BEING

On Being with Krista Tippett

Mahzarin Banaji

The Mind Is a Difference-Seeking Machine

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The emerging science of implicit bias is one of the most promising fields for animating the human change that makes social change possible. The social psychologist Mahzarin Banaji is one of its primary architects. She understands the mind as a "difference-seeking machine" that helps us order and navigate the overwhelming complexity of reality. But this gift also creates blind spots and biases, as we fill in what we don't know with the limits of what we do know. This is science that takes our grappling with difference out of the realm of guilt, and into the realm of transformative good.

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Guest

Mahzarin Banaji is Richard Clarke Cabot Professor of Social Ethics in the department of psychology at Harvard University and a 2018 inductee into the National Academy of Sciences. She is the co-author of and co-founder of **Project Implicit**, an organization aimed at educating the public on implicit bias.

Transcript

Krista Tippett, host: The science of implicit bias is one of the most promising fields for animating the human change that makes social change possible — and the social psychologist Mahzarin Banaji is one of its primary architects. She's helping us see how the mind is a "difference-seeking machine" — and in this way, it helps us order and navigate what could be the overwhelming complexity of reality. Yet this same gift creates blind spots and biases as we fill in what we don't know with the limits of what we do know. This is science that takes our grappling with difference out of the realm of guilt and into the realm of transformative good.

[*music: "Seven League Boots" by Zoe Keating*]

Mahzarin Banaji: I don't want people to not learn from guilt and not learn from shame. I think those are powerful motives. They have made us, in large part, the more civilized people we are. But I do believe that, in our culture and in many cultures, we are at a point where our conscious minds are so ahead of our less conscious minds. We must recognize that, and yet, ask people the question, "Are you the good person you yourself want to be?" And the answer to that is no, you're not. That's just a fact. We need to deal with that if we want to be on the path of self-improvement.

Ms. Tippett: I'm Krista Tippett, and this is *On Being*. Mahzarin Banaji is a professor of social ethics in the psychology department at Harvard University. She's the co-author of *Blindspot: Hidden Biases of Good People*, and she's the creator of the Implicit Association Test, which has been taken by over 17 million people. She was born in India and raised in the town of Secunderabad. I spoke with her in 2016.

Ms. Tippett: I start all my interviews by inquiring about the

religious or spiritual background of your childhood, however you would define that now.

Ms. Banaji: I didn't know that, but that will take us an hour, because I come from one of the world's minority religions but that also happens to be of great interest to scholars of religion. I was born and raised a Zoroastrian. Zoroastrianism is probably the world's oldest monotheistic religion. It predates Judaism by about 1,500 years, some scholars will argue. And it's a religion that actually dominated much of Central Asia for many centuries. It seems like we're about 80,000 or so in the world. Fifty thousand live in Mumbai, in what was Bombay, and the rest are scattered all over. It's of great historical interest that we exist. But it's also anthropologically odd that we're dying out so fast. We don't accept conversion. For some odd reason, we don't have children. We tend to marry less than most others. I and my siblings, none of us have children.

Ms. Tippett: Interesting.

Ms. Banaji: Yeah. But I am strangely kind of proud to be of this community of people dying out. [*laughs*]

Ms. Tippett: [*laughs*] Well, I wonder if that flows into — it seems related to the question I want to ask you, if you can trace the origins in your early life to these passions that you follow now. And of course that's a complicated thing to summarize, but I'd say the way you are working with our human approach to the other, to difference, to bias, to diversity — were there roots of that that are formative in your life that maybe inclined you?

Ms. Banaji: I have no faith in people's ability to reflect back on their lives and to accurately report on what may be the case. But I do have theories. And one such theory is that — I actually lived in a Zoroastrian enclave. People who surrounded me as neighbors were all Zoroastrians. We lived in a compound. When we left the compound, we knew we were the other. I've actually felt more comfortable in the United States because it is a country of immigrants, where even though I was odder than the oddest, I still am one of many people who probably feel that way.

