the short, broad man. In the reimagined case, he believes that black people sing spirituals. Going back to Leslie’s distinction, we might ask: what kind of claim was he making? Suppose his stereotype expressed a majority generic. People shouldn’t give up majority generics based on a few—or even many—counterexamples. Encountering someone who doesn’t sing spirituals, one can rationally think, “He’s an outlier. The majority of African Americans sing these songs.” The same thing goes if the stereotype is a characteristic.


68 I don’t endorse the view of prejudice that I’m putting forward here. The concept of prejudice in psychology includes more than mere insensitivity to evidence. Prejudices are understood as having an affective component, and it is affect which renders prejudicial judgments insensitive to evidence. The colloquial way of thinking of prejudices omits this affective element and, thus, includes beliefs or views that are insensitive to evidence for any number of reasons.

generic. Two things must hold for the generic claim to be true, if Leslie is right: some members must have the property in question and those that don’t must simply lack the property rather than having a striking alternative. This kind of generic also tolerates a great number of counter-examples. The short broad man, for example, would be rational to maintain his stereotype of African Americans so long as some members of the black community sing spirituals—a condition easily met in the present case—and exceptions to the stereotype seem without striking, alternative talents to report. Finally, suppose the stereotype was normative. The short, broad man thinks that black people ought to sing spirituals. Rationally speaking, we shouldn’t expect people who endorse normative claims to give them up when the world doesn’t fit them. Normative claims don’t describe the world as it is. They make claims about how it should be. Even if no one fit his stereotype, the short, broad man could have rationally maintained it.70

Here is what this shows. When we encounter people who don’t fit our stereotypes, sometimes the rational response is to maintain our views of groups, despite the fact that a few or even many group members do not fit the stereotype. It would only be rational to abandon stereotypes based on counter-examples if stereotypes expressed universal claims about groups. Since stereotypes don’t express universal claims, we cannot rationally demand that we, or anyone else, immediately give up stereotypes when the world seems to conflict with them.

This observation is not a blank check, entitling people to ignore evidence that contradicts their prejudices. My point is only this: we can’t validate the epistemic objection by appealing to the fact that stereotypes resist counterexamples. Stereotypes should be resilient to certain kinds of evidence, given the kind of claims that they typically express. So we should reject the claim that all stereotyping will be objectionable due to the evidence-insensitive nature of stereotypes. What is plausible is a weaker claim, namely, that sometimes stereotyping will be objectionable because the people who stereotype hold views of groups that are held “without proper regard for the evidence.”71

3. Endorsing Stereotypes is Always Epistemically Immodest

70 I’ve omitted a further possibility, namely, that the stereotype is a striking property generic. I’ve omitted this possibility because it’s not very plausible in this case: singing spirituals is not a dangerous or appalling property. A better example of a striking property generic is “Muslims are terrorists.” Striking property generics are an interesting case. Only a small percentage of group members need to have the property in order for the stereotype to be true. Therefore, the stereotype can be rationally maintained even when a vast majority of group members lack the property in question. Only 2% of mosquitoes carry the West Nile Virus. Only a minuscule percentage of Muslims are so-called terrorists. Even if one only ever encountered Muslims who were not terrorists or mosquitoes that did not carry the West Nile Virus, one could rationally maintain the stereotype so long as one has evidence that group members without the property are disposed, in the right conditions, to have it.

71 We have yet to see what standard should be used to evaluate whether someone has or has not improperly maintained a stereotype. I don’t have a positive suggestion, only a negative one. The bar for epistemic impropriety cannot be as low as it might first appear. Generics are not rendered false by a few or even many counter-examples.
Consider a third problem that appears to infect almost all stereotyping. If you believe what I’ve said so far about stereotypes typically being expressed as generics, you might agree that they can be true or justified but deny that individuals are ever in a position to know that their stereotypes are true or justified.

Stereotypical claims are, after all, hard to verify. For example, if I claim “women are empathetic,” I might appeal to my personal experience as evidence that the statement is true. But one may wonder, “Is my sample size sufficient? Is it representative of the population? Am I merely calling up examples consistent with the stereotype and ignoring other cases?” Perhaps we could appeal to psychological research suggesting that women display greater empathy than men. But, if we do that, we will also find that experts who study empathy disagree about whether “most” or “typical” women are empathetic. So we can’t be certain that “woman are empathetic” is true. As a result, you might think, we display epistemic hubris if we utter the stereotype aloud or use it to form judgments about individuals. For all we know, our stereotype might be false. For all we know, our evidence might be tainted or insufficient. Therefore, one might insist, we shouldn’t stereotype. Epistemic modesty prohibits it.

This objection is interesting, and there is something correct about it. Often people are disposed to generalize about groups based on a very limited sample size. We often employ generalizations without knowing for certain that they are true, indeed without having any clear sense of what it would take for them to be true. Would 50% or more of group members have to possess the property for a majority generic to be true? Or is it more like 60%? Should the generic be assessed relative to a specific temporal or geographical span? If so how should that parameter be set? We don’t have a clear sense of how to answer these questions. Likewise, people don’t typically have a good grasp of what the standards for adequate justification for stereotypes are, much less whether these standards are met in any given case. So we will often be in a shaky epistemic position with respect to knowing whether our stereotypes are true and justified.

Yet there are exceptions. Consider experts. Experts are people who have scientifically studied a community or whom have deep, personal familiarity with it. In at least some cases, experts will not be guilty of epistemic immodesty if they utter stereotypes. Think about the stereotype, “Black people sing spirituals.” Had the stereotype been uttered by a sociologist of contemporary African American religion or a member of the African American community during late 1940’s, the utterance would not strike us as epistemically immodest. Non-experts may rely on experts, as well. For example, in Ellison’s case as I reimagined it, the short, broad man defends his assertion by citing his African American nanny. She is one kind of expert. When we rely on expert testimony, new questions arise about how one knows that these experts are, in fact, reliable sources. But this much is plausible: sometimes experts and non-experts who appeal to them will

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72 Thanks to Jonah Schupach for initially pressing this objection and for Jacob Stengenga for continuing to emphasize its importance. I develop the idea further in Chapter 4, where I argue that context affects the extent to which we expect agents to be epistemically modest.
not violate norms of so-called epistemic modesty when they employ stereotypes in either conversation or reasoning.

On the other hand, the epistemic modesty objection will sometimes work. Almost no one will be in a position to verify certain kinds of stereotypes. Consider striking property generics. If Sarah-Jane Leslie is correct, a person who asserts a striking property generic is true must have two pieces of evidence in order to be justified in believing that her assertion is true:

(a) evidence that some group members have the striking trait and
(b) evidence that group members who don’t currently possess the trait would have it if they were put in the right conditions.

Think about “Muslims are terrorists.” A person who believed this claim would need to be justified in thinking that (a) some Muslims are terrorists and (b) Muslims who are not so-called terrorists would be disposed, in the right conditions, to become terrorists. If this is correct, it starts to look as if we are almost never justified in employing striking property generics. What would a reliable basis for evaluating a hypothetical stated in (b) even be when it comes to social groups? Epistemic modesty here calls for rejecting the claim at hand.

While the epistemic modesty objection can effectively be used in some cases, it also cuts the other way. We might be inclined to criticize people for stereotyping by asserting that their stereotypes are false or unjustified. But that kind of claim may be just as epistemically immodest as claims that stereotypes are true and justified. It’s hard to know what people mean when they use stereotypes in cognition or speech. Generics can mean a range of things. It’s also hard to figure out the truth conditions for generics and the conditions under which people are justified in using them. Different standards of evidential justification might even apply to speech, compared to cognition and reasoning. Moreover, even if we knew the correct standards for truth and evidential justification, we have yet to know whether or not these standards are met in specific cases. So, surprisingly, we find ourselves in a symmetrical position with those whom we hope to criticize.

4. Stereotyping and Essentialism Always Go Hand in Hand
Faced with the fact that not all stereotypes—perhaps not even all socially objectionable stereotypes—are false or unjustified, one might try to press the epistemic hypothesis in a different way. Stereotyping is epistemically problematic, one may argue, because stereotypes are associated with false or unjustified beliefs about the causes of groups traits—in particular, essentialist beliefs.

There are at least two ways of interpreting the proposal: as a claim about people’s underlying beliefs or as a pragmatic claim. In her book *Resisting Reality*, Sally Haslanger defends the prag-
matic version of the objection. In a chapter called “Ideology, Generics, and Common Ground,” she notes that socially-problematic generics can be literally true and warranted, just as I’ve said. “Woman are submissive” is one of her examples. “Black men are criminals” is another. About the first stereotype, she writes:

under conditions of dominance, women are, in fact, more submissive than men. This is a true generalization and those who live under male dominance are justified in believing it.

Nonetheless, she thinks, speakers who utter this stereotype in conversation can be criticized for making statements with false, unwarranted implications. Her specific suggestion is this:

assertion of a generic claim of the sort in question ordinarily permits one to infer that the fact in question [i.e., women’s submissiveness] obtains by virtue of something specifically about the subject so described, i.e., about women...however, this implication is unwarranted.

The implication that women qua women are submissive is not just unwarranted or unjustified, on her view, it is just plain false. As she explains,

The facts in question [i.e., women’s submissiveness] obtain by virtue of a broad system of social relations within which subjects are situated, they are not grounded in intrinsic or dispositional features of the subjects themselves.

A modified version of Haslanger’s criticism can be extended to generics used in cognition or reasoning as well. When people employ stereotypes like “women are submissive,” the criticism goes, they incorrectly and unjustifiably presuppose that women are, by their nature, empathetic. So they can be criticized for endorsing false, unjustified essentialist claims about the causes of group traits.

Do these objections work? Not as well as one might hope.

First of all, essentialist beliefs don’t lurk behind all stereotypes. A person might endorse a stereotype like “doctors wear white coats” or “Asians are good at math” or even “women are


74 Ibid., 449.

75 Ibid., 446.

76 Ibid., 446.
submissive” based on statistical observations and be noncommittal about the causes of group traits. So we can’t criticize everyone who endorses and uses stereotypes—even socially problematic ones like gender and ethnic stereotypes—on the grounds that they have essentialist presuppositions, as Haslanger realizes.

Second, if we stick to cases where people do or would endorse essentialist explanations of group traits, it’s not clear that their beliefs are always false or unwarranted.

Whether essentialist beliefs are typically false or unwarranted depends on how one defines essentialism. In psychology, there is an active debate about how to characterize essentialist beliefs and reasoning, and theorists endorse competing cognitive profiles for essentialists. Here is one popular profile, suggested by Ulrike Rangel and Thomas Keller:

(a) Stability: Essentialists believe that group members have a shared, stable disposition to possess/display/manifest certain traits.
(b) Homogeneity: They tend to see social groups as homogenous and unified.
(c) Discreteness: They tend to see certain social categories as distinct and non-overlapping. For example, men and women will be seen as unique groups, and group members will be thought of as belonging to either one or the other group.
(d) Immutability: Essentialists tend to believe that group membership is fixed and unchangeable.
(e) Inductive Potential: Essentialists see group membership as the basis for making a wide range of inferences about individuals; that is, if you know that x is a member of group y, you will believe that you can make a number of reliable inferences about x.77

Among people who fit this profile, there are significant differences. Some people who fit the profile will be disposed to argue that group membership is fixed and impossible to change. Others may see it as merely difficult and unlikely to change. Some people might judge a group to be extremely homogenous; others will judge it to be less so. People who fit the above characteriza-

77 I am paraphrasing their view here. See Ulrike Rangel and Johannes Keller, “Essentialism Goes Social: Belief in Social Determinism as a Component of Psychological Essentialism,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* (2011) Online First Publication. doi: 10.1037/a0022401, 3. Ibid., 4-5. For a competing characterization of essentialist beliefs in the same spirit, see Nick Haslam et al., “Essentialist Beliefs About Social Categories,” *British Journal of Social Psychology* 39 (2000), 113-127 at p. 116: “The structure of essentialist beliefs about social categories is not yet known. Although the use of a single term implies a singular set of beliefs, essentialist beliefs may have several distinct dimensions...Social psychologists working on the subject have employed subtly different, although overlapping, understandings of essentialism, and it remains to be seen how it ought best to be characterized.” Haslam divides up essentialist thought into two distinct strands, each of which has a variety of components: “One dimension combines judged naturalness, necessary characteristics, immutability, discreteness, and stability. This component corresponds closely to the concept of natural kinds and to folk theories of biological entities...The second dimension of essentialist beliefs combines the elements of informativeness, uniformity, inherence, and exclusivity... This dimension resembles the philosophical concepts of reification and hypostasis, the attribution to a concept of an underlying reality, and it also corresponds closely to the concept of entativity...the extent to which human groups constitute coherent, unified and meaningful entities” (120).
tion can also disagree about the causes of group difference. If a person is a biological essentialist, she will believe that innate, biological causes explain group membership and typical properties. However, psychologists have also found that people can be social essentialists, meaning that they cite “social background or status, upbringing, peer contact, and socialization” to explain why certain people and not others are group members and why group members exhibit typical properties. On this view, social causes give kinds their nature. Both groups can count as essentialist according to the above characterization.

If essentialists are a diverse group, we should not assume that their explanations of group traits are always false or unwarranted.

Consider a gender stereotype like “Women are empathetic.” If I am social essentialist about gender, I will think that there is a principled connection between women and the typical properties they possess. So I might be comfortable asserting that women are empathetic. Maybe I’d even say that women are empathetic because they are women. None of this commits me to a biological explanation of empathy. Nor does it commit me to saying the women are inevitably and necessarily empathetic. I might insist that social causes give women their nature. When women are raised to value empathy and it is expected of them, I might argue, when they tend to fill social roles where empathy is required or beneficial, women will have a greater disposition for empathy. So long as gender norms and social structures are stable, I might argue, women’s nature—and their empathic dispositions—will also be stable.

If essentialists can offer these kind of explanations about the causes of group traits, as psychologists seem to think, we must give up the idea that essentialist beliefs are necessarily false or unwarranted. Some essentialists may have true, warranted beliefs about why groups have the traits they do.

Philosophers may balk at this conclusion. There is only one way to be an essentialist, they may insist. Essentialists must be committed to saying that a group’s nature is necessary and fixed. Just as water must be H2O, women and men must have the natures they do. Furthermore, one may assert, essentialist explanations of group traits must appeal to purely intrinsic or dispositional features of subjects, just as Haslanger says, not to historically contingent social facts.

Even if this objection is ultimately correct and psychologists use the term “essentialism” too loosely, it would not rescue the epistemic objection in its current form. To rescue the objection, we’d need to show that people—as an empirical matter of fact—tend to hold false, unjustified

78 For experimental work confirming this suggestion see William Ickes, Everyday Mind Reading: Understanding What Other People Think and Feel (Amherst, NY: Prometheus, 2003); Kristi Klein and Sarah Hodges, “Gender Difference, Motivation, and Empathic Accuracy: When It Pays To Understand,” Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin 27 (2001). Socialization, these studies suggest, does not simply give women special empathic skills that men fail to acquire. However, it does provide women with special motivation and incentives to be empathic.
essentialist views about the causes of group difference and, more specifically, deny that social causes generate group difference.

It’s not obvious that empirical evidence shows this. Even in the United States, people display a wide range of views about gender difference. As psychologist Susan Gelman reports in her influential book, *The Essential Child*, citing studies from the last thirty-five years:

Ullian (1976) interviewed six- to eighteen-year olds about the causes of male-female differences and found that causal beliefs shifted with age from biological orientation (focus on innate physical differences) to a socialization orientation (focus on social role and obligations), and finally, to a psychological orientation (focus on requirements of individual and interpersonal functioning). J. Smith and Russell (1984) reported a similar shift from a biological to a sociological orientation in their interviews with seven- to fifteen-year olds. For example, seven year olds most typically reported biological differences (e.g., “Boys have different things in their innards to girls”) or normative differences (“Because God made them that way”). By the time a child reached age fifteen, socialization explanations were more common (e.g., “We do different things because it is the way we have been brought up.”) Adult samples of parents (Antill, 1987) and college students (Martin and Packer, 1995) mentioned both biology and sociology in their explanations of gender difference. When asked which factor they viewed as more important, both groups favored socialization (although a third of the parent sample viewed both as equally important).

Gelman’s own research with children points in a similar direction. In one study conducted with Marianne Taylor, she found that “[f]or biological properties, children nearly always (> .95% of the time) endorsed the mechanism of birth.” This result, she writes, shows that children are essentialists about biological and physical traits. But she found that children explained psychological traits differently. “Even kindergartners distinguished the two kinds of characteristics,” she writes, “they consistently treated physical characteristics as innately determined but their views of psychological traits were mixed.” Her studies are suggestive. As children mature into adults, one would expect that they get an increasingly better sense of how environmental features, including culture, influence group traits, especially behavioral and psychological traits. This should result in more complex views of group difference and a greater recognition of the role played by nurture. In the studies of teenagers and adults cited by Gelman, the prediction


80 Ibid., 97.

81 Ibid., 99.
was confirmed. As Gelman herself notes, “the mental models adults use are intriguingly complex.”

Gelman’s observations are by no means the whole story but they do not suggest that people typically deny that group traits have social causes. Quite the contrary. She notes that people often recognize the role that social factors play in creating group difference, even gender difference. Gelman suggests, moreover, that people change their beliefs over time, ending up with “intriguingly complex” views.

These results challenge Haslanger’s attempt to criticize socially problematic stereotyping in conversation, as well as attempts to extend her criticism to cognition and reasoning. If I assert a generic like “women are empathetic,” my interlocutor cannot justifiably assume that I am presupposing a false, unjustified essentialist belief about the cause of group traits or that I am tacitly introducing such a belief into conversational common ground. To begin with, my interlocutor cannot rule out the possibility that I am asserting a merely statistical claim and would remain neutral about the causes of group difference if pressed. Second, even if I am justifiably interpreted as endorsing essentialism, I might be a social essentialist. I could be a biological essentialist. Perhaps I would endorse a hybrid explanation of group difference. Who is to know? Based on the mere fact that I uttered “women are empathetic” in conversation, one can only conclude that I could or might have false or unwarranted essentialist beliefs about why women are empathetic. This point is underscored by the fact that we recognize widespread, public disagreement about the causes of group traits. Everyone knows that everyone else knows that it is a hotly contested subject.

Of course, there might be cases in which Haslanger’s pragmatic criticism is plausible. If a white supremacist asserts that black men are criminals, we might justifiably infer that he would endorse a biological explanation of why black inmates are disproportionately represented in the US prison system. Perhaps we could make a similar argument for some people who use a stereotype like “women are submissive.” But notice that the argument only works in these cases—if it does work at all—because of particular facts about the stereotypes in question, the people who use them, and their context of use. It would not generalize to all stereotypes or even all gender, ethnic, or racial stereotypes which we might deem socially problematic.

82 Ibid., 98.

83 In “Ideology, Generics, and Common Ground,” Haslanger says that we are normally assuming that speakers make misleading or false essentialist implicatures when they use stereotypes stating typical or striking group characteristics. In an article co-authored with Rae Langton and Luvell Anderson, the same position is put forward. See “Language and Race” in The Routledge Companion to the Philosophy of Language, eds., Gillian Russell and Delia Graff Fara (NY, NY: Routledge, 2012), 753-67. My analysis provides reason to doubt their view.
We are now in a position to reject the fourth form of the epistemic objection. To stereotype is not to see the world incorrectly by endorsing false or unwarranted essentialist presuppositions about the causes of group traits. Only sometime does stereotyping have this problem.

5. Forming Expectations by Stereotyping is Always Unjustified

Some theorists may complain that I have been looking the wrong place for an explanation of why stereotyping is always epistemically problematic. The problem doesn’t lie with the epistemic properties of stereotypes themselves or beliefs associated with them; rather, it comes from applying stereotypes to individuals.\(^\text{84}\)

One potential problem with applying stereotypes to persons is this: in applying our views of groups to individuals, we appear to make unjustified inferential leaps.

The argument goes like this. If stereotypes expressed universal claims that applied to all group members, we would be justified in thinking that any random group member must have stereotypical properties. After all, if all Ps have Q and this person is a P, we can justifiably expect that she has Q. However, if stereotypes are typically generics, that expectation is not justified. Consider a true, justified majority generic: “Ps have Qs.” If 60% of Ps have Q, 40% of Ps don’t have Q. Merely knowing that someone is a group member would not justify believing that she has Q. The person might be part of the 40%. Since we can’t be sure, we can’t justifiably expect it.

To render the problem more vivid, return to Ellison’s case. The short, broad man calls out Ellison’s narrator, asking him to sing a spiritual. In the original case, he cited a universal generalization as the reason why. But, in the revised case, he cites a generic: “Black people sing spirituals.” Why, then, the thought goes, is his assumption about the narrator justified? Even if the expectation is ultimately correct, he couldn’t have known that the narrator sang spirituals. The narrator might have been an outlier. So, even if his assumption about the narrator was ultimately true, it was not unjustified.

The above argument may sound correct. Yet it sounds much less so after one realizes just how far it generalizes. If the argument works, no one could ever justifiably use generalizations to form expectations about individuals based on the population or group to which they belong. I couldn’t justifiably expect a chair to have legs, even if I believe that most chairs have legs. I couldn’t justifiably expect a lion to have a mane, even if I know that typical lions do have manes.

