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**Rational Healing**

Review of 'Against empathy: The case for rational compassion.'

by Bloom, P.

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*"Sympathy with suffering [may] go so far as to enable a man to be moved emotionally by statistics."*

*~ Bertrand Russell, 1926, Education and the Good Life (p. 71)*

I (PRH) recently attended a fundraiser held in Buffalo, New York, to raise money for *Lighthouse*, a donor-funded free clinic run by medical student volunteers. The gala was lavish in a millennial sense, complete with craft beer, Edison light bulbs, and a silent auction with prizes including cocktail sets and home-delivery meal kits. Halfway through the event I wondered about the point of the whole thing. Aren't we here to help Buffalo's underserved? How does my pleasure tonight quell the suffering of others? Wouldn't it be more helpful – and more selfless – to volunteer at the clinic instead? During this reflection, I felt empathy for the patients I could have been helping. This inevitably turned into guilt. That night, the Lighthouse fundraiser raised $16,000 – the financial equivalent of thousands of volunteer hours. By appealing to compassion, and to my generation's taste for material goods and gratification, the compassionate deliberation of the student volunteers did far more good than the twinge of emotional empathy I felt. This demonstration of the inefficiency of emotional, empathic responses is documented and retold throughout *Against Empathy: The Case for Rational Compassion* (Bloom, 2016). In this review, we will explore Paul Bloom's argument, summarize some of the critical response to his divisive stance, and introduce a few ideas of our own. Finally, Bloom is given the final say in describing how to 'do good' better.

**Bloom's Argument**

The core argument in *Against Empathy* is that the popular and emotionally compelling notion of empathy is detrimental to social and moral action. Bloom even goes so far as to make the strong – and controversial – claim that the world would be a better place if empathy were

erased from it. This seemingly cold and callous claim about empathy ("It's sugary soda, tempting and delicious and bad for us" (p. 13).) is woven through mundane experiences, including interpersonal relationships, politics, violence, and parenting. In each of these domains, Bloom uses data and personal anecdotes to develop his core claim that our empathic system – our ability to feel what others are feeling – is an ineffective moral guide. A corporate executive, for example, may be emotionally and empathically motivated to volunteer at a soup kitchen after seeing a disheartening news story on unemployment. Bloom interjects in this heartwarming story that for the cost of one hour of the executive's wage, she could do far more good by hiring workers, upgrading the facility, or using her social capital to lobby for better policy. Rather, the emotional reaction to physically and personally interact with others misleads the executive to help in a way that allows her to feel a self-gratifying warm glow and end her day feeling like she had lasting impact. Bloom is committed to the notion that there are ways to 'do good better.' He details the inefficiency and incoherence of the similarly heartwarming story of Batkid – a young cancer survivor who, at the cost of many working hours and thousands of dollars, was able to experience a day in the life of a superhero. In terms of strict utility, the Batkid phenomenon succeeded in creating fuzzy feelings, while both failing to save human life and detracting from other high-need, life-or-death causes. In addition to the distraction argument, Bloom also chides the selfish consequences of empathy. Here, he discusses parenting: a child's tears can certainly cause a parent to feel their child's pain, but parents who concede to the tantrum are often doing so to reduce their own pain and frustration rather than the child's.

Throughout *Against Empathy,* Bloom appeals to current cultural notions to better convince an audience of would-be prosocialites. But the central argument is not new. He pays tribute to founding and contemporary utilitarians Adam Smith, John Stuart Mill, and Peter Singer

(among others). In perhaps the book's clearest indication of how to do good better, Bloom describes a social movement rooted in utilitarianism called "Effective Altruism." Members of this group seek to overcome their emotional responses to plights and crises, instead recruiting reasoning to determine how charitable resources can be most effectively spent. Along with classic utilitarianism, Bloom refers back to famous philosophical divides prompted by Hume and Kant and maintained by the dialectic between emotion and reason. This debate over what we *feel* and what we *think* is deeply embedded in modern psychological research, and has generated immensely popular science and trade books on the topic (Gladwell, 2007*;* Kahneman, 2011). And yet, Bloom's application of this known theoretical contrast to the link between empathy and moral behavior is novel, refreshing, and important. It is often surprising, occasionally stirring an emotional or empathic response to defend empathy as we commonly understand it. College students in the first author's seminar have reacted strongly and often viscerally to Bloom's *streitschrift*. Many insist that "We can't just get rid of all empathy entirely!"