So, there was a deep comfort arriving in the United States, as I did in 1980, from a country that is largely Hindu and has many minorities and many intergroup conflicts around the issue of religion. But my group was always reasonably protected. We were

relatively safe. We knew we could not participate in some larger society as equals, but we also knew we were privileged in some way because we were wealthier, we were more educated, and therefore had certain protections.

Ms. Tippett: It's interesting to me to think about the work you do now, the discoveries you've made and helped us make as a culture. But it seems to me — and correct me if I'm wrong — that when you wandered into psychology, we were kind of convincing ourselves that human beings were rational beings, and the language of the unconscious had kind of fallen out of favor. Is that right?

Ms. Banaji: It's so completely right that I had this flashback to my meeting with my dissertation committee in 1983. And I remember wanting to study the topic of repression. [*laughs*] An old Freudian concept. I, of course, had long given up any belief in Freud's ideas as having been proven. I knew that the fact of an unconscious appealed to me. I read studies, experiments done, where you can have people record words into a tape recorder. And then you can have them hear those words played back to them through headphones like I'm wearing now, except that they are the same words said by others. And you're asked to identify the words that you're hearing that were said by you in your voice versus words that were said by others. It turns out we're not very good at doing that. We can't tell our own voices apart from the voices of others.

Ms. Tippett: Really?

Ms. Banaji: We're almost at chance at being able to do that. However, the investigators also hooked people up to a machine that, in those old days, measured physiology in sort of the crudest possible way: skin conductance. How much sweat do your fingers excrete when you hear your own voice versus the voice of others? And the data showed that you actually must be recognizing your own voice at some implicit or unconscious level because the skin conductance measure was much higher when you heard your own voice versus the voice of others. Even though cognitively you couldn't tell the two apart. I was completely fascinated by this.

Ms. Tippett: So, your body knows something, recognizes something that your mind does not know.

Ms. Banaji: Somewhere, some system in you. Not your conscious mind. I was just bowled over by this. [*laughs*] I thought, how can it be that in the same person, in the same mind, there are multiple

minds, in a sense? Some part of me knows, some part of me doesn't know — the same thing. It always stuck with me. So that years later, when I made the discovery that people make judgments about the fame of a name. "How famous is this name?" And it turns out if you've heard a name that you could randomly sort of pull out of the phone book, "Sebastian Weissdorf." If I hear the name or if I've seen it somewhere in some irrelevant context and then two days later I'm asked, "Is this a famous person?" I'm more likely to say "yes."

So there's a kind of a lingering perceptual, what we might call, fluency for that visual stimulus. And I just did that same study except that I thought, I'll use both names of men and women, and discovered, to my great astonishment and my colleague Tony Greenwald's astonishment, that women's names did not become famous overnight in this study. So we thought, oh, so the underlying perceptual fluency can be exactly the same, but at the point of making a decision — "Is this famous?" — some other standard is being used. If female, not famous. If male, famous. People were doing this without awareness. So I would quiz all 400 of them. "Did you use the gender of the name in making your choice?" "Absolutely not."

Well, how could this be? And I just thought this was more interesting than the memory bias. So off I went doing some different things that now make up the last 30 years of my career.

Ms. Tippett: I want to ask you — you use the language I believe very often of "implicit." I don't know if that is a synonym or a refinement of the word "unconscious." Like what does that word connote for you?

Ms. Banaji: It's a very good question. I have pushed the word "implicit" in part because the word "unconscious" in our culture has a certain meaning. First of all, it is psychoanalytic. But more than that, it has the implication that the unconscious is this incredibly motivated, smart process that is constantly trying to do things that are in my interest and shove away the deep dark secrets of my childhood that I don't wish to remember. And the science has not produced good evidence for that. The science tells us that the word "unconscious" really should be used to refer to ordinary things, things that are irrelevant, nothing that's dynamic and necessary. Someday maybe we'll get evidence for that, but right now it's that I saw something in a store that had a certain feature,

a pattern. And I see it again, and I like it more because it's familiar. So the word "implicit" came to be used by us almost in an effort to try to demystify what the old "unconscious" might have meant. It's a failing project. [*laughs*]

Ms. Tippett: [*laughs*] Is it?