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\(^{84}\) I will not explore all possible versions of the objections here. For example, in conversation, both Joseph Barnes and Joseph Stegenga have suggested that some cases of stereotyping might be objectionable because the predicates mentioned in the stereotypes are not projectable. Here is Stegenga: “…we think ‘white’ is a projectable predicate whereas ‘whurple’ is not projectable. What makes a predicate projectable? There is a rich debate about this, but a standard way of responding to whurple-type examples is to claim that certain predicates represent natural properties or dispositions that members of a real natural kind have, and those are the predicates that are projectable. Here’s the rub. If the class in question is not a natural kind, or if its properties are determined largely by sociocultural contingencies, then we have less reason to think that the class has natural properties that are projectable.”
How could expectations such as these never be justified simply because they do not logically follow from universal claims? Certainly there are some conditions under which forming expectations about individuals based on their group membership is justified.

It is hard to know what those conditions are, exactly. Perceptual seemings might justify expectations in certain cases. The idea here would be that visual information alone can justify categorizing persons as types (man, woman; young, old; white, Latino, Asian, black) as well as inferences about typical group members. Consider the short, broad man. If seemings justify, his inference about the narrator could have been justified by the fact that the narrator seemed to be a typical African American male. If seeing the narrator in this way was justified, inferring that he sings spirituals would have been justified too. Probabilistic reasoning might also validate the inference. If you believe that “Ps have Q,” where that is a statistical claim to the effect that a large majority of Ps have Q, you might be justified in forming some but not all kinds of predictions about any given P, given your circumstances. You might also be justified in deciding to behave as-if the person has Q for the purposes of practical reasoning, even though you don’t believe with 100% certainty that P will have Q.

I am not going to defend a specific position here. All that matters for my present purposes is that some such conditions can be articulated. If so, stereotyping will sometimes involve true, warranted stereotypes that are used to form warranted expectations about individuals.

6. Forming Expectations by Stereotyping is Always Epistemically Immodest
As I’ve just shown, we cannot always criticize people for stereotyping on the grounds that doing so leads to unjustified expectations. Yet something else seems undeniably true: people are rarely, if ever, in a position to know that stereotyping has given them correct, justified expectations in any given case. The short, broad man, for example, couldn’t have known that Ellison’s narrator sang spirituals. This line of criticism returns to an idea mentioned earlier. Stereotyping, the thought goes, involves epistemic immodesty.

This criticism is tempting. It is easy to feel righteous indignation when you are stereotyped. There is a moral dimension to the indignation, but there is also an epistemic dimension. It can be annoying to be judged by appearances and, very often, to have people misunderstand who you

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85 Thanks to Joseph Barnes, who drew my attention to the existing literature on this question. Robert Chisholm is one of the traditional defenders of the view that perceptual seemings can, in fact, justify. For a recent collection of essays about the possibility that seemings justify, see Chris Tucker, editor, *Seemings And Justification: New Essays on Dogmatism and Phenomenal Conservatism* (Oxford: OUP, 2013).

86 When I act “as if” I believe that x is true, I may accept that x is true for the purposes of reasoning while not committing myself to x’s truth in the way belief requires. See Michael Bratman, “Practical Reasoning and Acceptances in a Context,” *Mind* 101 (1992), 1-15.
are and what you are like. Even when someone is correct, you still may be annoyed: “Why are people justified in forming expectations about me based on how I look? Why are they justified in expressing those expectations publicly?” For all they know, they are wrong. For all they know, their expectations are both incorrect and unjustified.

It is hard to believe, however, that we are guilty of epistemic immodesty every time we form expectations based on a person’s apparent group membership. Appearances convey a great deal of information: information about gender, social class, profession, political leanings, age, race and ethnicity, as well as other kinds of group affiliations. Indeed, the vast majority of people dress and groom themselves precisely to signal their group affiliations, especially their gender identity. Certainly sometimes people are guilty of epistemic hubris. When those who stereotype are overconfident, when they fail to recognize the possibility of error, the charge seems warranted. However, any reasonable person knows that stereotyping rarely, if ever, yields certainties. We may judge that someone “probably is” or “might be” or “could be” such-and-such way, given stereotypes. We may reason “as if” the stereotype were true of an individual, recognizing that we could be wrong. Taking such positions, we are less susceptible to charges of epistemic immodesty. Indeed, I would argue, we render the charges irrelevant.

7. Forming Expectations by Stereotyping is Always Unreliable
Here is a final reason to worry about applying stereotypes to individuals. By using stereotypes to judge individuals, we are able to make quick, practically helpful judgments. Nonetheless, stereotyping leads to predictable fallacies, biases, and errors. So, the worry goes, it is never a reliable way to form expectations about individuals.

Consider the following concerns:

The Reference-Class Problem: People belong to indefinitely many social categories. For example, I am a woman, a Caucasian, a philosopher, a person who grew up on the East Coast, a person from a rural Pennsylvania, a person who worked in the jewelry industry, someone with a PhD, a mother, a wife, and an expatriate living in Rome. If someone wants to form an expectation about me based on stereotypes, the question arises: “Which is the relevant reference

87 I was once told a story by an acquaintance that illustrates this point nicely. My acquaintance and her partner were traveling in Morocco. It was Ramadan. Every time they went outside for a cigarette, people stopped and stared at them. They muttered words in Arabic in disgust. The issue: he appeared to be a Moroccan Muslim, and they assumed he was violating the restrictions of Ramadan, expressing public disrespect for the religious holiday. Fed up with the badgering he finally took to yelling, “I am MEXICAN, o.k.? Mexican! I’m a Catholic.” In telling this story to me, she explained how indignant they were that people just assumed. “How could people be so presumptuous?” they wondered out loud, “and prejudiced!” As a matter of fact, her boyfriend looks as if he could be Moroccan and people were likely rational to expect that he was, given the context.
Distinct stereotypes may be associated with different reference classes, just as distinct probabilities are associated with those classes. We are almost never in a position to know the entire range of relevant categories according to which an unfamiliar person could be stereotyped. We simply don’t have that kind of information at our fingertips. Moreover, the more we know about the social categories into which a person falls, the more we will find ourselves in an epistemic quandary. How do we justify using one stereotype rather than another to form expectations about someone in a given context? If forming judgments based on combinations of social categories is more reliable, how is this supposed to work? For example, if philosophers are stereotyped as rude and women are stereotyped as compliant with social norms and I am both a philosopher and a woman, what should you expect of me? On the basis of stereotypes alone and without interacting a great deal with me, how is one to know? Because of this uncertainty, we may expect that stereotyping is never very reliable.

The Base-Rate Fallacy: Almost no one has done more to document the cognitive biases associated with stereotyping than psychologist Daniel Kahneman and his late colleague Amos Tversky. Their thesis is this:

In making predictions and judgments under uncertainty, people do not appear to follow the calculus of chance or the statistical theory of prediction. Instead, they rely on a limited number of heuristics which sometimes yield reasonable judgments and sometimes lead to severe and systematic errors.

One such error is called the base-rate fallacy.

Suppose we receive the following information about a stranger:

Steve is shy and withdrawn, invariably helpful but with little interest in people or in the world of reality. A meek and tidy soul, he has need for order and structure and a passion for detail.

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88 The reference-class problem is usually thought of as a problem for statistical or probabilistic reasoning, but it is also a problem for stereotyping. Here is a canonical statement of it in Hans Reichenbach, *The Theory of Probability* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1979), 374:

If we are asked to find the probability holding for an individual future event, we must first incorporate the case in a suitable reference class. An individual thing or event may be incorporated in many reference classes, from which different probabilities will result. This ambiguity has been called the problem of the reference class.


We are then asked, “Is it more probable that Steve is a librarian or a farmer?” Steve fits the stereotype of a librarian. In all of Tversky and Kahneman’s studies, almost all of the research participants say the same thing: Steve is more likely to be a librarian. Even participants trained in statistics give this answer. “Did it occur to you,” writes Kahneman,

that there are 20 male farmers for each librarian in the United States? Because there are so many farmers, it is almost certain that more meek and tidy souls will be found at tractors than at library desks.\(^1\)

Yet people ignore the base rates, i.e., the respective percentages of farmers and librarians in a given population. In order to arrive at a reliable judgment about Steve, one must consider the base rates. Yet research participants overwhelming tended to ignore the relevant statistical information and instead base their prediction on the extent to which Steve fits the stereotype of a librarian. So it is supposed to be always. When we form expectations based on stereotypes, we cannot be sure that our judgments are reliable. After all, we are likely ignoring base rates.

**Availability Bias.** Stereotyping may also cause us to deploy an availability heuristic. When people use this heuristic, Kahneman says, their task is to estimate the size of a category or the frequency of an event but... [they instead] report an impression of ease with which instances come to mind.\(^2\) Because they are not paying attention to actual probabilities, they end up overestimating the probability of an event occurring or of a person being a member of a class. This effect very often occurs when a property is dangerous or striking. But it may occur in other cases as well. The mere existence of a trait as part of a cultural stereotype may bring it more easily to mind than would otherwise be the case. For example, we may overestimate the percentage of mothers among women because, stereotypically, women bear children.

If we have an availability bias, we should expect that people who stereotype will often overestimate the likelihood of specific individuals having traits associated with groups to which they belong, especially when those traits are striking or dangerous.

**Affect bias.** Using stereotypes may also leave us open to non-cognitive biases. Stereotypes can inspire a variety of emotions: fear, disdain, hope, admiration. They may bring to mind aversions and affinities and are often laden with evaluative and emotional significance. All this provides additional reasons to think that information provided by stereotypes can sometimes cause us to reason about individuals worse than we otherwise would.

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\(^1\) Ibid., 7.

Some of the most interesting work on affect-driven bias has been conducted by Paul Slovic and his colleagues. Slovic introduced the idea of an affect heuristic. As before, the idea with heuristics is that people aim to find easy ways of answering questions when thinking quickly and intuitively. Emotions can be helpful for this purpose. A person may simply consult his feelings to determine what he should think and do. If one’s feelings are clear-cut rather than ambiguous and if a person possesses an immediate emotional response to a question, one can “just go with it” and suppose that affect provides the right answer to the question. “Using an overall, readily available affect impression can be easier and more efficient than weighing the pros and cons of various reasons or retrieving relevant examples from memory,” writes Slovic, “especially when the required judgment or decision is complex or mental resources are limited.”

As he and others have argued, reliance on affect will not always lead to errors in judgments, but it will cause systematic errors in certain cases.

Research on the affect heuristic does not usually focus on stereotypes explicitly, so I cannot cite specific results about stereotypes and the heuristic here. However, I can make a few plausible suggestions. Much of the research, after all, concerns judgments of risks and benefits. Stereotypes will often carry information relevant to such judgments. If judgments of risks and benefits in general are subject to affective biases, we should expect the biases to exist in cases where stereotypes are used to assess risk and benefit as well.

When people rely on affect, for example, they may exaggerate the riskiness of certain behaviors and events. Affect and availability heuristics may work together here, warping people’s sense of likelihoods and, relatedly, their perception of risk. Especially when striking properties are included in widespread cultural stereotypes, the potential for warped judgments is high. For example, a white mother with a car full of children may perceive herself to be in a far riskier situation than she really is when a group of rowdy African American boys pass by her in a crosswalk because fear drives her perception of risk. Violence, a property associated with black men in widespread cultural stereotypes in the US, could easily evoke this emotional response.

Does this list of biases and potential errors validate the epistemic hypothesis about stereotyping?

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94 There are also studies about how the availability and affect heuristics interact, e.g., Pachur et al. “How do People Judge Risks? Availability Heuristic, Affect Heuristic, or Both?” Journal of Experimental Psychology 18 (2012), 314-330.

95 Specific emotions may affect one’s judgments of the probabilities in different ways. See Jennifer Lerner and Dachner Ketner, “Beyond Valence: Towards a Model of Emotion-Specific Influences on Judgment” Cognition & Emotion 14 (2000), 473-493. Lerner and Ketner distinguish fear and anger, claiming that each emotion leads to different kinds of risk assessments.
The answer seems to be yes. Even people highly trained in statistics, even psychologists that study cognitive and affective biases, fall prey to them in a wide range of cases. Stereotyping therefore seems to be an inherently risky activity, even for experts, and thus never reliable.

The above claim is dubious, however. Sometimes stereotyping must be reliable. What research in psychology shows is that stereotyping is not always reliable: we can count on it to lead us astray under certain conditions. But, as Tversky and Kahneman say, heuristics “sometimes yield reasonable judgments.”

Stereotype-driven judgments are no exception here. Heuristics based on social group membership sometimes yield true, justified expectations about individuals on which we can count. If there are contexts in which stereotyping is indeed reliable, the challenge is to distinguish the conditions under which stereotyping helps us track truth and those in which is leads to us into severe and systematic error. Acknowledging this, the allegedly general objection to stereotyping dissolves: it is not plausible that stereotyping is never a reliable way to form expectations about individuals.

No General Explanation, But Maybe Something Just as Good?

I started by looking for a general explanation of why the epistemic hypothesis could be true. By a general explanation, I mean one that would apply to each and every case of stereotyping and would explain why stereotyping always involves seeing the world incorrectly. I explored seven possibilities:

1. Stereotypes are always express false or unjustified claims about groups.
2. Stereotypes are never held with proper regard for evidence.
3. Endorsing stereotypes is epistemically immodest.
4. Stereotypes and essentialism go hand in hand.
5. Forming expectations by stereotyping is always unjustified.
6. Forming expectations by stereotyping is epistemically immodest.
7. Forming expectations by stereotyping is never reliable.

I wasn’t able to validate any of these suggestions. Because stereotyping only sometimes has the problems mentioned above, none of these claims provide the basis for a general objection to all cases of stereotyping. Since these are the most salient options, we should expect that there is no general epistemic objection to stereotyping, that is, no single objection that applies in all cases.

We cannot yet conclude that stereotyping is not always wrong. Here is a second possibility: stereotyping might always involve seeing the world incorrectly but for diverse reasons. For example, in every case of stereotyping, we might be able to cite one of the above seven problems. So, sometimes stereotyping might involve seeing the world incorrectly because the stereotypes employed are false or unjustified. Other times, forming expectations about individuals by stereotyping will not be reliable. And so on. If we were able to validate this strategy, we could en-

endorse the epistemic hypothesis and argue for pluralistic view about what’s epistemically wrong with stereotyping.

To rule out this possibility, we can first look to a general consideration. That is, right off the bat, the epistemic hypothesis should have sounded implausible. In chapter 1, we saw that stereotyping was epistemically valuable—a hallmark of rationality.

The ways in which is epistemically valuable are hard to ignore. Without stereotyping, we could not be fully rational. In categorizing things and making use of our expectations about the categories to which they belong, we bring our inductive capacities to bear on the social world, and we make it possible to know things about both individuals and kinds. Moreover, stereotyping helps us cope with deeply human limitations. When we try to learn things about the world and other people, we have scarce resources with which to work: limited time, attention, intellectual capacities, and perspective. Stereotyping helps us overcome these limitations, and it is sometimes all we’ve got. It lets us make predictions about unfamiliar individuals with whom we’ve had little interaction. It also obviates the need to see every individual as completely unique, thereby freeing up our attention and cognitive energy for the more pressing tasks. If we were epistemically better situated, we could, perhaps, judge every person as an individual and wouldn’t have to rely on kind-based thoughts and reasoning; but, as things are, we need stereotyping to lighten our cognitive load and to guide us in conditions of limited information. Given all this, it is highly implausible that any and all instances of stereotyping are worthy of epistemic condemnation.

To see why the general thought is plausible, reimagine Ellison’s *Invisible Man* case once more. Keep everything the same as in the first re-imagining: the short, broad man cites the stereotype “black people sing spirituals.” When challenged by Jack and appeals to his personal experience and knowledge of black culture to justify the stereotype. Now add a few extra details. We ask the short, broad man a series of questions, trying to gauge whether essentialist beliefs underpin his views. We find that he endorses a merely statistical claim and rejects the idea that the tendency to sing spirituals is the expression of any deep, intrinsic property. Further, he readily admits that the stereotype might not be true in the future. It’s possible, for example, that African Americans will lose their religion and give up spirituals. If this would happen, suppose his stereotype would change. So far so good. The next step is to confirm that his inference is justified. Here I have no decisive proof. But it’s plausible that his inference was rationally justifiable. If the vast majority of African Americans in mid-century America really did know how to sing Christian spirituals, the short, broad man could have reasonably expected that Ellison’s narrator also sang spirituals, given his group membership. Unlike in the Kahneman & Tversky cases, we are not in a situation where there’s a mismatch between the stereotype and base rates. The two dovetail nicely. Were we to describe Ellison’s narrator and ask research participants to predict how likely it was that the narrator sang spirituals, given that he was a black man, they could use either stereotypes or statistics. If they used a resemblance heuristic, they would predict that he likely sings spirituals. If they were thinking about probabilities, they would make the same prediction. The two pieces of data don’t conflict here. With all these hurdles cleared, epistemic
modesty is the only one remaining. The short, broad man does seem confident. Perhaps too confident, given his evidence. But his endorsement of the generic claim may be fitting given his knowledge of black culture. If so, epistemic norms don’t render his judgment impermissible, even if they provide some grounds to criticize it.

Here is what my analysis shows: we must reject blanket epistemic condemnations of stereotyping and begin to think more carefully about when, exactly, epistemic norms condemn and permit stereotyping. It’s simply not plausible that stereotyping is never in any instance epistemically permissible.

How might we draw the distinction between epistemically permissible and impermissible stereotyping? One strategy is to focus on the impermissible cases. If we figure out what makes them impermissible, we could use this knowledge to differentiate them from the permissible cases.

The analysis in this chapter can help to think through such questions. As I have shown, stereotyping can be epistemically objectionable for a range of reasons. It is highly plausible that no single objection, e.g., stereotypes are false or unjustified applies in every single problematic case. If this is correct—and I think it is—there will be no general, unified explanation of what makes the epistemically impermissible cases problematic. What we will have, at best, is a list of objections, any one of which might be sufficient to show that the person in question should not have stereotyped—or stereotyped in the way that they did. So, in the end, we’ll have to be pluralists, recognizing a diversity of epistemic objections to stereotyping.

The overall picture of stereotyping that emerges from the analysis is complex. We see that stereotyping is not always epistemically impermissible and, in fact, can be perfectly rational and consistent with epistemic norms, though it does not come without epistemic costs and risks. If we are looking for a general wrong of stereotyping, we must therefore turn away from the epistemic hypothesis and search elsewhere.

Ellison’s case provides a nice pointer here. Even if the short, broad man’s stereotyping was epistemically permissible, it could still have been morally objectionable. This fact leads us to a new hypothesis: perhaps failing to treat someone as an individual—hence stereotyping—is a moral failure.
Chapter 3

What’s the Wrong of Stereotyping?

The Moral Hypothesis

When people stereotype, we will not always be able to criticize them on epistemic grounds, even when their judgments and behavior are socially problematic. However, we are not yet in a position to say that there is no general wrong of stereotyping. All we can conclude is this: if there is a general wrong present in this and all other cases of stereotyping, we must look beyond the epistemic features of cases to discover it.

In this chapter, I’ll turn to the idea that stereotyping is always wrong for moral reasons. Call this the moral hypothesis about the wrong of stereotyping. I’ll start by looking for a general reason that the hypothesis could be true. By a general reason, I mean one that would apply to each and every case of stereotyping and would render all impermissible. I begin with the following idea: we have a moral duty to treat persons as individuals. If we had such a duty, stereotyping would always be wrong, and it would be intrinsically wrong. However, I find that we have no such duty. We have good reason to think that moral norms sometimes permit stereotyping. So the moral hypothesis fails: it is not always wrong to stereotype. We must therefore begin to distinguish morally permissible and impermissible cases. I explore four ways in which one may attempt to draw this distinction, and I argue that each of them fails. What this shows, I suggest, is that there is no simple rule for distinguishing permissible and impermissible cases. To know whether stereotyping is morally impermissible in any given case, we must get more specific, appealing to particular features of situations, including the content of the stereotype, who was using it, why it was being used, its effect in particular cases, and the stereotype’s connection to historical injustice. Moreover, I argue that we must be pluralists about what’s morally wrong with stereotyping and accept that these wrongs are extrinsic in nature, i.e., due to the ethically bad causes of consequences of stereotyping.

Failing to Treat Persons as Individuals

Here is an initial thought that would validate the claim that stereotyping is always wrong and, moreover, is characterized by a single, general wrong, present in each and every case. By definition, stereotyping involves seeing people through the lens of group membership and, therefore, failing to treat them as individuals. Perhaps this fact explains what makes stereotyping wrong.

Do people actually hold this view? Yes. In fact, it’s a quite traditional position to take. In his article “Stereotypes and Stereotyping: A Moral Analysis,” for example, Lawrence Blum asserts:
being seen as an individual is an important form of acknowledgment of persons, failure of such acknowledgment is a moral fault and constitutes a bad of all stereotyping.97

“Impendent of any further bad consequences,” he goes on, “stereotyping constitutes a form of disrespect, a way of misrelating to the stereotyped other.”98

If failing to treat persons as individuals is what makes stereotyping wrong, we’d have to say that stereotyping is always wrong because it, by definition, has the relevant wrong-making feature. Stereotyping would, moreover, be intrinsically wrong, i.e., wrong due to features internal to the act itself. Finally, there would also be no meaningful distinction between morally objectionable and unobjectionable cases. All stereotyping would be objectionable.