**Critical Response**

Like our vocal university students, several prominent scientists reject Bloom's wholesale burial of empathy. These critics argue for a guided and governed balance between emotional responses and calculated utilitarian reasoning. In the Boston Review, Simon Baron-Cohen (2014) insists that "we need to make room for empathy" and that "empathy is a valuable and essential additional resource" (p. 3). Note his usage of the word *additional*, which suggests that empathy may be able to be recruited to guide or aid decision-making above and beyond reason alone. Ironically – or perhaps strategically – Baron-Cohen's response employs empathic rhetoric: he uses Israeli and Palestinian bombings as emotional illustrations to motivate his own readers to see (or, *feel*) the intuitive value of empathy. Two years before *Against Empathy* was published,

Denise Cummins similarly appealed to emotional control by critiquing Bloom's argument on

*Psychology Today*. She wrote, "It is our ability to generalize and to direct our empathy through

the use of reason that is our saving grace" (Cummins, 2013). In a post-publication response,

Jamil Zaki echoed this sentiment by describing empathy as a directed or motivated tool by

likening it to a spotlight. This is a common metaphor used to describe attentional processes and

is woven throughout the book. Zaki praises Bloom for describing empathy as a controllable

process, but rejects his treatment of agents as inexperienced or uninformed users. He (Zaki)

writes, "Control allows people to conquer at least some of the empathic limits that Bloom

laments" (Zaki, 2017, p. 59). Baron-Cohen, Cummins, Zaki, and other critics (see Baron-Cohen,

2014 for 13 other scholarly responses in the *Boston Review*) argue that this empathy spotlight,

for all its circuitry issues, can be reliably controlled. These arguments appeal to choice: being

able to choose where the light shines is characteristically human. How can a person act as a

willful moral exemplar if he cannot pick and choose the issues he cares about?

Bloom is not swayed by the appeal to emotional control. He elevates the issue beyond

circuitry and hardware, instead questioning the operator herself. He writes, "What you see

depends on where you choose to point the spotlight, so its focus is vulnerable to your biases"

(Bloom, 2016, p. 87). The larger argument is not just about empathy's shortcomings, it is about

the pitfalls of human attention. This is perhaps where *Against Empathy* shines brightest. Bloom

subtly and intelligently relies on a specific construct (empathy) with an even more specific

definition (cognitive sympathy) to comment on decision-makers' inability to effectively gate and

control their own attention. This cognitive shortcoming results in logical (and empirically

supported) downstream consequences due entirely to the intuitive pull of emotional responding.

He cites cases where it is "easier to empathize with someone who is similar," or with, "members

of our own group [rather] than people from different, perhaps opposing, groups" (Bloom, 2016, p. 94). These examples of interpersonal empathy biases cannot simply be overcome by willful emotional control.

If human attention is imperfect then it also invites exploitation. It is unsurprising to hear that empathy can be manipulated to further separate agents from their own choices. This can happen in simple dyadic interactions and is similarly structuralized into the business and leadership models of large societal systems. As an example of the former, Bloom writes that when seeking the emotional spotlight of those we love (or those whose love we seek), "The spotlight nature of empathy seems just the ticket" (Bloom, 2016, p. 130). By appealing to attentional and emotional biases, exploitative individuals are quite successful at manipulating and guiding others' focus. At the levels of organizations and systems, institutions have been manipulating empathic responses for centuries. Oxfam and The Make-A-Wish Foundation, for example, leverage the strong and often overwhelming emotional response resulting from the identifiable victim effect to generate revenue. Of course, these are charitable institutions that enact prosociality and create good in the world – our purpose is not to decry them. Rather, the argument is that the empathic capital spent on isolated individuals could be *better* spent, for example, "by donating to the Against Malaria Foundation, which is a highly effective provider of bed nets to families in malaria prone regions" (Bloom, 2016, p. 97). Bloom again admits that this controversial stance is not a new one when he cites Adam Smith's observation of the nonlinear relationship between number of lives lost and amount of empathy (or sympathy) experienced.