Ms. Banaji: People love the word "unconscious." Everywhere I go, they say, "You're the expert on unconscious bias." I say, "Yep. OK." [*laughs*]

Ms. Tippett: And maybe because of the Freudian, lingering associations, I think "implicit" takes also out the suspicion of moral blame.

Ms. Banaji: I agree with you. That is a part of it. I don't want people to not learn from guilt and not learn from shame. I think those are powerful motives. They have made us, in large part, the more civilized people we are. But I do believe that, in our culture and in many cultures, we are at a point where our conscious minds are so ahead of where our less conscious minds are. Our conscious minds deeply believe in egalitarianism, in selecting people based on things called merit, on talent, and not based on the color of people's skin, or their height, or whether they have hair on their head. And yet, we are doing that.

So I like what you just said which is "implicit" just allows us to shed that whole sort of moral encasing in which so much of our values about — "Am I a discriminator or not?" — comes. I am especially interested in, letting people let go of that sort of sense — "I'm a bad human being." The title of the book, therefore, has been *Blindspot: Hidden Biases of Good People*. The "good people" is extremely important to me. I do believe that we have changed over the course of our evolutionary history into becoming better and better people who have higher and higher standards for how we treat others. So we are good. We must recognize that, and yet, ask people the question, "Are you the good person you yourself want to be?" And the answer to that is "no, you're not." That's just a fact. And we need to deal with that if we want to be on the path of self-improvement.

[*music: "Finding Family" by Ben Sollee*]

Ms. Tippett: I'm Krista Tippett, and this is *On Being*. Today, with social psychologist Mahzarin Banaji.

Ms. Tippett: There's a little test, a grid, really, in the preface to your book, *Blindspot*, where you actually are able, as the reader, in less than a minute, to have this experience of seeing something on a page, moving the picture so that part of the picture disappears, and experiencing that your brain fills in the blank with what it expected to see there. It doesn't show you that you have a blind spot. [*laughs*]

You think you're seeing something, and you think you know something. This, as an analogy for the fact that we also go through life with partial knowledge which we fill in, that this applies to social groups as well and that our brain is giving us information that may or may not be the whole picture. [*laughs*] I don't know. Is that too simplified?

Ms. Banaji: No. It's not too simplified. It is actually fundamental. It is a hallmark of human intelligence that to survive, to evolve, to be able to do ordinary things, we have to fill in. We must fill in. We have theories about how the world works. I know that when I'm speaking to you in this little studio room, that certain things are going to happen. I'll listen to questions. I'll answer them. But I'm not going to listen, all of a sudden, to rock music being played. Certain things are simply not going to happen. People aren't going to walk into the room. These are reasonable assumptions.

Ms. Tippett: We create order, and we need order to function.

Ms. Banaji: Yeah. And they work. They work in many, many cases. But our worlds, socially, intellectually, in the jobs that we have to do, they're no longer predictable in that way. I can sit trying to admit a candidate to a graduate school. Somebody, a manager, can be trying to think about who to hire. The very theories that I used to have that said, "When people look different from me, don't hire them. That's not going to work out. They don't have your values. They don't understand what you're saying. Keep them out of your inner circle." That was a very reasonable philosophy a few dozen years ago, a few hundred years ago, for sure. And all of a sudden, I'm confronted by people who look and speak entirely different from me, and they are the ones I should outsource to. They are the ones who will solve the problem of my science by inventing a new piece of equipment that will show me something about the brain that I could never have done.

How am I to cope with this? This is an old machine in my head telling me what to do based on theories that it has learned, that

seemed reasonable and rational. And all of a sudden, I have this enormous task before me of putting all that aside and asking newly, “Is this really in my interest?”

I’ve just come from teaching a class to a group of students at Harvard Business School on a problem that they read. It’s an Airbnb problem. People who run Airbnb places — these are homes that people own into which they can allow people to come and stay for a smaller amount of money than those would pay if they stayed in a hotel. It turns out that there is a race bias here. If you are black, you are around the order of about 15 percent less likely to get a house.