I think we should reject these claims. Blum himself recognizes that they are too strong. He admits:

Treating or seeing others as individuals is not always an appropriate standard of conduct. For example, some interactions are too fleeting for the idea of treating as an individual to gain traction; in others, it is appropriate to treat the other in an instrumental fashion, e.g., a cashier.99

The point is compelling. When we don’t have very much information about unfamiliar individuals, when our interactions with them are only momentary or brief, when it does no harm to see them primarily group members and, in fact, can do a lot of good, failing to treat persons as individuals is not a moral failure. One only needs to think of a panicked father in an emergency room to illustrate the last point. “Where is the doctor?” he might yell, “we need a doctor.” The man might grab the first person he sees in a white coat, relying on the stereotype that doctors wear white coats, not caring that he is grabbing this or that particular doctor, not caring about the doctor at all in his or her individuality. There is no moral wrong in failing to recognize individuality here, no moral vice. Nor are we doing something wrong every time we quickly categorize someone as a social type based on how he or she looks.

The point holds even for gender stereotypes—and likely a whole range of other stereotypes too, including ethnic and racial stereotypes. Consider the following example. I am a swimmer. Suppose that I go to a new swimming pool where I’ve never been, and I can’t find the changing rooms, so I decide to ask a desk attendant. Barely glancing up from her computer screen, at which she has been staring the entire time, the attendant says, “The ladies changing rooms are to the left.” She has stereotyped me. She has some generic view of what women look like and has


98 Ibid., 282.

99 Ibid, 272.
categorized me under that generic view and, indeed, justifiably so. Has she committed a moral wrong in doing so? It’s hard to see why. There are no bad intentions or consequences in this case. Indeed, the attendant has offered me a piece of helpful guidance. It’s hard to think that she has done anything intrinsically wrong.

The same point holds if we permit the attendant to go beyond mere categorizing and to make a few inferences based on the stereotype. Suppose that the pool offers its patrons towels of two different sizes. After directing me to the ladies changing room, the attendant reaches down and hands me a big towel. She thinks that women like the big towels. She also says to me, “Don’t worry, there are hairdryers in the changing rooms.” The attendant has made a few inferences about me based on the fact that I am a woman. She expects that I want a big towel, rather than a small one, and that I care about drying my hair. Her expectations are based on her experience working several years at the pool. She has stereotyped me, but, I would suggest, she has done nothing morally wrong.

Cases such as this are unlikely to strike us as morally objectionable for a good reason: it is hard to believe that there is a moral duty to always treat persons as individuals. First of all, it would be impossible to comply with such a duty because stereotyping is often not a voluntary choice; it’s something we do automatically. Second, and more importantly, a moral principle absolutely prohibiting stereotyping could be reasonably rejected on grounds that it is excessively burdensome to never, ever stereotype. It is burdensome because we need stereotypes to form expectations about individuals in conditions of limited information and uncertainty and because stereotyping can be cognitively and practically useful. These grounds give anyone reason to reject an absolutist moral prohibition against stereotyping and, with it, the thought that failing to treat someone as an individual is inherently wrong.

These thoughts help explain the pool case. Even if I would prefer to always be seen and treated as a unique individual, unencumbered by social categories—even if this is what everyone wants—it is simply not a reasonable expectation. So, even if I find it upsetting or annoying that the pool attendant sees me primarily as a woman, even if I would prefer if she wouldn’t make assumptions about me based primarily on what she perceives to be my sex or gender, I don’t have a decisive moral objection to her stereotyping. To demand that she never stereotype me, or anyone else, is to make an excessively burdensome demand. It is not in my own or anyone else’s interests to comply with a demand like this. We need stereotypes to make sense of and effectively navigate the social world. I have this need, just as the pool attendant does. Moreover, to make such a demand would be hypocritical. We can’t demand that other people live up to a higher moral standard than one to which we could reasonably hold ourselves.

These considerations might not fully address the pool case. Perhaps it is morally permissible for the pool attendant to expect that I am a woman looking for the women’s changing rooms, the thought goes, but the pool attendant did more than this. She expected that I would want a large towel based on the fact that I was a woman. This kind of inference isn't necessary for effectively navigating the social world. Indeed, it seems more reasonable for the attendant to remain neutral.
about whether this or that individuals wants a towel and, for example, to offer everyone the choice between a big and small towel.\textsuperscript{100}

Let me clarify the question I am asking. The question, first and foremost, is about the pool attendant’s expectations. Is it morally permissible for the pool attendant to expect that I will want a big towel because I am a woman? The answer to this question has to be yes. We need group-based expectations such as this in order to effectively and efficiently navigate the social world. Without them, we would be at a huge practical and epistemic disadvantage. The pool attendant’s expectations, for example, are based on years of working at the pool. For years, she has asked patrons whether they want big or small towels, and women almost invariably ask for big towels. So, of course, she expects that I will want a big towel, given that I am a woman. That’s a reasonable default expectation. Moreover, it is consistent with her adopting a policy of asking each patron whether they want a big or small towel, just to be polite or because she wants to treat patrons equally. Maybe an egalitarian policy is better, all things considered. In the case as I’ve described it, however, she doesn’t adopt this policy. She simply reaches down and hands me a big towel. Is it morally impermissible for her to treat me in this way because of stereotypes? How could it be? Her treatment of me is completely harmless. If I—or anyone else—strongly preferred a small towel, I could just hand the big one back. There’s absolutely no stigma in returning the towel. The pool attendant thus seems well within the bounds of morally permissible behavior, even if there was a morally better way for her to act.

If you think that we have a moral duty to see and treat persons as individuals, you will have to say that the pool attendant did something morally impermissible both when she expected that I would want a big towel and when she handed that towel to me. You will have to say, “Each and every person must be treated as an individual. The pool attendant can’t just expect that someone will want a big towel and hand her one. She must work from scratch each time a patron walks into the pool office.”

My general response to these thoughts is the same as before. We are not blank slates, and we cannot reasonably expect of ourselves or others that we walk through the world without any prior expectations of the people in it. Nor can we expect that we never allow these expectations to structure our interactions with others. It’s simply not a reasonable demand. The language of reasonableness gestures towards a view of morality in which morally permissible actions are actions permitted by principles that no one could reasonably reject. No one could reasonably reject a moral principle that permitted us to sometimes stereotype. All of us, however, could reasonably reject a moral principle that always prohibited stereotyping.

\textsuperscript{100} Thanks to Vicky Plaut for pressing this objection.
Even with questions about specific cases looming, we have a significant result. If failing to treat persons as individuals is not always wrong, then stereotyping cannot be wrong—or intrinsically wrong—for that reason. Moreover, if the pool case is correct—and I think it is—stereotyping can be morally permissible. If this is right, we must give up the idea that stereotyping is wrong in itself and must think harder about the difference between morally permissible and impermissible stereotyping.

**Prejudice**

When we begin to think about what might differentiate morally permissible and impermissible cases, an initial idea sounds very plausible. For as long as psychologists have studied stereotyping, stereotyping and prejudice have been closely linked. Maybe the presence of prejudice is what makes stereotyping morally impermissible.

In her book *Epistemic Injustice*, philosopher Miranda Fricker offers the following definition of prejudice:

> Prejudices are judgments, which may have a positive or negative valence, and which display some (typically epistemically culpable) resistance to counter-evidence owing to some affective investment on the part of a subject.

This definition is standard in social psychology. Stereotypes count as prejudices, on this view, so long as they fulfill two conditions: (1) they display resistance to counter-evidence and (2) this resistance caused by affect or emotion.

In her research on stereotyping and testimony, Fricker rejects the view that stereotyping is wrong if and only if it is motivated by prejudice. Instead she endorses a narrower, seemingly more plausible view. Her idea is this: stereotyping is morally wrong if and only if it involves negative stereotypes that are also prejudices—what she calls negative identity prejudices. For example, if I stereotype women as irrational and this view holds fasts despite evidence that women are not irrational due to my aversion towards women, I would be guilty of morally objectionable stereotyping. Why would stereotyping be wrong here? Fricker writes:

> Negative identity prejudices...I take it are always generated by some ethically bad

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101 One may try to press alternate scenarios in the pool case. For example, what if a transgendered person enters the pool and is mistaken for the opposite sex? What if a Sikh woman with a beard is mistaken for a man by the pool attendant? For my argument above to go through, I don’t need to take a stand on these cases. I only need to show that there are some cases in which stereotyping is morally permissible. If there are such cases, stereotyping as such cannot be intrinsically wrong. In alternate versions of the case, if stereotyping turns out to be wrong, it will be not be because forming expectations about individuals based on group membership is wrong as such. It will be because doing so in this case has bad consequences or is harmful. These objections don’t show that stereotyping as such is wrong.

The ethical badness of aversion towards women, for example, would explain why stereotyping rooted in this aversion is wrong. On a view like Fricker’s, the ethically bad investment driving prejudice would explain why stereotyping is sometimes wrong. It also provides a way to distinguish morally objectionable and unobjectionable cases of stereotyping. If a case involved negative identity prejudice, it would be morally objectionable; otherwise, it would not be.

These answers don’t work either, however. Negative identity prejudice is neither necessary nor sufficient for morally objectionable stereotyping.

Consider this example regarding sufficiency. Blacks in the antebellum South might have stereotyped white Southerners as cruel and untrustworthy. Even though these stereotypes count as negative identity prejudices on Fricker’s view, they need not have been due to any ethically bad investment. Rather, their origin would likely have been legitimate caution and fear. Moreover, such stereotypes would have served a good purpose, alerting slaves to the dangers posed by whites. If this is right, not all cases of stereotyping involving negative identity prejudice are morally wrong.

Given what Fricker says, we might want to skip appeal to prejudice altogether and appeal to the ethical investments underlying each person’s stereotypes. We might say: stereotyping is morally objectionable if and only if it is caused by an ethically bad investment.

Yet this view does not hold up either. Ethically bad investments will sometimes motivate stereotyping. Racial hatred or misogyny, for example, might cause people to form and use stereotypes. But not all cases of stereotyping are motivated by hatred. Not all cases are even motivated by prejudice properly speaking. Stereotyping can be underwritten by cognitive habit. We might stereotype because we are thinking quickly and automatically, making use of rough-and-ready heuristics without realizing that we are doing so. Moreover, the stereotypes we employ might not reflect our own prejudices. “There is no good evidence that knowledge of a stereotype of a group implies prejudice towards that group,” writes psychologist Patricia Devine in an important early paper on the subject. Knowledge of a stereotype can influence behavior, she argues, leading to actions that are indistinguishable from someone who personally believes stereotypes and is emotionally invested in their truth. So stereotyping and social prejudice come apart.

Nonetheless, we are not at a loss to explain why people who stereotype for reasons other than prejudice act impermissibly. Their stereotyping can cause harm and contribute to pernicious social inequalities. They can therefore engage in morally objectionable stereotyping, even without

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103 Ibid.

ethically bad investments. Thus, not only is prejudice not necessary for morally objectionable stereotyping, ethically bad investments are not either.

Should we conclude that prejudice never explains why stereotyping is wrong? No. Prejudice sometimes plays a role in explaining why stereotyping is wrong. It never provides a basic explanation of wrongness, however. Consider a white supremacist who negatively stereotypes his black neighbor. His prejudice, in and of itself, doesn’t explain why stereotyping is wrong; after all, negative identity prejudices are sometimes morally permissible. If we want to explain why prejudice in this case is objectionable as a motivation, we must get more specific. For example, we might appeal to the ethically bad affective investment motivating his prejudice. Or, we might appeal to the stigmatizing, inequality-generating effects of prejudices like his. Either way, prejudice does not explain why stereotyping is wrong. The most fundamental explanation of wrongness are located elsewhere.

We can draw a further conclusion from the discussion as well. Initially it seemed plausible to say that impermissible stereotyping was intrinsically wrong. But we haven’t vindicated that thought. People can form and use stereotypes for a variety of reasons, so we can’t build a particular bad motivation into the very act of stereotyping. We must therefore conclude that the white supremacist’s stereotyping is wrong for extrinsic reasons. The cause of his stereotyping—racial hatred—is what explains why stereotyping is wrong, not the fact that someone formed expectations about someone else based on their group membership. The same goes for any morally impermissible case of stereotyping caused by ethically bad prejudices. Prejudice is not intrinsic to the act of stereotyping, so it could never explain why stereotyping is in itself wrong. Therefore, if and when we cite prejudice to explain why a specific act of stereotyping is wrong, we are only ever citing an extrinsic wrong.

Objections to Inequality, Applied to Stereotyping
The previous result leads to a new suggestion. Perhaps when stereotyping is wrong, it is wrong not because of any intrinsic moral defect inherent in the act of stereotyping but because of stereotyping’s bad causes or effects. It’s often noted, for example, that stereotypes and pernicious social inequalities are connected. Stereotyping helps to entrench inequalities and inequalities help generate stereotypes. Maybe its relationship with inequality explains why stereotyping is wrong. Maybe we can even say: stereotyping is wrong if and only if it either causes or is caused by pernicious social inequalities.

Thomas Scanlon’s writings on inequality are a good place to start when thinking through this suggestion and, in particular, his essay, “The Diversity of Objections to Inequality.” In this es-

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105 The shooter bias experiments described in chapter 1 lends credence to the claim under consideration here. As those experiments show, mere knowledge of racial stereotypes appears to bias us, causing research participants to shoot armed black men in a video game faster than armed white men and to more frequently shoot unarmed black men by mistake.
say, Scanlon distinguishes what he takes to be “the fundamental moral reasons lying behind our objections to inequality.”106 He cites five such reasons. All these reasons apply to stereotyping.

Here is Scanlon’s first objection to stereotyping. “In some cases,” Scanlon writes, “our reason for favoring the elimination of inequalities is at based a humanitarian concern—a concern, for example, to eliminate suffering.”107

Humanitarian concerns will sometimes explain why stereotyping is morally objectionable. In a society where great inequalities of wealth exist, stereotypes may justify the existing distribution of resources. As one psychologist writes:

> We like to believe that high-status people have done something to earn their status. At the other end of the scale...we tend to believe that people who are less fortunate have deserved their fate...and stereotypes may function as vehicles for explaining status differences.108

Stereotypes of the poor in the contemporary United States are a case in point. In a 2001 study, researchers found that research participants described “poor people” as “uneducated, unmotivated, lazy, unpleasant, angry, stupid, dirty, immoral, criminal, alcoholic, abusive, and violent.”109 Such associations lead to complacency about the plight of the worst off. They do so, in part, by obscuring the real causal mechanisms behind extreme poverty. Stereotypes suggest that the poor suffer due to defects of character and not because society is unjust. When negative stereotyping justifies severe deprivation in this way, it will be objectionable for that reason.

Scanlon’s second objection to inequalities is that they create social stigma. Stigma is morally and politically problematic, he writes, because “it is an evil for people to be treated as inferior, or made to feel inferior” (204). Inferior treatment, he notes, violates a strongly egalitarian ideal: the “ideal of society in which people all regard one another as equal.”110


107 Ibid., 203.


110 Scanlon, “Diversity,” 204-5.
The same equality-based objection can be leveled against stereotyping in certain cases. In *The Imperative of Integration*, Elizabeth Anderson observes:

> Stigmatizing stereotypes represent subordinate groups as possessing traits that merit these [negative] attitudes... blacks are stereotyped as criminal and violent; women, as sex-crazed harlots threatening to tempt men into sexual sin.\(^{111}\)

We can condemn using stereotypes like this on the grounds that they express a vision of some groups as inferior to others and undermine people’s ability to see and treat each other as equals.

(3) Scanlon’s third objection to inequalities is that they cause “unacceptable forms of power and domination.”\(^{112}\) The problem with domination, he writes, is that some people “exercise an unacceptable level of control over the lives of others.”\(^{113}\) In other words, inequalities undermine autonomy.

The same objection also applies to stereotyping, a fact one can better appreciate by considering the work of John Rawls and Iris Marion Young.

Though Rawls never explicitly talks about stereotyping, his theory of justice highlights different ways in which stereotyping can threaten autonomy. Its threat, first, may come in the form of law and social policy. Legislators and judges, for example, could justify laws excluding women from the vote—an essential political liberty guaranteed by the basic liberties principle—on the grounds that women are irrational and overly emotional. Here stereotyping would justify laws that give men excessive control over the lives of women. Stereotyping’s threat to autonomy may take subtler forms, for example, widespread patterns of thought associated with implicit bias. Suppose, for example, there is a widespread stereotype associating women with incompetence. This stereotype could bias employers, making them more likely to hire men. Stereotypes could thus threaten the fair equality of opportunity principle, and with it, women’s ability to control their own lives, even in a society where anti-discrimination laws prevent explicit discrimination against women.

Iris Marion Young’s work on oppression further adds to the Rawlsean picture. Young names “five faces of oppression”: exploitation, marginalization, powerlessness, cultural imperialism, and violence. She explains why each is wrong by appealing to autonomy.

The first form of oppression is exploitation. Exploitation, she explains, is a an “oppression that occurs through a steady process of the transfer of the results of the labor of one social group to

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\(^{112}\) Scanlon, “Diversity,” 207.

\(^{113}\) Ibid., 205.
benefit another” in which the “energies of the have-nots are continuously expended to maintain and augment the power, status, and wealth of the have-nots.”114 Like Scanlon, she says that exploitation is wrong because it “enables a few to accumulate” and to control the conditions of labor of the many.115 Marginalization, the second form of oppression, occurs when people are excluded from the labor system. Turning to social services, marginalized persons are often “subject to patronizing, punitive, demeaning, and arbitrary treatment by the policies and people associated with welfare bureaucracies” and find themselves unable “to exercise power over the condition of their lives.”116 Powerlessness, the third form of oppression, is a condition defined by one’s position in social structures. The powerless “are those over whom power is exercised without their exercising it; the powerless are situated so that they must take orders and rarely have the right to give them.”117 She continues,

Powerlessness also designates a position in the division of labor and concomitant social position that allows persons little opportunity to develop and exercise skills. The powerless have little or no work autonomy, exercise little creativity or judgment in their work, have no technical expertise or authority, express themselves awkwardly, especially in public or bureaucratic settings, and do not command respect.118

The bad here, as before, is found in the lack of control people end up having over their own lives and in the inhibition of their rational and creative potentials. “Cultural imperialism,” the fourth form of oppression, “involves the universalization of a dominant group’s experience and culture, and its establishment as the norm.”119 The injustice of this is, again, due to the excessive control that some people end up having over how others are seen and understood in the wider culture.

Those living under cultural imperialism find themselves defined from the outside, positioned, placed, by a network of dominant meanings they experience as arising from elsewhere, from those with whom they do not identify and who do not identify with them.120

115 Ibid. 53.
116 Ibid., 54.
117 Ibid., 56.
118 Ibid., 56-7.
119 Ibid., 59. My italics.
120 Ibid., 59.
Violence is the final form of oppression. Physical violence is the paradigm case here, but she also includes in this category “less severe incidents of harassment, intimidation, or ridicule simply for the purpose of degrading, humiliating, or stigmatizing group members.”

When stereotypes and stereotyping enable these forms of oppression, we will have autonomy based objections to them. Think about the Trayvon Martin case. We can reasonably object that Martin was profiled, harassed, and eventually murdered because George Zimmerman expected that he was a thief based on stereotypes of black men. Stereotyping is wrong in this case, in part, because it enabled violence. If we then ask, what makes violence wrong, we can explain that a young boy was robbed of his life—the most radical assault on one's freedom possible. In this way, Young’s analysis helps to fill out Scanlon’s autonomy based criticisms of inequality and, by extension, of stereotyping.

(4) Scanlon’s final two reasons for objecting to inequalities appeal to considerations of fairness. We may object to inequalities, he says, because they render important social processes like trials and elections unfair. We may further object to inequalities that render society as a whole unfair. Scanlon asserts, appealing to Rawls:

The basic institutions of a society should be seen as a cooperative enterprise producing certain benefits, and...citizens, as free and equal participants in this process, have (at least prima facie) equal claim to the benefits they collectively produce.

Fairness-based objections apply to stereotyping too. Stereotyping can help render both specific processes and social institutions more generally unfair. All the examples mentioned last section apply here too. If employers are implicitly or explicitly biased against women, the fairness of the job market is undermined. If women are excluded from the vote based on stereotypes, the fairness of the political process is undermined. When these processes are unfair, the fairness of society as a whole can also be threatened.

Does Scanlon’s analysis shed light on the ethics of stereotyping? Absolutely.

It suggests that stereotyping can be wrong for a variety of reasons. Stereotyping can contribute to suffering; it can encourage inequalities in status that cause some people to be seen as inferior to others; it can help support unacceptable forms of power and domination, which undermine people’s autonomy; and, finally, it can threaten the fairness of important social and political processes, as well as the fairness of society. These four considerations—humanitarian concerns, equality, autonomy, and fairness—provide distinct explanations of why stereotyping can be

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121 Ibid., 61.

wrong. Each explanation is irreducible to the others and will provide objections to some but not all cases.