**The Empathy Switch**

What appears to emerge from *Against Empathy*, and its pre- and post-publication review, is a complex an unanswered question: are decision-makers themselves capable of determining

when an emotional, empathic response will help or harm others? Returning to the electrical metaphor, should agents be allowed to access the power switch to their own empathy spotlight? Bloom's critics appear to subscribe to an approach guided by libertarian paternalism: careful thought, training programs, and even modern apps (HabitatSeven, 2016) can enable us to harness empathy so that we may be more effectively prosocial. To these critics, an empathy switch should be freely handed over to the user. Bloom, however, is absolute in his judgment throughout: "If we want to make the world a better place, then we are better off without empathy" (Bloom, 2016, p. 3). The notion of an on/off switch controlling activation of either an emotional or a rational system has been questioned before (Krueger, 2012), and is similarly illustrative when applied to empathy. Who would flip the switch? This question is unanswerable because it raises a new, recursive question: who would flip the switch that tells us to flip the empathy switch? Readers can imagine a situation where an emotional catalyst motivates an agent's response. This agent, equipped with an empathy switch, gets to make a decision: flip the switch to 'on' and respond emotionally and empathically, or instead turn it 'off,' allowing for a rational, calculated evaluation and decision. This unbounded metacognitive approach would allow agents to maximize Baron-Cohen's, Zaki's, and Cummins' proclaimed benefits of harnessing empathic responses while simultaneously avoiding the pitfalls of selfish, warm-glow helping Bloom disparages. This idea – to give agents control of their own empathic response – would likely be lauded by the critics cited in this review.

Can we trust a person to effectively (or *rationally*) turn his or her own empathy switch to maximize benefit and minimize harm? Though Bloom does not mention the idea of an empathy switch in his book, he does decry the biases of humans as cognitive operators: "A spotlight picks out a certain space to illuminate and leaves the rest in darkness; its focus is narrow. What you see

depends on where you choose to point the spotlight, so its focus is vulnerable to your biases"

(Bloom, 2016, p. 87). One such bias, which goes unmentioned in *Against Empathy*, is moral

licensing: the tendency to behave immorally after having done something prosocial (Sachdeva,

Iliev, & Medin, 2009; see Blanken, van de Ven, & Zeelenberg, 2015, for a recent meta-analysis).

This phenomenon occurs when an agent, after performing a moral action, is subsequently more

likely to think or behave immorally, specifically because their initial behavior causes them to

feel licensed (i.e., like they have already 'done their part'). Moral licensing is why agents who

donated yesterday feel as though they deserve to splurge selfishly today. We propose that

choosing to activate an empathic response (flipping the hypothetical switch to 'on') would be

perceived by an agent as a moral action. In doing so, our (ir)rational agent may then feel as

though they deserve some time off from the aversive experience of feeling others' pain. The end

result is a cognitive license to ignore or abstain from whatever emotional or empathic scenario

arises next. The controlled empathy argument falls short here: knowing when and where to

activate an empathic response suffers from the same boundedly rational shortcomings of relying

on empathy as an intuitive guide in the first place. The person controlling the empathy switch is

no more knowledgeable than the intuitive and emotional agents condemned by Bloom.

**Return to Bloom**

In closing, we would like to return to the idea of Effective Altruism, a group of rational

prosocialites who, quoted by Bloom, "define themselves as: "a growing social movement that

combines both the heart and the head"" (Bloom, 2016, p. 102). These are individuals who

attempt to override their emotional intuitions, recruiting all available information in order to

make the most effective and most efficient prosocial decisions. But, as Russell argued in the

epigraph, doing good must be motivated by *something*. For Russell, this motive is emotional

sympathy; for Bloom and the effective altruists, the motive emerges from reasoned prosociality. Returning to the luminance metaphor, effective altruists opt to switch off the spotlight and instead power up a street lamp. Still, it remains difficult to imagine any prosocial individual who has divorced herself from emotion entirely. Bloom summarizes the motto of effective altruism: "The heart is needed to motivate you to do good" (Bloom, 2016, p. 102). Any altruistic behavior, whether 'effective' or not, must still cause agents to feel good about themselves. It is unlikely that charitable or prosocial behavior can be separated entirely from the self and the resulting experiences of pleasure, reward, and moral licensure. Though Bloom's (and perhaps Russell's) notion of an unbound, rationally compassionate being may never fully emerge, we agree with and encourage *Against Empathy*'s call to work toward a more reasoned and prosocial future.

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