Ms. Tippett: Because the host has an option to accept your reservation. And so, how do the hosts — do they infer that by name, or pictures, or…?

Ms. Banaji: They do. It could be name or pictures. And names are very interesting. Names give a lot of information. I gave them the example that if somebody saw my name, an “H” next to a “Z,” that’s a signal of a person who you shouldn’t want in your home. Except that my email address also continues on and says “@harvard.edu.” All of a sudden, I’m a wonderful guest. I’m a safe guest. I will pay. I won’t break their furniture. All of this goes into computing how you make your choices.

And here is my interest. At this moment, let’s say that we set aside the problem of those who are consciously prejudiced and who say, “I do not wish to have black people live in my house.” Let’s put them aside, because for now, I find them much less interesting, and I have very little to say to them.

But let me take the example of somebody who might be like myself, who has no such conscious belief, who actually wishes to be a person who wants a diverse group of people who come and live in her apartment. I believe that a large number of those people who are turning African Americans down are such people. I think large numbers of us want to make money, and we want to be fair. And if we’re not being fair, and if we’re not making money, I think some scientific evidence can play a role in making us aware.

Ms. Tippett: Is our need to create order out of the chaos that is reality behind — I’m always struck, and this is another kind of reflection of this, by how each of us knows, if we’re asked to think about it for two seconds, that within our group, whether it’s our

family, or the people we work with, or whatever our clubs are, whatever our avocations are, we know that within that group itself, even if it's a small group, there's huge diversity. There are people who we are more like, and people we're very different from, and perhaps people who drive us completely crazy, especially in our families. And yet, they are kin. But we assume a kind of monolithic quality to others. [*laughs*] Is that something our brains do also?

Ms. Banaji: In the book, we report on a little riddle which many people now have heard. It was originally a riddle printed in *Reader's Digest*, I believe. But it also appeared on *All in the Family*. [*laughs*] Anybody who watched TV in the '70s kind of knows this riddle. The riddle goes like this: A father and his son were in a car accident. The father dies at the scene. The boy, badly injured, is rushed to a local hospital. In the hospital, the operating surgeon looks at the boy and says, "I can't operate on this boy. He's my son." How can this be if the father just died?

When I was asked this riddle in 1985, my answer was, "Oh, the father who died at the scene was the adoptive father, and then the father who was the surgeon was the biological father." Now, this answer is so convoluted compared to what is the actually correct answer that it boggles my mind that I did not get the right answer. So, I put this riddle up on a website recently, asked lots of people — 80 percent today of people who read this riddle do not know the right answer. Eighty percent.

Ms. Tippett: I mean, I've heard this before so I know what the right answer is.

Ms. Banaji: Of course. So you know. The right answer, of course, is — why don't you say?

Ms. Tippett: It's the mother.

Ms. Banaji: The surgeon is the boy's mother. Duh. How could this be that I didn't get this answer? I say this in my lectures to people, and I saw a woman recently who, when she heard the right answer, she hit her head on the table in front of her. [*laughs*] Later when she came up to speak to me with a big bruise on her forehead, I said to her, "I see that you didn't get the answer, and I saw what you did. I understand the frustration, but you shouldn't have hit yourself so hard." And she said, "Of course I should have. My mother is a surgeon."

Now think about this. There's something odd about the mind. OK, look. If 100 percent of surgeons were men, this would not be a bias. This would be a fact. I've talked to doctors who work in hospitals where 80 percent of the entering class of surgeons are women. And they don't get the right answer. That's what you mean by "monolith." What is it about our minds that doesn't allow us to get to an obvious right answer? Because there's almost like a firewall in our minds that the stereotype really is. It won't let us traverse into the domain of the right answer because there's a wall, and that wall is just sort of keeping us from getting there. Look, these simple ways of thinking paid off in the old world. You thought that way. There was no big ethical issue or an issue of not finding the right candidate or hiring the right candidate for the job. Your main issue was, "Do I survive to the next day?" I don't think the world is that way anymore, and yet, we must deal with the vestiges of these old ways of thinking.