Scanlon’s analysis also underscores the centrality of stereotyping’s extrinsic wrongs. When we object to stereotyping, we are often objecting to the effects of stereotyping and, in particular, how stereotyping fits into widespread patterns of thought and action with extremely bad social consequences.

Scanlon’s observations, however, do not prove that stereotyping is wrong if and only if it is connected to pernicious social inequalities. Examples undermine both necessary and sufficient conditions here.

Consider courtroom decisions. Imagine a juror who decides that a defendant is guilty based on the stereotype “Blue eyed people are evil.” This decision is morally impermissible, even though no larger inequalities obtain due to the idiosyncratic nature of the stereotype. Why? Because convicting someone of a crime on the basis of stereotypes would be unfair. When guilt or innocence is on the line, we should judge persons as individuals and not condemn them on the basis of group membership. So a connection to pernicious social inequalities is not necessary for morally objectionable stereotyping.

Examples concerning vigilance and self-defense suggest a different point. Suppose I am walking alone at night in a quiet residential area, and I hear footsteps behind me. I turn to see a scruffy, dark-skinned man who appears to be an African American in a hooded sweatshirt. Maybe I would cross the street, feeling worried. If I had pepper spray, perhaps I would put it in my hand, displaying it ostentatiously. My response here would be informed by stereotypes. In the United States, black men are often associated with violence and crime. Their behavior can be interpreted as threatening and aggressive, even when identical behavior by white men would not be. Stereotyping of black men contributes to stigma, well as to violence against them, as Trayvon Martin’s recent killing so clearly illustrates. Yet it is hard to believe I am not morally permit-

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123 For an elegant personal essay on this subject, see Brent Staples, "Just Walk on By: Black Men and Public Spaces" *Harpers* 12 (1986). Iris Marion Young articulates the point like this in *Justice, Politics, and Difference*: "Regardless of what a black man has done to escape the oppressions of marginality and powerlessness, he lives knowing that he is subject to attack or harassment. The oppression of violence consists not only in direct victimization, but in the daily knowledge shared by all members of oppressed groups that they are liable to violation, solely on account of their group membership. Just living under such a threat of attack on oneself or family or friends deprives the oppressed of freedom and dignity, and needlessly expends their energy" (62).
ted to be vigilant, to hasten my pace when I feel threatened and when gathering more information has the potential to be risky.124 Or so I would argue.

Because of examples like this, we can’t simply conclude that someone has committed a morally impermissible act of stereotyping based on the fact that stereotyping contributes to pernicious inequalities. Even though we may often be correct in making this inference, we will not always be correct. In special cases, agent-centered permissions permit stereotyping even in cases where stereotyping has bad social effects.

Inequality cannot tell the whole story when it comes to the ethics of stereotyping. The whole story must be more complex. We must therefore keep looking for necessary and sufficient conditions for morally impermissible stereotyping, as well as for a reason to believe that stereotyping is ever intrinsically wrong.

### Unfairness

Perhaps thinking about fairness can help here. Unfairness seems not to be so much a consequence of stereotyping—a contingent effect that may or may not obtain in a given case—but to be constituted by the act of stereotyping itself. Maybe it explains why stereotyping can be intrinsically wrong. Perhaps we can even say: stereotyping is morally impermissible if and only if it is unfair.

This suggestion quickly proves implausible, however. Not all stereotyping—not even all morally impermissible stereotyping—is inherently unfair. Think about the *Invisible Man* example. A white partygoer, in a room full of white partygoers, singles out the lone black man in the room and demands that he sing a Southern spiritual. He then asserts a universal claim about all black people: “Nonsense, all colored people sing spirituals.” We can’t argue that it is inherently unfair to form expectations about individuals based on group membership or to hold stereotypes about groups. As I’ve already argued, we are not always morally obligated to judge persons as individuals. So, while it might seem that it was unfair in a colloquial sense for the short, broad man to expect that the narrator sings spirituals, unfairness is not the real problem. Better explanations are readily available. For example, the short, broad man’s behavior was rude and humiliating. It drew to everyone’s attention the fact that narrator was not only different but also perceived as inferior: he was the kind of man that you could call out in the middle of a party and ask to perform a song and dance. The outburst harmed the narrator, and it illustrated—as well as rein-

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124 This example is framed in terms of “I” and, as a matter of fact, I am a Caucasian woman; nonetheless, the example does not depend on this fact. It would work for a woman of any race or ethnicity and may even work for vulnerable men. Also, I am not denying that a woman might have good reason to ignore the stereotype and keep walking as usual. There may be great value, for both parties, in making it clear that you reject the stereotype. My claim here is just that one is morally permitted to be risk averse and cross the street. From this example, it does not follow that any kind of risk averse behavior, e.g., locking car doors when one spots a person of color is morally permissible. Cases must be considered on an individual basis. Thank you to Nathaniel Adam Tobias *Coleman* for pressing me on these points.
forced—racial inequalities in society at large. These reasons, not unfairness, explain why stereotyping was morally impermissible. So we must reject the idea that unfairness is necessary for morally impermissible stereotyping. Even norms of fairness are not violated, a case of stereotyping can be wrong.

Unfairness is also not a sufficient condition for morally impermissible stereotyping. Sometimes, even if stereotyping violates norms of fairness, it can be morally permissible.

Here is a potential example. In the United States, airlines cannot employ pilots over sixty years old. The Federal Aviation Act of 1959 prohibits it. It is hard to see how FAA policy—even if legal—is fair. Meritocratic ideals require that we judge people according to evidence about their actual qualifications and abilities, not according to stereotypes or statistical generalizations. Moreover, specific pilots cannot contest the policy, providing evidence that their eyesight and reflexes are sharp. Nor can they volunteer to get their eyes and reflexes tested frequently for signs of decline. Those over sixty are simply out of luck, even if they merit the job just as much, if not more, than the next person. It’s hard to argue that meritocratic norms are not violated here. Yet the policy may still be morally permissible. Why? Fairness is not the only moral concern relevant to policy. Public safety also matters. Airlines have a responsibility to keep passengers safe. Passenger safety can trump fairness.

These priorities are not challenged by opponents of the policy. One author, for example, objects that the FAA policy’s is justified by statistics about people in the general US population; however, airline pilots “consistently exceed general population norms for longevity, physical health, and mental abilities.” So, the author argues, the age limit should be raised. He does not, however, deny that FAA policy would be justified by safety concerns were it based on statistics about airline pilots specifically. Imagine that revised policy, based on the appropriate statistics. The same fairness-based objections would apply to that policy as well, even if it better protected passengers’ safety.

We can start to see that there is no categorical moral obligation to abstain from stereotyping even in contexts where seeing or treating persons as group members violates norms of fairness. In at

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125 Typically this would be illegal. Employers are prohibited from discriminating against workers based on their membership in a protected class. Protected classes include race, color, religion, national origin, possession of a disability, age, and sex. Yet airline policy is deemed legal. The reason is this. Employers are permitted to discriminate if membership in a protected class is a “bona fide occupational qualification.” A bona fide occupational qualification is a reasonably necessary to the normal operation of the particular business or enterprise.”Title VII of the Civil Rights Act, U.S. Code, 42, sec. 2000e-2(e) (1964). See http://www.eeoc.gov/laws/statutes/titlevii.cfm. The FAA argues that age is a BFOQ. It cites slower reflexes and degrading vision in people over sixty. Since excellent vision and reflexes are required to fly planes safely and effectively, they assert that being under sixty is a legitimate qualification for employment.

least some cases, even if stereotyping violates the terms of a fair procedure, we are morally per-
mitted to do it.

If this is right, violating norms of fairness is not always sufficient for morally objectionable stereotyping. Even when norms of fairness bear on a case and are violated by stereotyping, we cannot yet conclude that something morally impermissible has happened.

Notice that we haven't arrived at the pyrrhic conclusion that unfairness never explains what's wrong with stereotyping. Sometimes it will. In the airline case, there was an overriding reason to stereotype even though it was unfair. When there are no overriding reasons present in a case, it will be wrong to stereotype when doing so violates the terms of a fair procedure.

Does appealing to unfairness save the idea that stereotyping is intrinsically wrong? It might be tempting to think so. In conditions where fairness requires judging persons as individuals, perhaps stereotyping is wrong as such.

I think we should reject this idea. Think about hiring. While it might be tempting to say that stereotyping is always intrinsically wrong in the context of hiring, matters are not so simple. “What’s that,” you might say, “individuals have to be judged as individuals when they compete for jobs. That’s just a fact.” Actually, employers and people on admissions and hiring committees use group-based heuristics all the time. They form expectations about individual job candidates based on the educational institutions which they have attended, on their test scores, on extracurricular activities. In doing so, they often stereotype. Someone might think, “Stanford students are smart! I want to interview that person.” That same employer might decide not to interview another person, even though they have a higher GPA, because she thinks, “Students from Fresno State are not as academically challenged as Stanford students.” Judgments such as these are often considered morally permissible. In part, the thought is that institutional stereotypes are true, justified and serve as reliable predictors of future performance. However, if stereotyping in hiring contexts is inherently unfair, none of this matters: any and all use of group-based heuristics would be morally wrong, as people must be judged purely as individuals in order to satisfy norms of fairness. Is this a correct result? If we think that employers and hiring committees should be sometimes permitted to use group-based heuristics, we have to reject the idea that stereotyping is intrinsically wrong in hiring or admissions contexts.

Instead we must say something like this. In hiring contexts, initially it seemed inherently unfair to judge persons according to group membership. But, as we can now see, perhaps it’s only unfair to do so when we are talking about social groups like gender, race, ethnicity, age, and a range of other categories. We single out these groups with good reason. It is socially divisive for employers to use membership in primary social groups as heuristics for merit, even if stereotypes associated with group membership are true. Permitting employers to stereotype on such grounds would also promote the entrenchment and growth of social inequalities. It would also frustrate equality of opportunity. These reasons for objecting to stereotyping appeal to its bad effects: social divisiveness, frustration of equality of opportunity, entrenchment of pernicious social in-
equalities. So we are again pushed away again from the idea that stereotyping is intrinsically bad in the impermissible cases and towards the conclusion that stereotyping is only ever extrinsically wrong.

Harm
So far, no unifying fault has been found in all cases of morally impermissible stereotyping. Nor have we identified a sufficient condition for it. A last hope, however, presents itself: maybe stereotyping is morally impermissible if and only if it causes harm.

Examples I’ve already discussed show that harm is not sufficient for morally impermissible stereotyping. Think about the discriminatory airline policy. Pilots over sixty are harmed by being stereotyped as less able to see well and react quickly compared to their younger counterparts. They lose their chance at competing on fair terms for jobs. They may be fired from employment that they love and financially need. Yet, as I argued, an airline policy of refusing to employ pilots over sixty may be morally permissible because it has the potential to better protect passengers’ lives. I also mentioned a case in which a woman is walking late at night, sees a black man behind her, and crosses the street. I argued that this kind of behavior—and the stereotypes that support it—reflect and contribute to racial inequality in society at large; they are also directly harmful in so far as they stigmatize the man walking behind her. Given this, she has good reason not to stereotype. Still, I argued it would be morally permissible for her to cross the street. If I am right about these cases, we must reject the idea that harm is sufficient for morally impermissible stereotyping. Even if stereotyping harms someone, moral norms might still permit us to stereotype.

Nor does harm seem necessary for morally impermissible stereotyping. Imagine a person riding the subway late at night. No one else is on the train. A second passenger enters the train: a Pakistani American man dressed in traditional garb. The person riding the subway utters under his breath: “Terrorist!” The man doesn’t hear him; he is wearing headphones and minding his own business on the other side of the train. He is blissfully unaware of anything except his music. The next stop comes. The man who uttered the epithet exits. The two never see each other again. Even though no actual harm appears to result from that man’s utterance, we can justifiably accuse him of morally impermissible stereotyping. His utterance was motivated by prejudice of the worst sort, expressed disrespect, and is part of a larger pattern of hateful treatment and stereotyping of Muslims in the United States post-9/11. Therefore, actual harm is not required for morally impermissible stereotyping and, as a result, cannot be the unifying element among bad cases.

Theorists of harm will object to the conclusion I’ve just drawn. It’s true that man with headphones isn’t aware that anything untoward has happened to him. But, as theorists of harm correctly argue, people can be harmed even if they are not aware of it, even if they experience no
pain or anguish or stigmatization whatsoever.\textsuperscript{127} So maybe the stereotyped person is harmed, even if he doesn’t realize it.

To better evaluate this question, we must think about what harm is. Suffering a harm can be helpfully thought of as being put “in a bad state or condition.”\textsuperscript{128} This basic thought can be filled out in different ways. In her article, “More on the Metaphysics of Harm,” Judith Jarvis Thompson sketches three of many possibilities:

(Non-Comparative Account of Suffering a Harm) A’s suffering a harm is A’s being in a state s such that: s is non-comparatively bad for A to be in.\textsuperscript{129}

(Temporal Comparative Account of Suffering a Harm) A’s suffering a harm is A’s being in a state s such that: A is worse off in a way for being in s than he was just before he came to be in s.\textsuperscript{130}

(Counterfactual Comparative Account of Suffering a Harm) A’s suffering a harm is A’s being in a state s such that: A is worse off in a way for being in s than he would have been if he hadn’t been in s.\textsuperscript{131}

She also evaluates an event-based alternative, suggested by Matthew Hanser which says:

(Hanser’s Account of Suffering a Level-1 Harm) A’s suffering a level-1 harm is an event that for some basic good g, consists in A’s losing g.\textsuperscript{132}


\textsuperscript{128} Ibid.


\textsuperscript{130} Ibid., 443.

\textsuperscript{131} Ibid., 446.

\textsuperscript{132} Ibid., 454.
Basic goods are those things “the possession of which makes possible the achievement of a wide variety of the potential components of a reasonably happy life,” for example, things like eyesight and dignity.\textsuperscript{133}

Evaluating the relative merits of these views isn’t necessary. According to any of them, the Pakistani American man on the train suffers harm when he is stereotyped. It is non-comparatively bad to be seen in a negative light when you move about in society at large and for people to tend to think the worst of you because of the color of the skin or your real or apparent religious affiliations. The incident is also comparatively bad. The man on the train is worse off after he is stereotyped than right before he hopped through the train doors. He is worse off than he would have been had he not gotten on the train at all. Had he taken a cab instead or caught a different train, he would not have been denigrated and insulted by a fellow passenger, a person whose attitudes express a general social distrust and dislike of “people like him.”\textsuperscript{134} By being negatively stereotyped, we can also say that the Muslim man loses a basic good, namely, the good of being treated in a respectful way by a fellow citizen.

These observations clarify something important: even in cases where stereotyping does not involve communication and the object of stereotyping is not aware of being stereotyped, stereotyping can still be harmful.

Should we conclude that morally impermissible stereotyping is necessarily harmful? I don’t think so. Imagine a distant future in which Muslims are regarded as equal in every respect to non-Muslim citizens. In popular culture, people who denigrate real or apparent Muslims are deemed ignorant and out-of-touch. Labels like “terrorist” have lost their capacity to stigmatize.\textsuperscript{135} Now return to the train example. A Pakistani American man who is also Muslim walks onto a train and the only other passenger utters the word “terrorist” under his breath. He is communicating a stereotype. However, in the context described, his utterance could not possibly

\textsuperscript{133} Hanser, “Metaphysics,” 440.

\textsuperscript{134} For a nice example of this, see Elizabeth Anderson. The Imperative of Integration, 53. She writes, “One late night in 2007 I was driving in Detroit when my oil light came on. I pulled into the nearest gas station to investigate the problem when a young black man approached me to offer help. “Don’t worry, I’m not here to rob you,” he said, holding up his hands, palms flat at face level, gesturing his innocence. “Do you need some help with your car?”...” The fellow proceeded to help with an oil change. This encounter illustrates, she says, “the public standing of stereotypes as default images that influence the interactions of black and white strangers in unstructured settings, even when both parties are prepared to disavow them. A little ritual must performed to confirm that both parties do disavow the stigma, so that cooperate interaction can proceed.” Anderson argues that the man was harmed, even though he benefited from the interaction and even though they both rejected the stereotype.

\textsuperscript{135} In discussion of her paper “Slurs and Sluts: The Precarious Performative Structure of Reclamation Projects” at the Race, Gender, and Hate Speech Graduate Workshop at Birbeck College London, Cassie Herbert made an analogous point about the word “queer.” Because the term has been reclaimed by the LGBT community, “queer” ceases to have its intended effect when used as a slur.
harm his fellow passenger. The cultural tide has turned so much that the stereotype has entirely lost its force and now, instead of insulting or stigmatizing the object of the stereotype, the utterance only serves to make the speaker look ridiculous. His fellow passenger hears it and thinks, “What a bigot. I feel bad for him. He doesn’t know how ignorant he sounds.” I think we’d still be inclined to think that the speaker has engaged in morally impermissible stereotyping; after all, his utterance is hateful. However, we have much less reason to think that the object of stereotyping is harmed. In the original example, the cultural context made harm possible. When the context changes in the described way, the stereotype ceases to have its power. So being publicly stereotyped doesn’t leave the Pakistani American man in an incomparably or a comparably bad state. Nor is it immediately clear that the Muslim man loses a basic good, e.g., self-respect or the capacity to stand on grounds of equality with other citizens. Stereotyping doesn’t successfully undermine these goods in the relevant context.

Suppose you don’t like the example I’ve just given. Here is a second. Suppose that someone is watching a TV show alone in his living room. He yells out a repugnant stereotype at the sight of a character—or perhaps the person does not yell out the stereotype but merely thinks it to himself. Either way, his stereotyping is morally objectionable, and we can criticize him, even though no one is harmed. No one is harmed for the simple reason that there is no one to harm. The person stereotyped is a fictional character and cannot actually suffer harm. Nonetheless, stereotyping is morally impermissible here. Hateful utterances—including utterances featuring stereotypes—are morally repugnant, even if they are not harmful per se.

Of course harm will sometimes help to explain why stereotyping is wrong. It just won’t be necessary or sufficient to explain the wrong. Nor will one be able to cite harm as a reason to think that stereotyping is intrinsically wrong. Harm is a consequence of stereotyping. It is not intrinsic to the very act of stereotyping.

Conclusion
We’ve arrived in a surprising place. The word “stereotyping” is often thought of as a pejorative, as it were necessarily a bad thing to stereotype. However, I haven’t been able to vindicate the idea that stereotyping as such is wrong. Indeed, I’ve found evidence that stereotyping is sometimes morally permissible. The example that I used to prove this point, the pool example, is a paradigm case of stereotyping. In it, a desk attendant formed expectations about someone based on her apparent sex. Yet, though it is recognizable as a case of stereotyping, it is not morally impermissible. What this shows, I think, is that there is no general wrong of stereotyping and that stereotyping, as such, is not morally wrong. The moral hypothesis about the wrong of stereotyping thus fails. How then do we make sense of the idea of “failing to treat persons as individuals?” One possibility is that we use it as a label to refer to the impermissible cases of

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136 The case I am imagining involves someone who is shamelessly hateful. Those who have “guilty thoughts,” i.e., thoughts they don’t endorse and would prefer that they didn’t have present even more interesting, ethically harder case. Thanks for Julian Jonker for this point.
stereotyping only and to pick out whatever is bad about those cases. Here are three salient possibilities:

(A) “Failing to treat persons as individuals” refers to a special intrinsic wrong present in all and only impermissible cases of stereotyping.

(B) There are a range of wrongs associated with impermissible stereotyping, but these wrongs share an underlying unity, which is specifiable only by appealing to the objectionable causes or consequences of stereotyping. “Failing to treat persons as individuals” is the label we give to stereotyping that shares this underlying unity.

(C) There are a range of wrongs associated with impermissible stereotyping, however, these wrongs share no underlying unity; moreover, if we investigate the matter, we’ll see that extrinsic causes or consequences typically explain why we find cases objectionable. So, while we think that it is wrong in itself to stereotype and identify that wrong as “failing to treat persons as individuals,” there is no such special wrong. Instead, “failing to treat persons as individuals” refers to a diverse class of wrongs.

The correct answer may seem to be A or B. Yet, if my analysis is correct, there is no way of ultimately justifying these answers, and we must accept C. Stereotyping is not intrinsically wrong. Its wrongs are only extrinsic in nature, and these wrongs are diverse. Some involve failing to apply fair procedures, such as in the review of applicants for a job. Others involve humiliating expressions of social superiority, such as happens, perhaps, in passage from Ellison. Yet other wrongs are due to the negative effects of allowing stereotypes to structure our interactions with others. The short, broad man’s expectations of Ellison’s narrator, for example, recreated stigmatizing racial hierarchies in society at large and undermined the possibility of Ellison’s narrator being seen and treated as an equal. So we must be pluralists about both the moral and epistemic wrongs of stereotyping.

We do not thereby have a neat criterion for distinguishing permissible and impermissible cases. In one way, this is not surprising. If the wrongs of stereotyping are diverse, no simple criterion could serve as the basis for this distinction. We’d need a more complex criterion, which identifies a conjunction of sufficient conditions for morally impermissible stereotyping. Yet I have not been able to develop such a criterion. As I’ve shown, many conditions one would initially expect to be sufficient conditions for morally impermissible stereotyping actually aren’t sufficient conditions. For example, one might expect that any case of stereotyping caused by negative identity prejudice is morally permissible. But that’s not correct. Similarly, suppose we know that a particular case of stereotyping helps to entrench widespread social inequalities or causes harm. In most instances, we could conclude that the case is an example of morally impermissible stereotyping; however, we cannot always jump to that conclusion. Some cases of stereotyping are morally permissible even if they entrench widespread social inequalities or cause harm. The same goes for unfairness. What this suggests is that no complex criterion of the kind envisioned—a conjunction of familiar sufficient conditions—exists. At most, we find rules of thumb, e.g., don’t stereotype if you will harm someone in doing so. Like any rules of thumb, these will have exceptions.
The ethics of stereotyping thus drives in a particularistic direction. To know whether stereotyping is morally impermissible in any given case, we must get more specific, appealing to particular features of situations, including the content of the stereotype, who was using it, why it was being used, its effect in particular cases, and the stereotype’s connection to historical injustice. Because of this, and stereotype that might be impermissible to use in one context might be permissible to use in another. Similarly, forming expectations about someone based on group membership might be permissible in one situation and not in the next. We therefore find ourselves in a position where we must use our judgment—thinking about own and others’ situations and the full context of specific cases—when we find ourselves faced with the question: “Should I stereotype?”
Chapter 4

Normative Conflict in Cases of Stereotyping:

Does Morality Require Stupidity?

In the last two chapters, I’ve tried to find a general wrong of stereotyping: that is, a wrong that exists in every single case of stereotyping and would render every case objectionable. What I’ve found instead is that stereotyping is sometimes morally and epistemically permissible. The upshot is that we must think of stereotyping as normatively diverse: sometimes ethical and epistemic norms condemn it; other times, they do not. Moreover, we must be pluralists about what’s wrong with stereotyping in the bad cases. There is no single explanations of why all objectionable cases are that way.

One implication of stereotyping’s normative diversity is that the relationship between epistemic and moral judgments about cases can be complex. For example, if both kinds of norms condemn a case, we may lodge both epistemic and moral objections to it. Or we might find that both epistemic and moral norms permit a case of stereotyping. On the other hand, conflict instead of harmony is also possible. Epistemic norms may condemn a case of stereotyping while moral norms permit it. Conversely, moral norms might prohibit stereotyping even in cases where it would be epistemically rational to stereotype.

The possibility of conflict is troubling. Is it really possible that moral and epistemic norms are not always harmonious? What do cases of conflict look like when it comes to stereotyping? If normative conflicts do occur, are we forced to choose between morality and epistemic rationality, hence between being good and being rational? Is there, as a result, a moral demand for stupidity in some cases?

In this chapter, I’ll begin by illustrating cases of apparent normative conflict, and I’ll divide cases into three types:

Type 1: assertions about social groups
Type 2: forming expectations about individuals
Type 3: stereotyping and policy

Then I’ll argue that first impressions are misleading. Actually, there are no cases of bona fide conflict between epistemic and moral norms when it comes to policy or assertions. Only when we consider forming expectation about individuals do we find bona fide conflicts. But, as I show, even here we have to be careful, because many cases that first seem to be instances of conflict actually are not. Finally, I look at cases in which epistemic and moral norms conflict. Does morality really require stupidity in these cases? I argue ‘no.’
Normative Conflict and Stereotyping: Three Types of Cases

Type 1: Assertions About Social Groups

Stereotyping sometimes involves asserting claims about social groups. These assertions are often expressed as what linguists call generics. Earlier I argued that generics—even socially problematic generics—can be true and people can have adequate evidence for believing that they are true. Moreover, attending to the pragmatics of generic speech won’t always yield decisive epistemic objections to stereotyping. If I am correct about all this, we have a normative conflict in the making.

To illustrate the potential conflict, return to an example that has been central throughout my argument: the Invisible Man case. The novel’s narrator—a black man whose name we never learn—finds himself at a swanky members-only club full of Communist party bigwigs in New York City, all of whom are white. As he is being introduced to the higher-ups, a short, broad man yells at him across the room: “Sing a spiritual for us, brother!” A confrontation ensues, and the short broad man justifies his behavior by saying, “All colored people sing spirituals.” Though this claim is certainly false, I suggested a version of the example in which the short, broad man utters a generic claim instead of a universal generalization, “Black people sing spirituals.”

In the reimagined case, the short, broad man’s utterance could be epistemically permissible. For all we know, the stereotype is true, if interpreted as majority generic. By hypothesis, the man’s personal experience and knowledge of black culture in the 1940s also justify him in believing it. Moreover, dubious essentialist views needn’t have lurked behind the statement. Given all this, it was likely rational for him to endorse the stereotype.

Yet, as will be clear to almost everyone, the utterance “Black people sing spirituals” is morally problematic in the situation Ellison describes. It is never appropriate for a white partygoer to single out a black person at a party, demand that the person sing a spiritual and then to justify that behavior by citing a stereotype. The narrator is humiliated. It puts right in his face something that he probably knew anyway, namely, that at least some people at the party see him as a typical black man and, as such, someone who was not only different but inferior. He is the sort of person that could be humiliated in the middle of a party, coerced into performing a song and dance. He is that kind of person. Not only does the utterance make the narrator explicitly aware that he was being seen in these terms, it calls this fact to everyone’s attention.

The reimagined case seems to illustrate the conflict in which I am interested. Moral norms condemn uttering the stereotype. Epistemic norms appear to permit it. We might imagine the short, broad man continuing his defense. “Is he really a bad person for stating obvious facts about black people? Can morality really require that he refrain from making true, justified assertions?” The answer, I think, is yes, and a natural way to describe the situation is in terms of conflicting prescriptions. Moral norms say, “don’t utter the stereotype!” and epistemic norms appear to say, “There’s nothing wrong here!”
This example does not seem particularly special or rare. We can easily think of other cases in which people assert stereotypes that could be epistemically pristine while their assertion is nonetheless highly inappropriate, even morally wrong. That’s because even epistemically permissible utterances can humiliate, undermine, silence, subordinate, and otherwise harm members of the group to whom the stereotype applies.

Examples of this kind don’t require a member of the stereotyped group to be present during the utterance and, therefore, actively harmed. Here is one example. A few months ago, I was lingering in the halls of my home university. A white woman with whom I am friendly stopped and said hello. She asked about my baby girl, who was then barely eight months old. “She’s walking,” I told her. “Is she half black?” my acquaintance joked. My face may have displayed the shock I felt at this comment because, as I went silent, she added, “Black babies walk sooner than white babies. It’s well-documented. They are strong.” As she said “strong,” she crumpled her fists and made two small muscles in the air. All I could say, as I stood there, was “Oh!” “I’ve got to go” she announced, summarily ending the conversation “Bye!” Though I didn’t know it at the time, there is apparently some evidence to support her contention. Yet, even if the stereotype she asserted were true and justified, as a white woman of privilege, she is not entitled to use it in the way she did. This particular stereotype is connected to both historical injustice—including justifications of slavery—as well as continuing, present harm. “But the stereotype is positive,” she might have said, “how could it be harmful? Strength is a good thing.” Maybe strength is a positive thing. But we cannot judge the assertion of this stereotype without recognizing its connection to negative stereotypes. Black people are physically strong and athletic. But are black people smart? Are they good at math? Not so much, if we are to believe stereotypes. The two stereotypes—one about intellect, the other about strength—are complements. They support one another. Perhaps there is some context in which it is morally permissible for someone to say that black babies are stronger than white ones. Perhaps. But there is no question in my mind that it was morally objectionable—even impermissible—for my white acquaintance to utter the stereotype in this instance, even if what she said was beyond epistemic reproach.

Cases such as this have the potential to exemplify normative conflict in a distinctive way. In cases of this type, people utter stereotypes about social groups which typically take the form of generics. Epistemic norms appear to permit their utterance, while moral norms condemn it.

**Type 2: Stereotyping Individuals**

Not all stereotyping requires uttering claims about groups. Indeed, it is entirely common to judge individuals primarily based on their group membership without explicitly mentioning the generalizations on which our judgment depends. Stereotypic judgments may happen automatically. We may not even be aware that we are using stereotypes.

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138 In this case, I think that there are actually grounds for epistemic criticism, as I explain shortly.
Cases of the second type involve stereotyping in a second sense: they are examples where someone uses a generalized view of groups as the primary basis on which to form judgments, expectations, or predictions about an individual. These judgments, expectations, and predictions about individuals might be communicated to others, either directly or indirectly. Or they may remain completely private.

Potential examples seem to be everywhere, including the initial Ellison example. Consider this true story retold by Tamar Gendler in her paper “The Epistemic Costs of Implicit Bias”:

In the summer of 1995, historian John Hope Franklin—author of *From Slavery to Freedom*—received a call from the White House informing him that President Clinton planned to present him with the Presidential Medal of Freedom, the nation’s highest civilian honor. On the night before the award ceremony, Franklin hosted a dinner for a small group of friends at the Cosmos Club, a Washington DC social organization of which he was a member. He writes: —It was during our stroll through the club that a...woman called me out, presented me with her coat check, and ordered me to bring her coat. I patiently told her that if she would present her coat to a uniformed attendant, and all of the club attendants were in uniform, perhaps she could get her coat. (Franklin 2005, 340).

This story is like the Ellison case, except the woman gets it wrong. While Ellison’s narrator did sing spirituals, Franklin wasn’t the help. Nonetheless, you might think that the woman’s expectations were epistemically permissible. In fact, Franklin fit the stereotype of a coat attendant at the Cosmos Club: nearly all of them were black. However, he did not fit the stereotype of a Cosmos club member: the vast majority of them were white.

In her new book *Citizen*, poet Claudia Rankine writes a similarly jarring scene with the sheen of autobiography:

The new therapist specializes in trauma counseling. You have only ever spoken on the phone. Her house has a side gate that leads to a back entrance she uses for patients. You walk down a path bordered on both sides with deer grass and rosemary to the gate, which turns out to be locked.

At the front door the bell is a small round disc that you press firmly. When the door finally opens, the woman standing there yells, at the top of her lungs, Get away from my

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There are conditions under which this mistake could be epistemically permissible. The therapist’s clients are typically white, and she expects that her new client is white too. Clients typically use the back entrance; the poem’s speaker goes to the front door. Usually, the people who come to her front door are either there to sell something or up to no good. She is aware of a spike in neighborhood crime in her community. Almost all of the alleged thieves have been people of color. The poem’s speaker fits the profile of someone who would be there to rob the therapist, not the profile of one of her clients.

Other potential examples appear in the guise of conversational ephemera. Recent viral projects like “I, Too, am Harvard” and “I, Too, am Oxford” document these here-and-gone moments in which stereotypic expectations are revealed. A student of color at Oxford holds a sign describing a comment he receive the day before: “Oh…I was pleasantly surprised. You actually speak quite well.” A Jamaican woman writes, “Yes, I am Jamaican. No, I don’t smoke weed.” A South Asian woman at Oxford writes, “Was it [my marriage] arranged?” No, I don’t need my parents to find love.” Another writes, “So…You’re a medical student? Typical Asian.” Another South Asian student’s sign says: “You’re from London. You must be from Brixton.’ 2X in a week.”

It’s hard to know whether stereotyping is epistemically permissible in any of the actual cases just mentioned. There are two reasons for uncertainty. First, we don’t know the exact conditions under which stereotyping is epistemically permissible. Inevitably, people will disagree on the matter. Some may believe that epistemic norms sometimes permit us to stereotype based on mere appearances. Others may claim that we always need better evidence than first impressions. Yet others may emphasize reliability: epistemic norms require that we use reliable heuristics, i.e., heuristics that tend to track truth, even if these heuristics cause incorrect judgments in some cases. Because people disagree about what epistemic norms say, they will disagree about what these norms permit and require. Second, even if we knew what the norms permit or require in general, it can be hard to tell whether these norms are satisfied in any specific case. In all of the above cases, we lack information about people’s evidence, their line of actual reasoning, and many other details about the situation that we would need to judge whether or not epistemic norms permit stereotyping as it actually happened.

Despite these uncertainties, here is what we can say. The above cases have the potential to be consistent with norms of epistemic rationality, depending on how you fill out their details. Nonetheless, all the cases are ethically fraught.

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141 For the Oxford tumbler, see http://itooamoxford.tumblr.com/ For the Harvard tumbler, see http://itooamharvard.tumblr.com/.
Consider the example described in Rankine’s poem. Even if it were epistemically rational for the narrator’s therapist to expect that a black woman on her doorstep would be up to no good, the therapist didn’t know this about the woman ringing her bell. As a specialist in trauma, she should have realized that an incorrect judgment on her part could be hurtful and damaging, especially given the racialized nature of the judgment. Nonetheless she screamed at the top of her lungs: “Get away from my house! What are you doing on my yard?” This outburst communicated to the narrator that she had been stereotyped—and in a highly negative way—based on her skin color. The outburst humiliated her. Moreover, it was not an isolated incident. The poem describes a society in which people of color are systematically mistreated and disrespected. The therapist’s judgment is a symptom of life in this society, perpetuating harms characteristic of it.

The “I am Oxford” examples show something similar, if more subtle. Consider the South Asian woman who was stereotyped as a medical student. Suppose we fill in her story as follows. An Oxford undergraduate is invited to lunch by a friend. As they enter the college dining hall, the friend explains to her that English students and medics sit at the table where they’ll be eating. A South Asian woman enters the hall. She sits down next to them. The undergraduate immediately turns to her and says, “So, you’re a medical student?” “Why, yes,” the woman replies, “How did you know?” “Typical Asian,” she replies. Calling people “typical” anything—typical woman, typical Jamaican, typical Asian, typical handicapped person—is often an insult, even if the claim in question is true. Similarly, abruptly saying to someone, “So, you’re a medical student?” without bothering to politely inquire about what that person studies or introducing oneself in any way is rude. It reveals to the student that she is being stereotyped, and it suggests that her fellow student feels entitled to treat her rudely. As a result, even if the judgment is justified and correct, it is morally problematic. So is the way in which she makes the woman’s ethnicity salient. Perhaps her fellow student would rather that this aspect of her identity not be commented upon and highlighted at this moment, by a random person, in this way.

Here, again, we see cases of normative conflict exemplified in a special way. We may also begin to feel worried. From a moral perspective, it may have been better had the therapist in Rankine’s poem stopped her line of reasoning, refusing to apply the stereotype to the woman at her door. It may have been better yet had she forgone the line of reasoning altogether: ignoring or rejecting or suppressing her stereotypes. In the Oxford example, it may have been better had the student not made a stereotypic judgment, even though her expectation could have been perfectly rational and correct. To stop a line of rational thinking? To forget or reject or suppress true, justified views of groups? To ignore evidence relevant to a prediction? It is starting to sound as if morality requires us to be irrational.

**Type 3: Stereotyping and Policies**

A third kind of case involves policies. Policies can be informal: an employer could have an off-the-books policy of refusing to hire black people because he stereotypes them as insubordinate employees. Policies can also take the form of institutional rules. An insurance company, for in-
stance, might have an official policy of charging women between the ages of 20 and 40 years old more for healthcare on the grounds that women have “more complicated” healthcare needs.

Part of what makes policy valuable—and why this kind of stereotyping differs from the second kind of case—is that policy obviates the need to think about individual cases. “Listen,” the insurance representative might explain to a female customer who cannot have children and, on that basis, demands a lower rate, “We don’t consider specific cases. I have no view about your particular situation. You’ll be charged the same rate as every other woman between 20 and 40.” The insurance company’s claim is not that all women have babies. It is that most women or typical women have more complicated health coverage. The rule is designed around the typical case. So long as someone is a woman and in the relevant age range, the higher rates apply to her. In so far as the insurance company does not make a judgment about her specific case, it does not form expectations about her based on stereotypes. The insurance company doesn’t care about her, specifically, at all; it cares only about the average cost of insuring women between the ages of 20 and 40.

Legal cases provide real-life examples of stereotypes working in this way. For example, until 1996, the Virginia Military Institute (VMI) was an all-male military academy. VMI had a policy of rejecting all female applicants. In *US v. Virginia et al.*, the Supreme Court deemed this policy illegal. Before this ruling, when the state of Virginia defended the policy, they called expert witnesses who justified the policy by asserting gender stereotypes. “[M]ales tend to need an atmosphere of adversativeness,” they explained, while “females tend to thrive in a cooperative atmosphere.” These were not claims about all women, only typical or most women. Expert witnesses acknowledged outliers—women who would benefit from the adversarial educational methods practiced at VMI. However, it was argued that an educational system “must be designed around the rule.” Designing VMI around the rule required keeping it all male.

In years prior to this ruling, if you were an admissions officer at VMI, you would have known about the policy of admitting only men. As a result, you would have been freed from stereotyp-

142 Danielle Garrett, Marcia Greenberger, Judy Waxman, Anna Benyo, Kate Dickerson, Katherine Gallagher-Robins, Rachel Moore, and Sarah Trumble, “Turning to Fairness: Insurance Discrimination Against Women Today and the Affordable Care Act,” *Report from the National Women’s Law Center* (Washington D.C.: The National Women’s Law Center, March 2012), accessed online April 18, 2014, http://www.nwlc.org/resource/report-turning-fairness-insurance-discrimination-against-women-today-and-affordable-care-ac. Prior to the Affordable care act, the report found that charging women more for healthcare was common practice. See page 3: “Gender rating, the practice of charging women different premiums than men, results in significantly higher rates charged to women throughout the country. In states that have not banned the practice, the vast majority, 92%, of best-selling plans gender rate, for example, charging 40-year-old women more than 40-year-old men for coverage. Only 3% of these plans cover maternity services.”


144 Ibid.
ing female applicants in the second sense. You wouldn’t have had to form expectations about this or that woman. Coming upon an application with a female-sounding name, you could have thrown that application directly in the trash, without forming any expectations about her at all. The policy forbade women from attending VMI. So one could reject them simply on the basis of being a woman.

We still might want to say that the VMI stereotyped women. Or that the insurance company stereotypes women. But stereotyping here does not necessarily involve forming expectations about an individual person. It may just involve categorizing individual persons as social types and applying general policies to them qua social type in a way that excludes taking facts about them as individuals into account and renders individualized judgments about them irrelevant.

In cases of stereotyping of this third type, we may find nothing epistemically wrong with the stereotypes in question. They may be justified by statistical information. It might be true that, on average, women between the ages and 20 and 40 cost more to insure because many women have more complicated healthcare needs than men. It might be rational for insurance companies to charge women more because of this. It might be true that women prefer a less adversarial mode of education. Yet these facts do not show that the policies in question are morally right. Moreover, invoking the stereotype as a justification for the policy seems morally dubious in and of itself, given that the policies “create or perpetuate the legal, social, and economic inferiority of women,” as Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg puts it.145

In the VMI case, we can say something more as well. In the context of university applications, special norms of fairness apply—in particular, meritocratic norms and equality of opportunity. In order for these norms to be satisfied, applicants must be judged as individuals and according to their particular merits. Anyone not evaluated according to their individual merits would have grounds for complaint. Outliers—women who could flourish at VMI—have additional objections to the policy. They might be equally qualified and talented compared to male applicants but are not given the chance to provide evidence that they, in fact, would do quite well as military cadets. Because of what norms of fairness require, citing stereotypes to defend VMI’s policy may seem, at best, morally irrelevant and, at worst, inherently wrong.

Here, again, we seem to have normative conflicts. Stereotypes that justify exclusionary or discriminatory policies may be true and warranted. Yet we may morally object to the policies, the role stereotypes play in their justification, and their use in specific cases.

**Thinking Critically About Cases of Conflict**

Now that I’ve sketched some cases of prima facie normative conflict, I’d like to argue that, in fact, we should conceptualize what is happening in many of the aforementioned cases differently.

145 Ibid.
I’ll argue that actually, there are no cases of conflict when it comes to policy or assertions. Bona fide conflicts only ever involve forming expectations about individuals.

Stereotypes and Policy
Start by considering policies justified by stereotypes. I cited a hypothetical example of insurance companies charging women more for health insurance on the grounds that women have more complicated health coverage. I also cited an educational policy that excluded women from the Virginia Military Institute, which was ruled illegal by the Supreme Court in 1996. As I will now demonstrate, neither of these examples are bona fide cases of normative conflict, i.e., cases in which epistemic and moral norms conflict. In fact, there are no cases of bona fide cases of conflict when it comes to stereotypes and policy.

Think, first, about the VMI case. The college’s policy of excluding women seemed be to permissible by epistemic standards because it was true that women would not typically flourish in VMI’s environment. However, the policy was also unfair to women, violating the ideals of meritocracy and equality of opportunity.

Yet the appearance of conflict disappears upon closer investigation. If admissions officers outright reject female applicants without even considering their qualifications because of college policy, they can be criticized both on moral grounds—for being unfair—and on epistemic grounds—for failing to adequately scrutinize evidence about the relative merits of college applicants. There is no conflict between epistemic and moral judgments here. Instead, moral norms specify epistemic obligations, which are violated by admissions officers.