Ms. Tippett: I'd love to talk to you about some of the things that are happening in culture now. One would be the ferment — what's the word I want to use? — in some places, uproar that's happening on college campuses around the country. What are you seeing, what intrigues you, what are the questions you're asking? What do you wish we were paying attention to?

Ms. Banaji: When I see this particular debate that you mention — and it's happening everywhere, on my campus included — I'm very excited by it, because it's making all of us deeply uncomfortable. I think this is terrific. We are being forced to answer the question of our generation. I come believing that people should be admitted to Harvard University based on their accomplishments. When we begin to do that, we find that there is a diversity of people who get in because there are many different forms of accomplishment. Ever since Harvard stopped using financial resources as a way of admitting, we now have a large number of students, close to half, who are on deep financial aid.

And that changes, literally, the complexion of college students with every underrepresented minority sitting in Harvard College in their numbers in the population, and some ethnic minorities sitting in numbers much larger than their numbers in the population — Asians, Jews, for example. So, we would sit around saying, "OK we're done. We've done our job. Harvard mimics the country. Imagine that." And a bunch of Harvard students say, "I don't feel comfortable here. I don't feel at home." Then we have

the events that have occurred on many college campuses where freedom of expression is being pitted against a need for safety. I come from a tradition — a Western tradition, I will add — where the desire to be and make students in your class uncomfortable is your mission.

It is my job to tell people to feel uncomfortable, to squirm, to go back and think hard about where they come from and so on. Now I'm being told that when I say that, I'm making somebody possibly uncomfortable. I've argued forever this is a safe room in which we can say anything, and we will deal with it. Because if we don't, we've basically given up the most fundamental aspect of who we are and what we prize and value and what I believe is at the heart of social change.

Even today in class when some wonderful student said, "Well, why should it be Airbnb's job to change society? If people don't want to have people who are black in their homes, that's their God-given right." A few minutes later, I said, "Andy," or whatever his name was, "You're right. That is currently a right. I can look at..." — and Andy was kind of beefy and bald. And I said, "I can look at your face and say, 'I don't like your face. And I certainly do not like men without hair on their head, so I don't want to hire you.'" You should have seen the change. So people are very open to the idea of speaking freely until the freedom is about them.

I could see — he actually slid down in his chair and became small. And I said, "Sit up. You're not a short, bald man. You're just bald." [*laughs*] I wanted him to realize that if he's going to dish it out, it's going to be dished back. And I could see African Americans and women in the room just look at me with their jaws dropping, like, "You actually just said that to him?" So, given that I am for this kind of speech, it does bother me when people say, "I feel unsafe." Then I realize that no value is absolute. I can have a deep, deep, deep value on freedom of expression, but the world didn't start yesterday with everybody equal. It started a long time ago.

And largely, I would say, advantaged African Americans who come to Harvard are people who have themselves lived in a fairly, I would say, safe place. But their world is different today than it would have been even 10 years ago. A black student at Harvard now must confront the fact that every week, somebody who looks like them is being shot in some part of the country. I don't understand how that doesn't create PTSD. I don't understand how

it doesn't have any impact. Therefore, as a professor, I need to now ask myself, what does that mean? How am I to make people for whom the world is unsafe feel safe, and equally safe? This is complex. There's nothing about this issue that is simple, but I have every faith that we will come out of it if we don't hold back, if we keep talking, and if we try to understand what the other is saying.

[*music: "Twenty Two Fourteen" by The Album Leaf*]

Ms. Tippett: After a short break, more conversation with Mahzarin Banaji. Subscribe to *On Being* on Apple Podcasts to listen again and discover produced and unedited versions of everything we do.

I'm Krista Tippett, and this is *On Being*. Today, I'm with the social psychologist Mahzarin Banaji. She's a pioneer of the science of implicit bias, which is helping us become aware of the unintentional blind spots we bring to our encounters with difference. She's helping take our grappling with this out of the realm of guilt and into transformative good.