One might try to object: but the stereotype is true! Women won’t tend to flourish in an environment like VMI. But this is irrelevant. Suppose that the stereotypes in question were true: men thrive in adversarial educational environments whereas women flourish in cooperative ones. These are majority generics, which express claims about about most group members. The VMI admissions policy did not apply to most women; it applied to all women. What one would need from VMI is a reason to exclude all women from the college. Stereotypes simply cannot provide this because they do not state claims about all group members. Nor is it good enough to say that it’s hard to know which women will be outliers, so it’s better to reject them all. Admissions officers make judgments about male applicants’ capacity to succeed at VMI all the time, and there is no reason why they would not be able to make analogous predictive judgments about women.

Citing stereotypes as justification for the VMI policy is disingenuous anyway. The real reason for excluding women from VMI was that, allegedly, the college’s mode of education, its traditions, and its atmosphere of collegiality would be threatened by admitting women.

We can now see that the VMI case does exemplify normative conflict, but it is not a conflict between epistemic and moral norms. The commonwealth of Virginia valued keeping the status quo at VMI, and it valued the college’s traditions. The Supreme Court valued fairness. Here we have a conflict in values—tradition vs. fairness—not a conflict between epistemic and moral
norms. Epistemic norms on their own don’t justify excluding women from VMI. Stereotypes don’t justify their wholesale exclusion either. The stereotypes say that most women would not flourish at VMI, and this means that some women would do just fine there.

What goes for admissions officers at VMI goes for anyone. If someone uses a policy that categorically excludes certain kinds of people—whether that policy is written down in institutional handbooks or functions as an unwritten rule of thumb—when moral norms require judging persons as individuals, she will fail to live up to both epistemic and moral norms. Moreover, we cannot say that morality demands stupidity. In such cases, moral norms demand that people are more epistemically conscientious than they otherwise might be.

To see this, return to the insurance case. I used a hypothetical example here, though I might have used a real one. Up until last year, many states in the United States permitted charging women higher healthcare premiums as a matter of company policy. The official justification was that women have “more complicated healthcare” than their male counterparts. By hypothesis, the stereotype had a basis in fact: women are more likely than men to have babies and, also, to use healthcare more often than men when they are sick. They also have healthcare needs that men don’t, for example, biannual women’s health visits. Epistemic rationality might seem to permit—perhaps even require—charging women more. On average, women use more healthcare than men.

Morally speaking, this example is different from the VMI case. When it comes to jobs and university applications, meritocratic norms matter. Meritocratic norms require judging persons as individuals and according to their qualifications. In the insurance market, there is no moral obligation for insurance companies to evaluate individual policyholders on meritocratic grounds. It seems perfectly permissible, in principle, for insurance companies to set premiums using base rates, i.e., probabilities that apply to classes of people. If there is a moral objection to the policy, it is that differential rates entrench pernicious social inequalities.

Do we, therefore, have a case of conflict between moral and epistemic norms? No! Suppose that we find that women, in fact, have more complicated healthcare needs compared to men: there is empirical evidence for it, evidence which is produced by reputable sources using reliable methods, and so on.

Nothing about policy follows from this fact alone. An insurance executive might look at the statistics and think, “Well, o.k., but women’s health is important to everyone and women shouldn’t be disadvantaged for having ‘more complicated’ healthcare needs. It isn’t women’s fault, for example, that men can’t get pregnant too and that men don’t need biannual pelvic exams. Moreover, everyone benefits when women get the healthcare they need. Therefore, it is more fair to distribute the cost of insuring women over the group as a whole, i.e., across both men and women.” A different executive might look at the statistics and say, “O.k. women as a group are using more healthcare, so they deserve to be charged more than men.” Here is what this shows: while epistemic norms might require acknowledging that men and women differ with respect to
how much healthcare they use on average, they do not require us to endorse one policy rather than another. So epistemic norms are not violated if we decide to charge men and women equally. The base-rates by themselves don’t dictate what the policy regarding premiums should be.

Filling out the executives’ reasoning reveals normative conflict—but it is not a conflict between epistemic and moral norms. When executives argue about which policy should be adopted, they are relying on different normative principles and appealing to different values. One person says that women should not be disadvantaged due to factors beyond their control, and it is more fair to charge both men and women the same. The other says that group members ought to pay for the healthcare that they, on average, use. This is not a disagreement about facts. It is a disagreement about fairness. Notice, moreover, that profit is not necessarily the issue. In the right conditions, profits could be maximized either way. Either everyone could pay a higher rate, but only a slightly higher rate because everyone shares the burden. Or only women would pay a higher rate—but a substantially higher one. Either way, the insurance company would reap exactly the same profits. So we can’t frame the choice as an inherent conflict between fairness and profits.

What differentiates the executives is not their attention to profit or their willingness to consider base-rates but their views of fairness.

If the example works, it generalizes. Stereotypes don’t logically entail policies. Neither does the statistical information that supports the stereotypes. Multiple policies will typically be consistent with the facts. We, therefore, should not accuse policy makers—or anyone else—of being stupid or irrational or censoring themselves in a way that undermines their ability to live up to epistemic norms simply when and if they adopt policies in the name of fairness. The more one appreciates this point, the less one is tempted to conceptualize cases of the third type as examples of epistemic vs. moral conflict.

For some theorists, the temptation has been surprisingly strong. Consider Philip Tetlock. In his influential article, “The Psychology of the Unthinkable,” he writes:

> in many contexts, people are striving to achieve neither epistemic nor utilitarian goals, but rather, as prominent historical sociologists have argued (Bell, 1976), are struggling to protect sacred values from secular encroachments…146

One of Tetlock’s prime examples is analogous to my insurance case. He asks research participants to play the role of insurance executives. He finds that they are perfectly willing to charge people who live in high-risk neighborhoods more money for home insurance unless they find out that the neighborhoods are historically black. When research participants find out that their decision has a racial dimension, they opt for equal rates. He describes their thought process as follows:

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for many respondents, the use of base rates raised disturbing moral issues rather than tricky statistical issues. Permissible base rates in a race-neutral context were morally foreclosed in a race-contaminated context. These effects were driven largely by the insistence of liberals that base rates became "off limits" once the linkage with race was revealed. Their overriding concern was to ensure that a group that had historically suffered from discriminatory practices (and arguably may still be so suffering) would not, once again, be victimized.¹⁴⁷

What Tetlock fails to realize is that people don't have to ignore base-rates when they find out that high-risk neighborhoods are historically black. They can keep them in mind when setting policy. For example, one person might see the base-rates and first think, “O.k. I believe that people who live in high-risk neighborhood ought to pay higher premiums for home insurance because, on average, they will need to use insurance more.” When she finds out that the neighborhoods are historically black, she might realize that her principle has a ceteris paribus clause: people who live in high-risk neighborhood ought to pay a higher premium for home insurance unless charging them higher premiums would be socially damaging. Or, alternatively, she might think that her principle does not have such a clause but that she endorses other principles and values that prohibit charging higher rates for insurance if those cause racial inequality. For example, “Don’t intentionally do anything that would disadvantage or harm people who are already vulnerable.” Either way, the person doesn’t need to ignore the base rates. In fact, she cannot be accurately described as ignoring the base rates because her invocation of the ceteris paribus clause or further principles depend on recognizing the black neighborhoods have higher crime rates.

What Tetlock describes as willful ignorance—and as failure to care about epistemic norms—turns out to be something quite different. Research participants remain aware of the base rates and, because of their awareness, see that additional or revised principles can be brought to bear on the question of how to set premiums. How could they exclude such information from deliberation anyhow? Perhaps Tetlock’s point is that they cease to cite the base rates as justification for the policy. But that is not evidence that they are ignoring relevant statistical information.

Consider an analogy. Suppose I am an employer and have a policy of supplying my office with bottled water. Everyone gets little bottles of water, whenever they want. It’s convenient, fairly cheap, and my employees are, on average, better hydrated than ever. Then I find out that buying bottled water is extremely bad for the environment. I change the company policy. Does this mean that I have to exclude all the facts from my reasoning that previously led me to the initial policy? No. I still keep those same facts in mind when I end the policy and request that everyone drink filtered water from the tap.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid., 863
Exactly the same thing appears to be happening in Tetlock’s cases of allegedly forbidden base rates. People don’t ignore facts that they earlier used as justification for the initial policy. They remain aware of those facts. However, in the process of acquiring new information about the communities for which they are setting insurance rates, they realize that it would be unfair and potentially damaging to adopt a policy of charging high-risk neighborhoods more, given the racial composition of those neighborhoods.

Defenders of beleaguered policies may frame challenges to their policies as attacks on epistemic rationality itself. But that’s incorrect. Stereotypes—and the statistical evidence that validates them—never justify policy in and of themselves. They only justify policy in conjunction with other assumptions, for example, that it is fair to charge people more for a good or service if they belong to a group that, on average, uses that good or service more than others. It is assumptions like this, not the stereotypes or statistics themselves, that are challenged when policies are struck down on moral grounds. What we have, therefore, is not a conflict between epistemic and moral norms as such—but a conflict between competing views of fairness, values, and priorities.

What goes for the aforementioned cases goes for all cases of policy. There are no instances of bona fide normative conflict in the sense in which I am interested when it comes to policy and stereotyping. All such apparent conflicts turn out to be conflicts of value.

Assertions About Social Groups
Now think about cases in which stereotyping involves uttering claims about social groups. Earlier I cited two examples. In the revised *Invisible Man* case, the short broad man justified calling out Ellison’s narrator by claiming, “Black people sing spirituals.” I also described an acquaintance who claimed “black babies are stronger than white babies” when she joked that my baby must be half black because she was walking at eight months old. While I argued that epistemic and moral norms appear to conflict in these cases, I now want to present two arguments that suggest these are not instances of normative conflict at all; so they cannot be cases in which morality requires stupidity. These arguments generalize to other cases and suggest, in fact, that cases of stereotyping involving generic utterances about groups are never instances of normative conflict in the relevant sense.

Here is the first argument. Uttering stereotypes in conversation can be controversial for epistemic reasons. Stereotypes typically take the form of generics. As I argued in chapter 2, both experts and laypeople disagree about what generic utterances mean, as well as the conditions under which they are true and justified. Moreover, even if everyone agreed about the relevant standards, it is hard to know whether someone is justified asserting a generic given their evidence and whether their statement is true in any given case. The upshot is that generics raise a number of red flags for interlocutors. Even if we agree that there are some conditions under which utterances of generic claims about groups are true and justified, it will be hard to know whether any particular utterance meets these conditions. For that reason, uttering generics in speech contexts appears to violate norms of epistemic modesty. The epistemically modest thing to do is to refrain from asserting claims that one cannot believe to be true with a high degree of certainty. Especially when an utterance has the potential to be morally and politically inflammatory, we might
reasonably demand epistemic modesty of speakers. That is, we might demand that speakers have more and better evidence before they go ahead and introduce controversial stereotypes into conversation. When it is likely that such evidence is lacking, we can reasonably ask speakers to withhold their claims.

If this is right, many cases that first appear to be instances of normative conflict actually are not: assertions of stereotypes in these cases will be both morally and epistemically criticizable. Return to the “black babies are strong” example. The example seemed, at least potentially, to be an instance of normative conflict because the speaker’s claim could have been true if interpreted as a majority generic, and she had evidence in favor of believing it. So epistemic norms could have permitted the utterance, though, as I argued, moral norms would condemn it. However, as we can now see, the utterance is very likely both epistemically and morally criticizable. It is highly doubtful that her evidence—presumably, a few controversial studies and anecdotal evidence—sufficiently justifies her belief and her level of confidence in it.

Of course, it’s possible that agents who utter stereotypes will not always be criticizable on grounds of epistemic modesty. The Invisible Man case might be one such example. The short, broad man might persuasively argue that he has evidence beyond a reasonable doubt that most people in the African American community in the 1940s sing spirituals. Likewise, if Haslanger is right, someone who lives in an unjust society may be in a sufficiently strong epistemic position to publicly claim that “black men are more criminal than white.”

A second kind of argument must be used against people in such cases. As a first step, consider this proposition: the epistemic properties of stereotypes are often irrelevant to the question of whether or not we should use them in speech. Think about the Invisible Man case. In the original case, we might have thought the fact that the short, broad man was using a false, unjustified universal generalization mattered. But it doesn’t. Whatever the epistemic qualities of the stereotype, it was impermissible for the short, broad to use it as he did—namely, to single out and humiliate the narrator and then to justify his abhorrent behavior. He should have never opened his mouth. He should have kept quiet.

The point goes beyond stereotyping. Etiquette and morality can condemn utterances that are insulting, tactless, or harmful. Politeness, for example, recommends against telling a new mother that she looks miserable and tired even though that might be true. When an utterance would be harmful, insulting, or otherwise rude, we have good reason to not to say anything.

Here it helps to consider an analogy with slurs. Slurs are derogatory terms for groups and will sometimes be featured in stereotypes. Most people know the slurs for women, black people, Asians, Jewish people, poor white people, and so on, and I will not repeat any here. Slurs and stereotypes have something in common: both etiquette and moral norms constrain who (if any-one) can use them, in what context, and how. Racial stereotypes are charged and socially sensitive stereotypes, so it wouldn’t be surprising that our objections to using them in conversation, like our objections to using slurs, apply regardless of the epistemic properties of the stereotypes.

148 Thanks to John Campbell for first pointing out this analogy to me.
Uttering stereotypes in conversation can, moreover, be akin to slurring. Slurs insult, demean, marginalize, and undermine. So can stereotypes—even when the stereotypes in question are superficially positive or neutral. Because of this, we should often refrain from uttering group stereotypes—especially racial, ethnic, or gender stereotypes—in public.

Does one violate epistemic norms if one refuses to utter true, justified stereotypes? It is hard to see how. Epistemic norms don’t require us to make our every belief or reason transparent to others by communicating them in speech, no matter what the consequences. We can perfectly satisfy our epistemic obligations—remaining committed to true, justified beliefs—even if we choose to keep quiet in situations like the one described by Ellison. Some may say, “Oh, but we have an epistemic obligation to state the truth!” Note, first, that this claim is of dubious relevance to my cases. The short, broad man is not a truth-teller who adds to the store of knowledge in the world. He performs no useful epistemic function by uttering stereotypes about black people. His goals are self-serving: he is trying to cover his own back. Second, note that there is little reason to think we have a general epistemic obligation to speak the truth. If we did, we would be epistemically required to vocalize every single true, justified belief we possessed, at every moment of the day. That would be crazy. It would mean that we would have to walk down the street shouting out truths: “That’s a tree. This is a crosswalk. That person is ugly. Shoe shops are everywhere!” We simply are not epistemically required to do this.

The short, broad man might say in his own defense: “I was not fulfilling a general epistemic obligation to tell the truth when I cited a stereotype. I was simply explaining why I inferred that a random black man at the party could sing spirituals. I was explicitly challenged about my inference, so I had a special reason to supply my reason for making it. That reason came in the...
form of a stereotype. Are you telling me that moral norms prohibited me from explaining myself?

The answer to these questions is yes. If one’s line of reasoning is potentially hurtful, why one shouldn’t keep it to oneself? In the present circumstance, it was bad enough that the short, broad man singled out the narrator in the middle of a party, demanding that he sing and dance for everyone. Instead of justifying his decision by citing a stereotype, he simply could have apologized: “Sorry!” He didn’t have to double-down and defend the action. The right thing to do would have been to see his action for what it was: a drunken outburst, an outburst about which he had reason to be ashamed and which was not worthy of further defense. Even if his prediction about the narrator was correct, he didn’t know that it was true and, moreover, even if he did know this he should have remained silent because it was the polite, respectful thing to do.

We cannot yet conclude that normative conflicts of the present kind are impossible. There could be contexts in which epistemic norms do require truth-telling. Imagine a psychologist who studies math performance in high school students. Suppose that she finds an innate disparity between men and women’s aptitude for math. The norms of scientific inquiry require that she shares her data and conclusions. The norms of scientific inquiry are, largely, epistemic norms. Scientists should never conceal the truth, the thought goes, even if the truth hurts. If women are worse at math than men, the psychologist should simply affirm the stereotype, both in writing and conversation, even if doing so undermines women’s math performance even more due to phenomena like stereotype threat.

Examples like this, however, do not prove the alleged point. Assume that the scientists have an epistemic obligation to follow the truth wherever it leads, as well as to publicly communicate their conclusions. Why do they have this obligation? It’s not in virtue of epistemic norms plain and simple. It is due to their professional role and the norms associated with it. If this is right, the psychologist described above does not violate norms of epistemic rationality, properly speaking. Qua human being, she isn’t required to speak up and share her views about gender difference, even though she has studied these differences carefully. Only because she is a scientist does she have this obligation. As as result, she violates the norms of scientific inquiry if she decides to shelve the study. However, she does not violate the norms of epistemic rationality as such. If this is right, we must keep looking for a case in which uttering a stereotype is epistemically required but morally wrong.

Why should we think that there are any such cases? Epistemic norms can be used to evaluate beliefs and utterances. When someone utters a unjustified or false stereotype, epistemic norms condemn the utterance. But do epistemic norms in and of themselves ever require utterances—in particular, utterances of stereotypes? There’s good reasons to think not. Epistemic imperatives about speech seem to take the form of conditionals: for example, if you assert x, have sufficient evidence that x is true. Conditionals such as these don’t give us reason to believe that assertions are required. They state requirements that apply only if an assertion occurs. In order to show that epistemic norms require utterances, we would need reason to think that epistemic norms ac-
tually require speech in certain cases. But it is hard to believe that there are any such require-
ments. Why? Because speech is a kind of action, and epistemic norms on their own can never
dictate how we must act.

To see this, think about decision theory. Decision theory says that rational actions are ones that
maximize utility. If you ask a decision theorist whether you should utter a stereotype in situation
x, she will say, “Do whatever maximizes utility.” To figure out whether the utterance maximizes
utility, you need several pieces of information: (1) the range of possible outcomes that could re-
sult from uttering the stereotype, (2) your preferences about these outcomes, and (3) your expec-
tations about how likely these outcomes are in the present circumstances. Given all this infor-
mation, you calculate utilities for each option and choose the option with the highest utility. That’s
the rational choice.

I don’t want to endorse decision theory as a theory of practical rationality. It’s not necessary for
my purposes. My point is only this: decision theory gets something right. According to decision
theory, the epistemic properties of a stereotype are never sufficient reason to utter it. Even if a
stereotype is true and justified, it could be irrational to blurt out the stereotype in speech. We
need to think about the outcomes that could result in uttering the stereotype. We also have to
think about what we want—what we desire, hope for, and value—and what norms of morality
and etiquette, as well as other norms, including professional ones, demand.

Once we recognize that speech is a kind of action, we must reject the epistemic norms could ever
require us to utter a stereotype, while moral norms prohibit us from doing so. Epistemic norms
don’t tell us what to do. So they could never conflict with the prescriptions of moral norms.
Therefore, there are never cases of bona fide conflict of the first type.

Forming Expectations About Individuals
Now consider the second type of case—stereotyping that consists of forming expectations about
individuals. Examples included the John Hope Franklin case, Rankine’s poem, and the “I am
Oxford too” cases. I speculated that stereotyping in these examples could have been epistemically
permissible under some conditions, though morally objectionable. This speculation, as I will
now argue, was partially correct. Bona fide normative conflict can occur in this type of case.
However, as I will also argue, one can’t assume that all the cases I’ve cited exemplify bona fide
conflict between epistemic and moral norms.

Almost all of the cases of forming expectations about individuals that I described earlier are false
positives. By false positives, I mean that they seem to be instances of bona fide normative con-

Rankine’s case is a good example. In her poem, a therapist expected that a black woman at her
doorstep was up to no good, and she screamed, “Get away from my house! What are you doing
on my yard?” As I said earlier, being a specialist in trauma, the therapist should have realized
that an incorrect judgment on her part could be hurtful and damaging, especially given the racial-
ized nature of the judgment. The potential hurtfulness of her judgment is morally relevant to her epistemic obligations. We should avoid making hasty judgments based on stereotypes when doing so has the potential to seriously harm others and can be avoided at little cost to ourselves. So there is reason to think that moral norms required the therapist to be more careful. She ought to have gathered more more evidence about the woman at her door before she arrived at a judgment about her. Had she been slightly more observant, for example, she would have been easily able to see that the narrator was an upper-middle-class black woman, not someone who fit the profile of recent robbery suspects. The therapist could have checked her side gate and realized that it was locked. She could have put her client’s name into an internet search engine and quickly come up with a picture of her client. Taking these steps would have been easy, and, moreover, appear to be morally required. What we have is a case in which morality increases the epistemic standards required of an individual, making it both morally and epistemically objectionable to stereotype.

Rankine’s case illustrates a specific kind of false positive. This kind of false positive occurs because our first impressions about epistemic standards are incorrect. We may think, at first, that stereotyping is epistemically permissible. But it’s actually not.

Why do we make such a mistake? Quite possibly, we are applying a single set of epistemic standards across all cases. Consider the pool case. In that example, I go to a new swimming pool and ask a desk attendant, “Where are the changing rooms?” Barely glancing up from her computer screen, the attendant says, “The ladies changing rooms are to the left.” In addition to categorizing me as a woman on the basis of a brief first impression, the attendant makes a few inferences about me. She expects that I want a big towel instead of a small one and that I care about drying my hair. The attendant stereotypes me. I fit the profile of a pool customer who would care about having a big towel and drying my hair, and I fit the profile of a woman. As I argued earlier, her expectations are epistemically permissible. If the inference in the pool case is epistemically permissible, one may argue, the therapist’s expectation must be too.

The line of thinking, however, rests on a mistake. Epistemic standards are not uniform across all cases. Epistemic standards vary, and they vary precisely because the practical and moral stakes involved in stereotyping vary. Stereotyping is a way of thinking quickly. We use heuristics when we stereotype. We forgo paying close attention to individualized features of cases. Sometimes this is fine. When nothing much hangs on being wrong, as in the pool case, faster ways of thinking can be both morally and epistemically permissible. However, when relying on faster ways of thinking can have extremely bad effects, as in Rankine’s scenario, when it can seriously harm other people or oneself, we should think more carefully and pay attention to details.
Why is that? One explanation appeals to a contextualist thought: when we find ourselves in situations with high practical and moral stakes, these stakes affect epistemic norms.\textsuperscript{151} In high stakes cases, one must have more and better evidence for one’s expectations and one must engage in more careful ways of reasoning. For example, when the therapist expects that the woman on her doorstep is up to no good because she is a black woman, her expectation has the potential to be extremely hurtful. Because her expectation is potentially harmful, she faces higher epistemic standards. She must form her judgment of the woman more carefully and not rely primarily on generalizations. The pool example is different. Nothing much hinges on the pool attendant being correct about a person's towel preferences. As a result, the attendant is epistemically permitted to use faster, more error-prone ways of thinking.

Some people find contextualist views wrong-headed. If you reject contextualism, you will need a different explanation of why the pool case and Rankine’s case differ. Here is one such explanation. Suppose that the epistemic standards as such are the same in the two cases: profiling is epistemically permitted in both. The cases are nonetheless morally distinct. In the pool case, nothing much hinges on the attendant being correct, and the person stereotyped has no decisive objection to being seen primarily in terms of group membership. In contrast, in Rankine’s case, an incorrect judgment has the potential to be extremely hurtful. The therapist owes it to her, one might say, to evaluate evidence about her situation carefully. This is a moral requirement. However, it states an epistemic obligation that goes above and beyond what epistemic norms on their own require, making it the case that people are morally required to do what is supererogatory from a strictly epistemic point of view. So, if we think about the case in a narrow way, we might say that stereotyping in the therapist’s case is epistemically permissible. Epistemic norms—considered in isolation from moral norms—don’t condemn it. However, if we take into account the therapist’s heightened epistemic obligations due to moral norms, we will conclude that she is failing both epistemically and morally when she stereotypes.

For my purposes, it doesn’t matter which explanation is right. Either way, there is no deep conflict between epistemic and moral norms. Think about the criminal justice system. Jurors are held to a higher standard of evidence in the courtroom than in their everyday lives. For example, they must refrain from judging that a defendant is guilty unless there is evidence of guilt beyond a reasonable doubt. If the contextualist correct, moral norms raise the evidential bar for jurors.

\textsuperscript{151} For an argument in epistemology to this effect, see Keith DeRose, “Contextualism and Knowledge Attributions” \textit{Philosophy and Phenomenological Research} 52 (1992), 913-929. DeRose’s article began a conversation that is ongoing in epistemology about how, if at all, context affects standards for knowledge attributions, as well as justification. In the bank cases, a person’s evidence remains the same while her practical situation differs: in one case being wrong is of no great practical importance, in the other case being wrong would be disastrous. DeRose argues that the person knows in the low-stakes case but fails to know in the high stakes case. Jeremy Fantl and Matthew McGrath make similar arguments about justification. See, for example their “Evidence, Pragmatics, and Justification,” \textit{The Philosophical Review} 111 (2001), 67–94. The idea that epistemic norms are sensitive to context is very tempting. If contextualism is true, we could say that epistemic standards are heightened when agents find themselves in situations with high moral stakes.
If the non-contextualist explanation is correct, moral norms require the juror to do what would be supererogatory from a merely epistemic point of view. In both cases, the effect is the same: to make us more virtuous epistemic agents, not less. The same goes for the therapist in Rankine’s poem. Morality is not requiring stupidity here. Quite the opposite. It is requiring people to be more conscientious and careful than normal.

For those interested in proving the existence of normative conflicts, the point can—and should—be granted. At least some of the cases that first appear to be instances of conflict between epistemic and moral norms actually aren’t cases of conflict at all. They will be cases in which stereotyping is both epistemically and morally criticizable.

There is yet a second kind of false positive as well. In this type of case, forming expectations about an individual based on stereotypes will seem epistemically permissible but morally impermissible. However, it will turn out that the case is actually a morally permissible. So both epistemic and moral norms will allow stereotyping.

Consider the “I am Oxford too” examples. In many of those cases, students of color knew that people were forming expectations about them based on their real or perceived group membership. The South Asian woman, for example, knew that her fellow student expected that she was a doctor based on stereotypes of South Asians. “Typical Asian,” the student had said after correctly guessing which degree she was pursuing. “I’m surprised that you speak English so well,” a black man was told, revealing that his interlocutor expected worse of him, presumably because he was a foreign student of color. These cases could be epistemically permissible, as I’ve already argued; however, they should strike us as morally problematic.

Nonetheless, I don’t think that most of the “I am Oxford too” cases illustrate conflicts between epistemic and moral norms; nor do I believe that morality requires people from excluding stereotypes as evidence when forming expectations about individuals in many of these cases.

Consider the South Asian medical student. One might be tempted to say that she was a victim of morally objectionable stereotyping because the student’s expectation of her, i.e., that she was a medical student was based largely on stereotypes. But, if you reflect on this case, what is morally problematic is not the expectation itself. We can see this by changing the case—by keeping the expectation the same but changing her behavior. For example, expecting that the South Asian woman was a medical student, the student might have discretely asked her friend, “Is she a medical student?” After receiving an answer, she might have introduced herself by saying: “Hi! My friend tells me that you are a medical student.” Or, the student could have kept her expectation to herself and simply introduced herself, “Hi, I’m Adela. I’m an English student at Exeter. What do you study?” In none of these cases, I suspect, would we be tempted to say that the student has done something morally wrong by forming an expectation about her fellow student based on stereotypes. There’s nothing inherently pejorative or disrespectful about the thought that the woman is more likely a medici than an English student. Moreover, in the reimagined cases, the stereotype doesn’t structure the students’ interactions in a damaging way. If this is correct, the stereotypical expectation itself is not the moral problem.
What is the moral problem in the initial case? It has to do with how the South Asian woman is treated. The original interaction begins bluntly, with a rhetorical question: “So you’re a medical student?” This is not a polite way to start a conversation with someone you don’t know. There is no friendly ‘hello,’ no attempt at a polite introduction. And it gets worse. “How did you know?” the student asks. “Typical Asian,” goes the reply. One might think that her fellow student is just being blunt or irreverent here, and there is nothing wrong with that. But there is a moral dimension to the bluntness. The South Asian student hasn’t asked her fellow student to comment upon her ethnicity or to make the fact that she fits a stereotype into a public joke. Her fellow student treats her insensitively. The behavior is rude and disrespectful, and it can be condemned on those grounds.

This case reveals something important. Often the problem in cases of stereotyping is not that someone had stereotypical expectations per se; it is how he or she used these expectations when interacting with others. The wrong in stereotyping here, one might say, is in communicating that you have stereotyped someone—either directly or indirectly—and in allowing stereotypical expectations to structure one’s interactions with others, not in the mere act of forming expectations about someone based on stereotypes.

Why can it be wrong to communicate to someone that you are stereotyping them? Philosopher Amy Olberding explains:

Some features of a person will always and as a formal matter be at the front, visible and apparent to any who encounter her. However, such does not entail that they thereby constitute an aspect of the presented self to which observers are invited to respond, for etiquette norms will govern how recurrent social situations and the roles people play within them are appropriately understood. What we are invited to notice about others derives not simply from what we see of them, but from what norms of good manners suggest we should see. To treat others politely is, in broad strokes, to respond to them in their roles and as they present themselves, not taking liberty to respond to everything about them that is visible or catches our notice.\(^{152}\)

The explanation works. By communicating to someone that you have stereotyped them, you make their social identity salient in a way that they may not appreciate. That’s why, even if the trait being attributed is not negative, one can be justifiably annoyed. When an undergraduate at Oxford sits down for lunch, she is not offering up every aspect of her identity for comment. She may prefer to be treated as a student in this context, not as an Asian student. Moreover, when aspects of our identity are highlighted by people who do not share them, we may feel as if we are being reduced to that aspect of ourselves, to the neglect of other things. Olberding puts it like this:

\(^{152}\) Amy Olberding, “Subclinical Bias, Manners, and Moral Harm,” *Hypatia* 29 (2014), 294.
reference to self-presentation affords nuance in how we explain this. Reductive bias sometimes will manifest by observers summoning to the front aspects of the self the individual and social convention would have tacitly foregrounded. That is, bias sometimes hooks into what are, legitimately and sometimes even obviously, aspects of the more complete self. Its offense may reside not in making someone other than she is, but in remarking upon more of her than she offers for engagement.153

Here we have an undeniable truth: social convention—and norms of politeness—often require tacitly backgrounding facts about social identity and difference. That’s why, in the context of normal everyday interactions, it can be—and often is—disrespectful to communicate to people that you are viewing them as a particular social type and have expectations of them on that basis.

A similar point applies to the effects of stereotyping on behavior. Sometimes, when we object to a case of stereotyping, we are primarily objecting to how stereotypical expectations affect behavior. Think about the Invisible Man case. The short, broad man’s expectation that the narrator sings spirituals is not necessarily morally problematic. However, that expectation partially motivated extremely bad behavior. Similarly, in many of the “I am Oxford cases,” what is objectionable is rude behavior and its negative effects on underrepresented students.

If this is right, not all of the “I am Oxford too” examples will exemplify normative conflict. In the case I’ve just considered, for example, both epistemic and moral norms could easily permit stereotyping—in the sense that they permit forming expectations about someone based on their real or perceived group membership. What moral norms would forbid is communicating those expectations in speech or behavior and letting them structure our interactions with others in objectionable ways. There is no conflict with epistemic norms here. Epistemic norms don’t require expressing every thought we believe to be true and justified in conversation. So the Oxford student is not irrational or failing to meet epistemic norms if she keeps her mouth shut. Indeed, she fully lives up to epistemic norms so long as she forms her expectation in a rational way, whether she communicates that expectation or not. If normative conflict exists, it is not between moral and epistemic norms but between values that pull her in different directions—for example, the value that she may place on freely speaking her mind and, also, on treating others with respect.

Highlighting false positives of these two kinds is clarifying. In cases of bona fide normative conflict, there will be something morally objectionable about expectations or thoughts or lines of reasoning featuring stereotypes—even when they are not communicated and even they could be evidentially justifiable.

Return to Rankine’s example. Earlier I said that the therapist had a moral obligation to engage in a more careful investigation before she arrived at her judgment. That’s still true, but we may object that her initial impression is morally problematic. Imagine that therapist never screams at the poem’s narrator. Instead she figures out that the woman at her door is her client because she does the morally-required double-checking specified earlier. She opens the door and says, “You must be Claudia. I’ve been waiting for you!” Nonetheless, the woman at her door still seems to

153 Ibid., 295.
have been wronged. The therapist expected that a perfectly innocent woman, a client who was there to see her for trauma therapy, was up to no good and, possibly, there to rob her. Though the stereotype was not communicated to the person being stereotyped, we may note that black people in the society described by Rankine—our society—rightly perceive themselves to be walking under “a cloud of suspicion.” That cloud of suspicion can make it difficult for social cooperation and friendships across racial lines to flourish, and it harms people of color, specifically, people racialized as black.

In the John Hope Franklin case, a similar argument applies. In that example, a patron at the Cosmos Club assumes that John Hope Franklin is a coat check attendant and demands that he fetch her coat. Suppose that the woman never demanded her coat. She merely expected that John Hope Franklin was the help but didn’t communicate that in any way. Still, there would be something wrong with her expectation. It is morally problematic when the first thing that pops into your head when you see a black man in tails at a fancy club is, “Employee!”

So far I’ve identified two cases of bona fide conflict. In one, a person stereotypes when she sees someone unfamiliar at her door; in the other, a person stereotypes when she is looking for a coat check attendant at dinner. What makes stereotyping morally objectionable in these cases is that it harms the people stereotyped—even though the expectation is not communicated to them and even though the harm would be greater if it were communicated in speech or behavior—and that stereotyping reflects disturbing social inequalities. However, we cannot technically say that stereotyping as such is unfair. Norms of fairness do not forbid forming expectations about unfamiliar individuals based on group membership in these kinds of situations.

Can we think of examples of normative conflict where stereotyping is unfair? Yes. We simply look for situations in which judgments about individuals must be formed on a meritocratic basis—hiring decisions, grading, university admissions decisions, work assessments, loan application evaluations, etc. In such contexts, stereotypes should not be biasing our judgments, implicitly or explicitly, because meritocratic norms require judging persons as individuals. Indeed, there’s a case to be made that group affiliation should not be entering into our thought-process in any way. The issue is this: we should be excluding such information entirely from deliberation.

Think about court cases. Courts require jurors to exclude certain kinds of evidence from their reasoning. Evidence acquired by illegal means is a prime example. Jurors will never be allowed to see it; or, if they do see it, they will be told to act as if they had not been aware of the evidence and make the decision on other grounds. This exclusion is justified for a moral reason: allowing evidence acquired by illegal means into trials would undermine a central value on which courts are based, namely, the rule of law.

154 Anderson, Imperative, 53.

155 If so, not only is forming expectations about someone based primarily on stereotypes morally impermissible, so is accessing stereotypes about the group to which that person belongs or using these stereotypes as hypotheses about what a person might or could be like, hypothesis that demand further investigation.
Stereotypes can also be a forbidden kind of evidence. In certain contexts, we should not permit ourselves to use group membership to judge individuals. Perhaps we shouldn’t even contemplate this information as potentially relevant to a judgment. Tetlock’s claims about forbidden evidence seem to make most sense here. When facts about group membership have the potential to bias us and render our judgments unfair, we should try to exclude them—and, by extension, associated stereotypes and base rates—when reasoning.

Suppose, for example, that I am on a hiring committee, and I have full access to applicant’s files. I am able to glean the following facts from one dossier: the applicant is a woman, recently married, and her age is between 25 and 35 years old. Immediately I worry that she will take maternity leave soon after starting the job and thereafter be a less flexible employee. If the thought that I’m exploring is correct, my expectation is morally problematic. Yet it’s likely rational. As the United States Department of Labor reports: “Employees taking leave are more likely than other employees to be female, aged 25-34, married/living with a partner, and have children living at home.” The expectation is morally objectionable, even if true and justified, because I should not be evaluating the job candidate based on facts about her gender. So, we might say, even if my expectation does not cause me to reject the candidate, even if I only treat the information as an unconfirmed hypothesis and, therefore, not a decisive reason to make a decision about her either way, something morally problematic has happened. I never should have had access to this information, and I never should have used gender stereotypes in any way.

This thought may seem extreme but, in fact, it is quite plausible. When information has the potential to bias our judgments and render them unfair, perhaps we shouldn’t have access to it, even if it would normally count as part of our total evidence. In order to protect the fairness of certain processes, the information must be limited. That’s why teachers should grade papers blindly.

Notice that the issue is not, as it was at the beginning of this section, that people need to engage in more careful ways of thinking because arriving at an incorrect judgment based on stereotypes would be harmful. If this were the issue, we could permit people to access and use stereotypes. We would simply require that they gather more and better evidence before concluding that a candidate fits a stereotype. Trying to follow this advice, an employer might outright ask a female job candidate: “Do you plan to have children soon?” At this point, she wouldn’t be stereotyping, i.e., forming expectations primarily on the basis of group membership. She would be treating the woman as an individual by asking her, specifically, about her plans. Yet this too, if I am correct, is morally impermissible. Trying to glean that information in more subtle ways would also be morally impermissible. The employer is not morally permitted to judge the woman based on her intention or lack thereof to be pregnant.

The case, therefore, exemplifies the potential for epistemic and moral norms to conflict. In forming initial expectation of the job candidate based partially on gender stereotypes, an employer gives herself access to information that would normally count as part of her total evidence, in-

156 See Department of Labor Website: http://dol.gov/whd/fmla/chapter2.htm
formation that will help her form a justified expectation about the job candidate’s future performance, including leave-taking behavior and flexibility of scheduling. Nonetheless, using that information—perhaps even merely accessing it—seems morally objectionable. Norms of fairness forbid it.

We now have three examples of bona fide conflict in hand. The implications of these examples are striking: forming a justified expectation of someone or engaging in a correct line of reasoning can be morally wrong.

**Does Morality Require Stupidity?**
Suppose I know that I live in a society—like ours—where bona conflicts between epistemic and moral norms are possible. Tragic normative dilemmas seem inevitable. Satisfy epistemic norms and you’ll be morally deficient. Satisfy moral norms, and you’ll be epistemically irrational. Or so it seems.

I myself am skeptical that our situation is as tragic as one might first think, and I’d like to end this chapter by explaining why. The crux of the question is this: what, exactly, do moral norms require of us in cases of bona fide conflict?

Start by considering a specific case. Return to the woman at the Cosmos Club. She finds herself thinking, “That black guy is a coat check attendant.” What is she morally required to do? Not trust her first impression! Even if it is rational to expect that John Hope Franklin is a coat check attendant, she should be aware that a mistake could be humiliating for everyone. So she should sit tight and keep her mouth shut. As result, she may have to act in a way that conflicts with her self-interest, narrowly construed. Maybe she feels entitled to be waited on. Maybe she believes that it is unbecoming of a woman like herself to walk to the coat check station. Maybe she is in a hurry and doesn’t want to wait for the waiter to arrive so that she can ask him to grab her coat. Whatever the case may be, she should choose an option for retrieving her coat that does not require relying on racial stereotypes, even if it is in her self-interest, narrowly construed, to use a lazier method.

So far so good. We haven’t found a reason to think that morality requires stupidity. In fact, in the case just described, morality require persons to be more careful and conscientious than they would be otherwise.

But morality might require more. Indeed, theorists of implicit bias and stereotypes presume that it does. They suggest that people ought to do cognitive work in order to prevent problematic associations and expectations from arising in the first place. Echoing Gendler, Andy Egan describes three possibilities:

We can use the categories unreflectively, and wind up with a bunch of bad stereotype-concordant inferences, judgments, attitudes, etc. Alternatively, we can use the categories, but spend a bunch of cognitive resources suppressing or immediately excising the bad
stereotype-concordant inferences, judgments, attitudes, etc. Finally, we can avoid using the categories, and fail to code up the base rate information.157

The first option cannot be what morality requires: it amounts to doing nothing to stop injustice. Alex Madva has described the other two options, respectively, as:

\[(\text{Suppression})\] To try to actively suppress the expression of our stereotypical thoughts and impulses.

\[(\text{Ignorance})\] To aim to ignore or forget the stereotypes altogether.158

Remember that we are considering only thoughts and beliefs that satisfy epidemic norms. Ignoring or forgetting stereotypes in such a case would amount to ignoring or forgetting warranted, potentially correct views of groups. Suppression would require us to reject expectations of individuals that we know to be justified. Given what we know about group x, we would be rational to expect that group member has property c. Therefore, we cannot just say—as Egan and Gendler tend to—that being moral is epistemically costly.159 In fact, our situation is much worse. If morality required either Suppression or Ignorance, it would require failing to draw inferences we know to be justified and repudiating true, warranted views of groups. If this is right, morality would require irrationality.

Do moral norms require either of these things? I don’t think so.

Consider Ignorance. Think about the woman at the Club. Suppose she searches for a way to unlearn her racial stereotypes about Cosmos Club members and in general. Were she to succeed, she would have to abandon true, justified beliefs that are supported by her experience and, if push comes to shove, statistical information. Morality cannot possibly require this. First, the strategy is practically hopeless. We can’t simply will ourselves to forget our beliefs, and there is no way to induce such forgetting by, for example, swallowing a pill. Second, even if the strategy were practicable, it would be morally counter-productive. By forgetting her stereotype of Cosmos Club employees and patrons, the woman makes it impossible to recognize the need for the club to recruit more people of color as members and to make it a more inclusive place. She will also be blind to the larger racial inequalities and injustice in society at large, of which the Cos-


159 In “Comments”, Egan puts his and Gendler’s position like this: “we’ve sometimes got moral reasons to go in for epistemically suboptimal conduct… (77).” In “Epistemic Costs,” Gendler mostly frames her argument in terms of costs but sometimes adopts a stronger formulation of the problem along the lines I am suggesting. For example, she observes, “encoding information about racial inequity itself problematic—you are faced with a choice between explicit [epistemic] irrationality through base-rate neglect or implicit irrationality through encoding associations that you reflectively reject (57).”
mos Club presents a microcosm. To do good and to recognize injustice, she needs access to stereotypes and statistical base rates. Because of this, it is absurd to think that morality requires ignorance of stereotypes. That would be counterproductive and self-defeating from a moral point of view. Were people to choose Ignorance, they would be less able to live up to moral norms.