Ms. Tippett: We're in such an interesting, intense moment. Just to speak to what you called the personal, but the personal in the context of geopolitical realities, of living in a globalized world, of living with this pace of technology. As you say, we are in a very different situation from our ancestors who should have been threatened by anybody who was different and unknown.

Now, the challenge for us is to collaborate and to understand our well-being linked to that of people around the globe in very concrete ways. And yet, it does feel like fear is on the rise. So what does fear do to these dynamics that you study and how do we work with that?

Ms. Banaji: Fear is so easy to create. And yet, we know that fear is not equal. My colleague Liz Phelps, the neuroscientist, and I did a study many years ago where we actually created fear in people by associating a neutral face with a shock. You would sit there and you would see face number one, nothing would happen.

You would see face number one again, and nothing would happen. But face number two, whenever it appeared, would give you a slightly uncomfortable buzz on your finger. Very quickly we learn to fear face two and not to fear face one. So we gave to African Americans and to white Americans faces that were either white or

black, and half the white faces produced fear and half the black faces produced fear, but not the others. But then we stopped giving the aversive stimulus. Now you see the same face, too, and before it used to give you a shock, and now it does not.

What's of interest to us, as scientists, is how fast do you lose fear? How fast do you give up fearing the previously fearful person? What we discovered is that fear reduction is deeply based on who that other is. You will reduce your fear towards previously fear-producing others if they are members of your group. For whites, you lose fear to white faster than to black. To black Americans, you lose fear to black more quickly than you would to white. Somebody who wrote a commentary on our paper actually likened our result to the real world question of terrorism and why it is that we might lose fear to homegrown terrorists far more quickly than we do to foreign-born terrorists, for example.

Very interesting question, because we do try foreign-born terrorists in this country as we do homegrown ones. To know this result is important. We have some reason to think that intergroup intimacy might reduce this bias. There's no excellent evidence, but people who say they've had romantic relations with members of the other group, whites who've had romantic relationships with African Americans, and African Americans who've had romantic relationships with whites, do tend to show lower bias of this kind.

So, I wouldn't call that strong evidence, but I would say there is some suggestion that breaking bread together, having intimacy of other kinds together, continuously, can, because the brain is malleable. It's not rigid. It has a set of default responses, but they're extremely malleable to experience. And that's what the modern world gives us. Do not pretend, I say, if you live in L.A. or in New York that just because you live in a diverse city that you are now protected. In fact, you may be worse off because you see things every day. Your brain has to notice them.

There are statistics about crime and who has which kind of job, and as you walk down the street, you notice who is well-dressed and who is not. All of this is being learned. God knows if you are an equivalent person in Montana, you may be more protected. But if you live in a diverse city like New York or L.A. and you use the city's diversity to change your experiences, I would argue that that would change you in some way.

Ms. Tippett: That mitigates somehow these impulses.

Ms. Banaji: Yes.

Ms. Tippett: It seems like it's often true that where fear is played on an idea of the other — and I would say that that happens with Muslims now, and I would say that it happens with refugees and immigrants — actually, it's kind of an abstraction. It's not necessarily groups that people are interacting with, as you say.

Ms. Banaji: I'm not remembering this study exactly, but there is an Eastern European country in which a survey was done where they were given a nonsense name of a group and asked, "How much do you hate them? How much would you like them not to come to our country?" They got large numbers of people saying, "We don't want them here, we really dislike them, they're filthy and mean and nasty." And they didn't exist. That was a made-up name.

So, I think that's what you're trying to get at. Now, of course, think about Muslims, who actually do exist. There are things that a subset of Muslims are doing that create legitimate fear in some people or in everybody, myself included. But the worry is what do we do about that when I find that there are Muslims who come up to me after a talk I give and they say, "I know that I'm never going to be promoted because I know that when people look at me, as they hear my name, that on my forehead gets written the word 'radical.'"

Ms. Tippett: I think a lot about how the virtue of tolerance is really kind of the core civic virtue that we enshrined in the '60s to say how we're going to navigate all this new difference. And that, in fact, it's not a very robust virtue because it actually kind of keeps us — it's like, "You stay over there and do what you do, and I'll be me." I don't know if you use the language of "virtues" or what an equivalent language would be for you; you are a scientist. The civil rights leaders mobilized around the notion of love. I wonder if you have a vocabulary of qualities that you think could be effective for us to try to cultivate at that personal level, compassion, or empathy — aspirations that might be added to, not to take away tolerance, but kind of complete tolerance in terms of what we know now.

Ms. Banaji: It's a good question. You're right about the word "tolerance." That's a good word. [*laughs*] I like it. I also see that it sounds a little naïve these days when we speak about it. I favor — and as you said, as a scientist, what's the word? My favorite word

is “understanding.” I know it’s somewhat colder than the word “compassion” or “empathy,” but my regular lab seminar, which is an ongoing course, is called the Understand Seminar. It has many different meanings, of course. We’re there to understand, to understand the research, and to make our own. But we study a set of topics that I believe that when you understand, you are left with no option but to change in some way. I like giving more complexity to the word “understand” whenever I have a chance.

Ms. Tippett: But I think you have to create environments where understanding feels safe to people and is possible.

Ms. Banaji: One of the things that we haven’t talked about is sort of what I think is at the core of the work my colleagues and I have done and that is to have built a test, to have built a method, to have created something on the web that you can go take. And it will give you an insight into your mind. What is the test? It’s very simple. The assumption is that when two things come to be paired with each other in our experience over, and over, and over again, like the word “bread” and “butter,” that when you say “bread,” “butter” will come to mind. Likewise, I’m going to argue when you say “leader,” “male” is going to come to mind. When you say “nurse,” “female” is going to come to mind. Our test tries to get at the strength of those associations, even if you consciously don’t want to.

When I take the test, in which I am asked to associate “male” and “career,” “female” and “home,” I can do it very, very easily. But when the test requires the opposite association of “male” and “home,” “female” and “career,” I pretty much fall apart. I can’t do it.

And when I can’t do it, I understand. I understand that I’m a product of a culture where the culture has now gotten into my head enough that I am the culture. I cannot say, “There is a culture out there. It’s biased, not me.” Consciously, that’s true. But not at this other level. And I would argue that when you come face-to-face with that, and if you visit implicit.harvard.edu, and take a test, it does produce a deep understanding, maybe not immediately, but after months of having taken the test.

I’ve had people call me up and say, “I took your stupid test six months ago and didn’t think anything was useful, but I just traveled to a new city where I now live, and I have to pick a doctor. And I selected a white doctor from the list of doctors before me at

the new HMO. And it turns out that the black doctor actually had expertise in my disease of diabetes. But I hadn't picked him. Now I think that maybe I see what your stupid test was trying to tell me then. And I didn't understand. I am writing to thank you for it."

Now this is a simple little report, but just think about it. Somebody rejects an experience. Later, something happens that's completely unrelated to it. And the person, because of conscious awareness and deep understanding of their minds, they come to an understanding that I did something that was not in my own interest. And that test may be telling me something. Those sorts of things give me hope.

[*music: "Small Memory (Tunng Remix)" by Jon Hopkins*]

Ms. Tippett: I'm Krista Tippett, and this is *On Being*. Today, with social psychologist Mahzarin Banaji.

Ms. Tippett: I'd love to have three more hours for you to give us what you know about where to take it from there. But I think I'll just ask the question this way — how do you construct your life, your environment? How do you move through the world differently having taken this test yourself, having also not liked the results? Because of this science that you do, what actions do you take that turns that understanding into change?

Ms. Banaji: This is me speaking as a person. Not necessarily as a scientist. I do two things. I no longer believe that I can just let information into my mind as it comes. I believe I must choose and edit. I can't go home and lie on my couch and turn on the TV and watch the thing that seems interesting because that is going to leave a mark on my mind. And I actually am pleased that the way technology now allows me to craft what I want to watch and listen to allows me greater freedom to say, "This is what I do not want to watch, and this is what I do want to watch."