A similar argument applies to Suppression. According to Egan, this option requires one to “use the categories, but spend a bunch of cognitive resources suppressing or immediately excising the bad stereotype-concordant inferences, judgments, attitudes, etc.” However, morality could not possibly require this either. Like Ignorance, it is a hopeless practical strategy. Humans don’t have the ability to effectively suppress or excise first impressions. Thoughts like “that guy is a coat attendant” or “that fellow probably sings spirituals” or “this woman may be here to rob me” just pop into people’s heads. Suppression, at that point, is not an option. The morally problematic thought is already there. Second, the strategy is morally self-defeating. Evidence suggests that people who try to immediately suppress stereotypic thoughts experience what psychologists call “rebound effect.” The more one tries to suppress the stereotypic thought, the more salient that thought becomes. So, if moral norms require suppression, they require people to do something that is likely to make them less likely to live up to moral norms. How could morality require people do to something that makes them less likely to achieve the solution they seek? If there are more effective strategies out there to rid people of bad stereotypic thoughts, we should think that these are morally required instead.


More effective strategies are arguably available. Drawing on a rich history of research in psychology, Alex Madva suggests that people should implement “if-then strategies.” For example, if the woman at the Cosmos Club knows that she is susceptible to objectionable stereotypic inferences, she might give herself a mantra before she arrives for dinner: “If I see a someone in Club uniform, then I will ask for my coat.” By using this mantra, she attempts to replace one heuristic with another. Instead of inferring that someone is a coat check attendant because that person black, she infers that someone is a coat check attendant only if the person is wearing a uniform. In doing so, she adopts a more reliable way to predict whom is and whom is not a coat check attendant. All the coat checks wear club uniforms. No Cosmos Club members do. If the woman uses this mantra, it’s plausible that she could prevent herself from seeing John Hope Franklin and thinking “that guy works at the coat check!” Instead of having this thought, she would scan the dining room for someone in uniform. Since Franklin is wearing an expensive tuxedo, he would not catch her attention as someone likely to be a coat check attendant. No uniform—not a coat check attendant. Here is a second strategy. Before she enters the Cosmos Club, the woman might expose herself to counter-examples to the stereotype: images of black men in positions of power and prestige that could be Cosmos Club members if they so choose. Keeping these counter-examples in mind, she may have been able to avoid simply assuming that a black man in the Cosmos Club dining room was a coat check attendant.

The extent to which we can reasonably expect strategies such as these to reduce morally impermissible stereotyping is unclear. The matter is far from settled among psychologists. However, here is the thing to note: neither strategy for getting rid of the morally problematic thought requires anything like stupidity. They have the promise of making people’s judgments about unfamiliar individuals more reliable without the epistemic costs of Suppression or Ignorance. They are also better options morally speaking. They provide feasible—rather than unrealistic—strategies.


164 For a discussion of this point, see Lai, Calvin K. et al., “Reducing Implicit Racial Preferences: 1. A Comparative Investigation of 18 Interventions” (January 15, 2014). Available at SSRN: h ttp://ssrn.com/abstract=2155175 or http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.2155175 The study compares eighteen different interventions to reduce implicit racial preferences. Eight of the seventeen are found to be effective. However, the study found “no intervention consistently reduced explicit racial preferences.”

Such strategies cannot be the whole story. We don’t really know what works, so it is hard to know what, exactly, is morally required of us in terms of cognitive therapy. We also might worry that humans are not likely to implement any such cognitive therapies in a way that reduces morally objectionable thoughts across contexts and in the long term. A third objection is that we have limited time and energy. Should we really be directing these limited resources towards fixing our thoughts when there are, so to speak, bigger fish to fry?

Think, once again, about the woman at the Cosmos Club. Moral norms give her reason to prod the Cosmos Club to recruit more members of color. If the dining room contained more than a single representative black man, if there were a dozen black men having dinner there, it would be harder for her to use the same race-based heuristic. Moral norms might also require her to support initiatives in wider society that help us to better understand the causes of racial inequality and to fix them. For example, as Elizabeth Anderson eloquently argues in \textit{The Imperative of Integration}, segregation enables the objectionable thoughts of this woman and others. Take steps to fix segregation, and objectionable stereotyping will likely be reduced. One finds no imperative for stupidity or epistemic irrationality here. Instead, we find a demand for social change.

Institutional fixes often seem to make sense. Research also shows, for example, that mandatory yearly hiring reviews increase diversity in corporations.\footnote{Alexandra Kalev et al., “Best Practices or Best Guesses? Assessing the Efficacy of Corporate Affirmative Action and Diversity Policies,” \textit{American Sociological Review}, 71 (2006): 589-617. Based on analysis from employers in the US, Kalev et al. argue that diversity training—including training about implicit bias and stereotyping—is the least effective way to increase diversity in workforces. See also Soohan Kim, Alexandra Kalev, and Frank Dobbin, “Progressive Corporations at Work: The Case of Diversity Programs,” \textit{N.Y.U. Review of Law and Social Change} 171 (2012), 171-213.} The hypothesis is this: knowing that their decisions will be scrutinized, managers have a disincentive to rely on first impressions, which are often heavily influenced by stereotypes. The same study showed that educating managers about implicit bias and stereotyping did nothing to improve diversity. If this is right, we might be wasting our time by encouraging individuals to engage in cognitive therapy in the hopes of reducing problematic biases.

If we investigate institutional changes, do we find that morality requires stupidity? Perhaps. Consider blind evaluations. A university might institute a mandatory policy of removing names from job applicants CVs so that gender, ethnic, and racial biases cannot affect how credentials are judged. Such policies appear to violate an alleged principle of rationality: the principle of
total evidence. The principle of total evidence says, roughly, that we should “use all the available evidence when estimating probability.”167 So, for example, if I am a VMI admissions officer, I should use all my evidence, including a person’s gender, when trying to figure out how likely it is that he or she will be a good fit for the school. If I prevent myself from using this information by having someone excise the information in advance or by refusing to use it in reasoning, I am failing to use my total evidence. So my decision is not rational.

Or is it? I.J. Good puts the rationale for the principle of total evidence like this:

> it pays to take into account further evidence, provided that the cost of collecting and using this evidence, although positive, can be ignored. In particular, we should use all the evidence already available, provided that the cost of doing so is negligible. With this proviso then, the principle of total evidence follows from the principle of rationality.168

In case of hiring and college applications, there are significant epistemic and moral costs associated with using information about group membership, including information provided by stereotypes. We run the risk of being biased by the information. We also threaten to undermine the fairness of the judgment at hand. The proviso identified by Good thus becomes relevant. If the epistemic and moral costs of using our total evidence are not negligible—if they are, in fact, too high to ignore—we aren’t rationally bound by the principle of total evidence.169 Even committed Bayesians can admit as much.

The result is vindicating. If we adopt blind grading policies for our students, we are not violating a principle of epistemic rationality. The same goes for hiring committees take steps to conceal certain kinds of evidence from themselves in the initial stages of decision making. Because epistemic norms do not always require us to use our total evidence, they do not always require us to take into account information about group membership—including information conveyed by stereotypes—when reasoning. When the moral or epistemic costs of paying attention to such information are potentially high, we can opt to hide the information from ourselves if this is in fact a feasible and effective option.170

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169 For a related argument, see Lara Buchak, “Instrumental Rationality, Epistemic Rationality, and the Evidence-Gathering,” Philosophical Perspectives 24 (2010), 85-120.

170 I myself am not convinced that blind evaluations are a panacea. In the case of hiring, information about social group membership often leaks through, e.g., in candidates’ evaluations even though people’s names are struck from dossiers. It also can only apply at initial stages in the process. One cannot feasibly hide job candidates gender or ethnicity when they interview.
What about other kinds of institutional changes? For example, racial and ethnic profiling policies. Striking down such policies would not stop negative stereotyping. However, it would make acting on stereotype driven expectations illegal. Police officers in Arizona, for example, would not be allowed to pull over Latino drivers on the suspicion that they could be undocumented non-citizens. Morally speaking, that would be a good thing. Those trying to enforce immigration law might, however, complain that it requires them to act as if they are stupid. They are forced to ignore information relevant to doing their job. Such allegations are common when people try to defend profiling policies. But are they true?

To better answer that question, return to an earlier example. In that example, I am walking alone at night in a quiet residential area, and I hear footsteps behind me. I turn to see a scruffy, dark-skinned man who appears to be African American in a hooded sweatshirt. What am I do that?

Suppose I expect that this person is likely to rob me. According to Gendler, this is just what I ought rationally to expect. She writes:

\[
\text{it [base rate information] should lead a person to update her prior probability; rationally, she should come to believe with respect to certain racial groups that the likelihood of a member of that racial group committing a certain sort of crime is higher than for a member of some other racial group.}^{171}
\]

This amounts to racial profiling. What, then, am I to do? Crossing the street is deeply problematic from a moral point of view, even if it is nonetheless permissible. It communicates to the person behind me that I am stereotyping him, that is, forming an expectation of him based on group membership. My action potentially harms the man behind me by stigmatizing him, and it reflects troubling racial inequalities. As a result, from a moral point of view, there are good reasons not to cross the street. Perhaps we should keep walking, implicitly letting the person know that we reject the stereotype. Perhaps we should say hello. There are options. They are potentially risky options that could backfire and place us in danger. Yet risks may be worth bearing, morally speaking.

Suppose I decide not to cross the street. Suppose I keep walking. Can we say that moral norms justify stupidity or that they require ignoring base rates? No. My act of continuing on my way is made in recognition of stereotypes depicting African American men as criminals and with a recognition of statistical information supporting the stereotypes. The fact that I keep walking indicates that I refuse to automatically assume that any random black man fits the stereotype and, therefore, to take part in stigmatizing behavior. The behavior may be seen as foolhardy. It may be seen as virtuous. Either way, it is not epistemically irrational. I am not ignoring or suppressing or denying any reasonable beliefs. Someone may object that I act “as if” the stereotype is false when I know full well that it is true. But that characterization is incorrect. If I choose to do the supererogatory thing, it is not because I am pretending to be stupid. It is because I have certain priorities. I prioritize doing the morally best thing over doing the thing that better protects my personal safety. Someone might call that a stupid or irrational decision. But we should see

\[\text{Gender, “Epistemic Costs,” 56.}\]
such pejoratives for what they are: an expression of disagreement with priorities, not a statement about someone’s failure to live up to epistemic norms.

The same observation applies to profiling policies. When profiling policies are struck down, people are being asked to re-prioritize. A policy that permits law enforcement agents to randomly stop Latino citizens violates citizens’ rights. It also stigmatizes Latinos. In such a case, moral norms require prioritizing rights and equality over immigration arrests. They do not require ignoring base rates. Imagine a border patrol agent sitting by the side of the highway, fuming because he lacks probable cause to stop legions of potentially undocumented workers. What is he angry about? He is angry about having to prioritize right over arrests. He doesn’t agree with these priorities. Given his actual priorities, he may feel as if he is being asked to ignore evidence or suppress rational inferences, but, actually, that is not what morality requires. Morality requires that he reform his preferences, values, and goals.

We have not been able to validate the idea that morality requires stupidity. In cases of conflict, people’s stereotypic expectations are inherently problematic from a moral point of view, despite being rational. In such cases, we’ve found that morality may require:

1. Distrusting first impressions.
2. Being more conscientious about gathering evidence and forming expectations than one otherwise would be.
3. Creating “if then” plans that reduce bad stereotypical inferences and make one’s judgments more reliable.
4. Excluding information about social group membership when norms of fairness require meritocratic judgments.
5. Keeping quiet instead of uttering stereotypes.
6. Acting in ways that are risky or non-ideal from a personal point of view.
7. Supporting social and political initiatives that undermine the conditions under which morally impermissible stereotyping is rational.

None of these demands requires epistemic irrationality. None requires stupidity.
Conclusion

When we call something a stereotype, we tend to mean it as a criticism. If someone says, “Asians are good at math” or “women are empathetic,” for example, I might interject, “You’re stereotyping” in order to convey my disapproval of their utterances. Given this, we might have expected that stereotyping is always wrong. After all, the way the word is being used presupposes that there is something wrong with the phenomenon as such. However, as I’ve shown, this is a false presupposition. Forming expectations about persons based on their real or perceived group membership is not always morally or epistemically impermissible. Nor have we found decisive moral or epistemic objections to stereotypes. Indeed, when it comes to epistemic matters, we’ve found that stereotypes and stereotyping are indispensable from a rational point of view.

This result is surprising. Despite first appearances, there is no wrong of stereotyping. Sometimes it is perfectly permissible to stereotype. Not only is this result surprising, it is politically urgent. You might have thought that we should abolish all social stereotypes. You might have thought that we should never form expectations about individuals based on their group membership. Neither thought turns out to be true. Despite the fact that stereotyping can both epistemically and morally problematic, it can be rational and even good from a moral point of view.

How does my analysis affect our conception of a stereotype? In so far as I’ve given reasons to give up the false presupposition that stereotyping is inherently bad, I’ve provided an argument against conceptualizing stereotypes and stereotyping in way that contains this false presupposition. The alternative way of thinking about stereotyping, what I’ve called the descriptive view of stereotypes and stereotyping, does not contain this presupposition. To stereotype, according to this view, is to employ generic views of groups associated with our concepts or with their formation or use.

Some may want to reject this view of stereotyping, holding on to the idea that stereotyping is inherently bad. “Rather than adopt the descriptive view of stereotyping,” they may say, “we’d rather just stipulate that the words ‘stereotype’ and ‘stereotyping’ refer to morally or epistemically impermissible phenomena only. We thus reject what you take to be the main upshot of your work, namely, that stereotyping can be morally and epistemically permissible.”

On one hand, I want to press advocates of this view. The central example on which my first upshot is built—the pool case—seem to be a paradigm case of stereotyping. Yet the pool case is both morally and epistemically permissible. Why does the pool case seem like an instance of stereotyping? Because, in it, someone forms expectations about an individual based on real or perceived group membership. The pool attendant categorized someone as a certain type of person based on mere appearances and made inferences about what she was like based on stereotypes. Advocates of the normative view of stereotypes owe us an explanation here. Is it really plausible that the pool attendant wasn’t stereotyping?

On the other hand, while I believe that my big conclusion, namely, that stereotyping can be morally and epistemically permissible follows if you start with paradigm cases, my job is not to police how people use the word “stereotype.” I’ve given good reasons to adopt a descriptive
view of stereotyping. But, if you strenuously object to using the word in this way, so be it. Even so, I want to say, my analysis will be extremely valuable to you. According to the normative view of stereotypes and stereotyping, the terms refer to all and only bad instances of employing generic views of group. However, this is a stipulation. On its own, it cannot help us to distinguish permissible and impermissible cases. So we still need an understanding of why the impermissible cases are that way.

Here my view provides assistance. In chapter 2, I argued that epistemic objections to stereotyping are diverse; therefore, when we object to a case of stereotyping on epistemic grounds, we will not always have a single objection in mind. So we must be pluralists about what’s epistemically wrong with stereotyping in the bad cases. In chapter 3, I argued that there is no simple way to characterize morally impermissible stereotyping either. No intrinsic wrong is present in the bad cases. So we cannot say that stereotyping is the intrinsically wrong way of forming expectations about individuals based on group membership. Nor could I find a unifying extrinsic wrong present in all cases of impermissible cases. The best candidates—prejudice, inequality, harm, and unfairness—were neither necessary nor sufficient for impermissible stereotyping. This reveals something interesting: even if we stipulate that ‘stereotyping’ refers to morally impermissible phenomena only, there is no wrong of stereotyping. That is, there is no single wrong to which the charge of ‘stereotyping’ could refer. Instead, we find that there are a range of extrinsic wrongs associated with impermissible stereotyping, and these wrongs share no underlying unity. So we find that ‘stereotyping,’ if we stipulate that the terms refers to all and only impermissible cases of the phenomenon, refers to a diverse class of wrongs. This result is surprising: it shows that we must be pluralists when it comes to stereotyping. There is no wrong of stereotyping. There are only an associated collection of wrongs.

The third upshot of my view is practical in nature. Suppose we want to avoid the bad kind of stereotyping. We all should want this! My analysis suggests that achieving this goal would be complicated by the fact that we cannot craft a criterion of wrongness (or a decision rule) that would allow us to pick out morally impermissible instances of stereotyping. All the conditions that initially strike us as sufficient for morally impermissible stereotyping actually aren’t sufficient for it. For example, we can’t cite the mere presence of harm or inequality or unfairness or prejudice as decisive evidence of moral impermissibility. None of these conditions, surprisingly, are sufficient in themselves. A theory of why stereotyping is wrong may still be possible. We would just need principles that contain exception clauses. For example, we might argue that stereotyping that violate norms of fairness is morally impermissible all other things equal. In cases where fairness conflicts with other values and these other values dominate—as in the airline case—all other things are not equal. In this way, we might string together a series of principles that could help us to identify bad instances of stereotyping. We’d simply have to be careful in applying such principles to pay attention to particulars of cases. On the other hand, a series of principles with a potentially ever, expanding exception clauses may not seem like much of a theory at all. It would seem more accurate to the case, some may argue, to say that no theory of wrongness is possible. Instead of a theory of wrongness, we have the conclusion that stereotyping is only ever morally impermissible relative to a set of particulars. There is something desirable about this idea. From a practical perspective, it seems undeniable that specifics of cases matter: the social identity of the stereotyper and the person stereotyped, the content of the stereotype, its valence, the stereotype’s connection or lack thereof to historical and present injustice,
the likely or actual effects of stereotyping in this case, the exact context of its use. If these details always matter, it would make sense that we could not formalize simple, absolute rules about when not to stereotype. Nor would we be able to create a criterion of impermissibility. At best, we would have rules of thumb, and the vaguely Aristotlean advice that we must always do what the situation calls for.

All this points towards the following conclusion: the ethics of stereotyping is unexpectedly complex. If no single wrong unifies all impermissible cases, no singular prescription, e.g., “Don’t be prejudiced” will cover all such cases. The upshot is that the best solutions to the moral dangers of stereotyping will be diverse and tailored to particulars of cases.

These results are philosophically significant, and they constitute progress towards an adequate ethics and epistemology of stereotyping. Of course, they are only the beginning of a complete analysis. A more complete analysis would better answer the question: what is to be done about the wrongs associated with stereotyping?

My approach prevents me from offering grand proclamations. However, I am interested in the question of how best to go about fixing these problems—and in certain impediments faced by anyone who hopes to find solutions in specific cases.

Here is what seems true. As individuals, we face a rational and moral imperative: don’t engage in epistemically or morally impermissible forms of stereotyping. Yet stereotyping is not subject to absolute voluntary control. We can’t will away stereotypic associations and beliefs. We can’t always stop ourselves from accessing or using facts about group membership. We find ourselves in a position where we must accept the epistemic and practical benefits of stereotyping without being able to fully prevent ourselves from reproducing its epistemic and moral costs.

If individual attempts to correct for the wrongs of stereotyping will never fully work, we should look beyond ethics for solutions to those wrongs. Stereotyping thus becomes a subject for social and political theory. For example, in the Imperative of Integration, Elizabeth Anderson argues that segregation in the United States explains why negative stereotypes of black men retain their force and why stereotyping continues to create racial stigma. Integration is her solution to the wrongs of racial stereotyping. In The New Jim Crow, Michelle Alexander argues that the war on drugs and the rise of mass incarceration in the U.S. help to entrench stereotypes of black men as criminals.172 As both Anderson and Alexander clearly see, stereotyping is part of the problem, but it can never be the whole story about why racial inequalities exist or how we fix them. This does not absolve individuals of a responsibility to do what they can to avoid morally impermissible stereotyping. Rather, it shows that fixing the problems associated with stereotyping cannot be achieved by cognitive therapy alone.

Something else follows as well. We should expect that stereotyping will pose a threat to justice even under the best possible social conditions—even in a fully just state in which citizens are

committed to equality and fairness. The thought is this. Stereotypes and stereotyping will always exist so long as (1) the social world is diverse and (2) humans tend to see the world in terms of kinds and form expectations about others based on their real or perceived group membership. If these two conditions obtain, even in a just state, even if no one is prejudiced, there will be stereotypes and stereotyping. Moreover, we cannot expect that citizens in a just state will always be able to prevent themselves from stereotyping in situations where norms of fairness demand judging persons as individuals. Stereotypes tacitly influence what we see, remember, pay attention to, and ignore. They can affect how we evaluate and treat people, even when we don’t realize it. Therefore, we shouldn’t expect even people with the best of intentions to know that they are stereotyping or to refrain from doing so when situations demand it.

Political theorists should take note. One consequence is that ideal theories of justice—including John Rawls’s theory of justice—might need revised in order better account for the moral and political hazards of stereotyping. A second result is that we should stop seeing anti-discrimination and equal opportunity law and policy as solutions to a temporary problem. Even if there were no legacies of racial or gender injustice in society, we would need such laws and policy to address the wrongs of stereotyping.

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