Ms. Tippett: Could you give an example of something you might have watched before but you wouldn't watch now? Is that too personal? [*laughs*]

Ms. Banaji: [*laughs*] The easier thing to watch is what I don't want to watch. Look, I have to say I do like American football, but I don't watch it. That's an example. I have a hard time not watching it because I do love the sport. But it's a moral issue for me. If people are dying and becoming mentally ill from a sport, I think of

it as my having participated in watching gladiators. I cannot do it. It's a personal choice. I don't expect that it will translate to other people's choices. But it's a personal one.

The other thing that I do is to actually create inputs into my mind of my own making. I do think that in some ways our brains are simple and that they will believe that things are real even if they're not. So, that's what movies do. That's what novels do for us. So what if I have a series of 1,000 pictures that rotate through on my screen saver of people who come from many parts of the world that I will never, ever see or even think about. Look, just take an example close by. I have no idea what life for a farmer in Iowa is. I bet it's hard. I bet I have no idea what they have to deal with. I don't think I will ever truly understand.

But, right now, they are a distant group in my mind. I live in Cambridge, Massachusetts, and I don't think about farming and farmers. If my screensaver literally just points out the existence of such people and what their issues might be, I believe that my brain is going to begin to care at some level. And if I show myself possibilities that don't exist easily, that's even better.

These are hopes, but I don't just say it's a hope because I do know enough as a psychologist about learning and memory. I know that we learn. How much of this I need to do in order to change, I cannot say. But I can say that there is a point at which this brain is not just elastic in moving to what is being suggested, but that it may be plastic in that it can be reset into a new mold.

Ms. Tippett: That's wonderful. I just have one final question. It's a huge question. How you would start talking about what you've learned about what it means to be human, perhaps in ways that would have surprised you in your Zoroastrian childhood. [*laughs*]

Ms. Banaji: It's a surprise to me that what I've come to study actually harkens back to some very deep beliefs in Zoroastrianism. A very simple tenet — we were not raised deeply religious, but we knew some of the central tenets of our religion. The most important one is that the world is made up of good and evil, and your job as a Zoroastrian is to ask every day, "Which side am I on?"

Every day when I do my little experiments and I have two categories, good and bad, black and white, I think in a sense the test that I use, the Implicit Association Test, is a test that is telling

me which side I'm on in a way I would never have known without the science. And that just thrills me that Zoroaster may have been the first social psychologist. [*laughs*] He may have figured out that the world is simply divided in people's minds, even, into good and evil. But he would have never imagined that in the 20th and 21st century, somebody would make a test to actually get at those concepts in some objectively measurable way, and tell people which side they were on so that they could adjust.

[*music: "Natural Cause" by Emancipator*]

Ms. Tippett: Mahzarin Banaji is Richard Clarke Cabot Professor of Social Ethics in the department of psychology at Harvard University. She's the co-author of *Blindspot: Hidden Biases of Good People* and a 2018 inductee into the National Academy of Sciences.

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[*music: "Colors In Stereo" by Moonlit Sailor*]

Ms. Tippett: Our lovely theme music is provided and composed by Zoe Keating. And the last voice that you hear singing our final credits in each show is hip-hop artist Lizzo.

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The Osprey Foundation — a catalyst for empowered, healthy, and fulfilled lives.

And the Lilly Endowment, an Indianapolis-based, private family foundation dedicated to its founders' interests in religion, community development, and education.

Books & Music

Recommended Reading

Blindspot: Hidden Biases of Good People
Author: Mahzarin R. Banaji

Music Played

Into The Trees
Artist: Zoe Keating

Finding Family
Artist: Ben Sollee

TwentyTwoFourteen
Artist: The Album Leaf

Small Memory (Tunng Remix)
Artist: Jon Hopkins

Natural Cause
Artist: Emancipator

Colors In Stereo
Artist: Moonlit Sailor