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The Most Overrated Virtue

Empathy, Paul Bloom argues in “Against Empathy: The Case for Rational Compassion” entrenches our prejudices and is “morally corrosive.” But is reason any more reliable as a moral guide?

By **SHAI HELD**

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Empathy is having a moment. The primatologist Frans de Waal has heralded our time as an “age of empathy,” which he sees as the key ingredient for a kinder, more just society. The linguist-cum-political advocate George Lakoff insists that “behind every progressive policy lies a single moral value: empathy.” And advocating for what he calls “global empathic consciousness,” the social theorist Jeremy Rifkin maintains that only “global empathy” can prevent “global collapse.”

Paul Bloom, a professor of psychology at Yale, will have none of it. Not only is empathy a “poor moral guide,” he argues in his provocative book, “Against Empathy: The Case for Rational Compassion,” but it is actually “morally corrosive.” He calls upon individuals of all political persuasions to “join hands and work together in the fight against empathy.”

What justifies this all-out assault on an ostensible virtue? In a metaphor he returns to time and again, Mr. Bloom suggests that empathy, which he defines as “the act of feeling what you believe other people feel—experiencing what they experience,” is like a spotlight. A spotlight can direct attention and assistance to where it is needed, but its focus is necessarily narrow. Thus empathy always focuses exclusively on what is captured by its glow.

While we concentrate on the few whose suffering has become salient for us, we

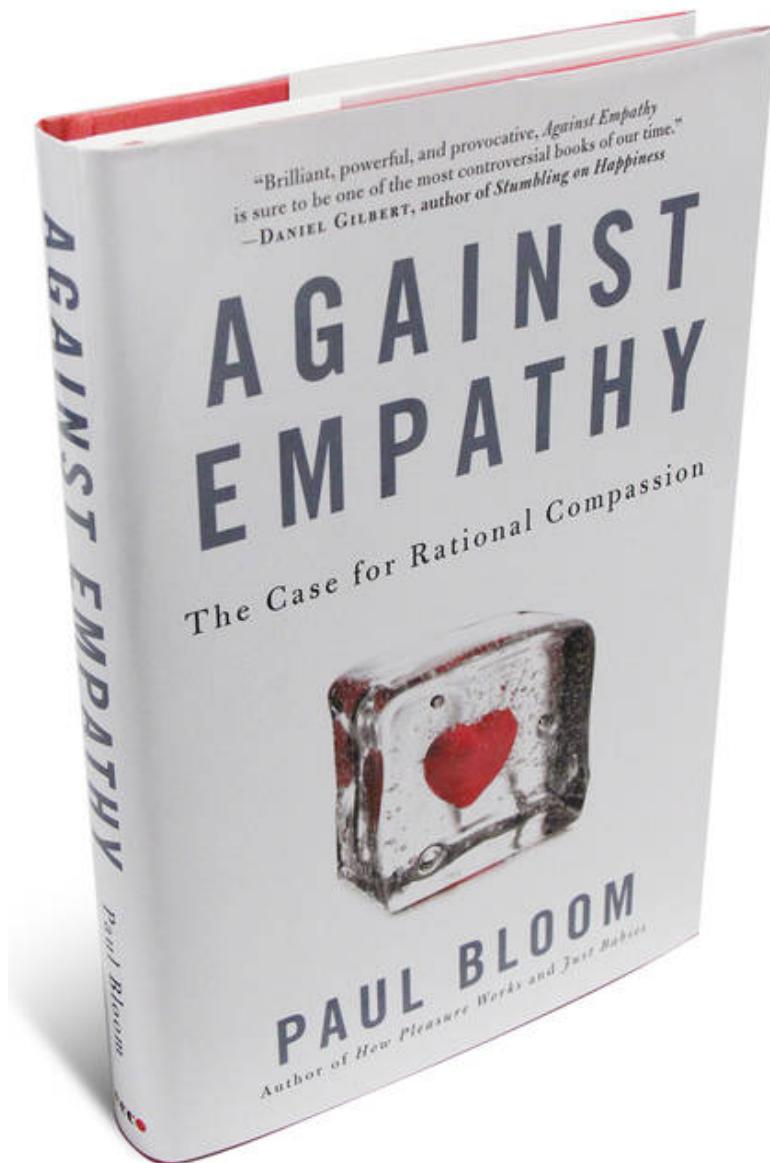


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AGAINST EMPATHY

By Paul Bloom

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more than a handful of people at a time because we have limited emotional capacity; accordingly, empathy necessarily constricts our vision and entrenches our prejudices.

Empathy is also innumerate. As many studies have demonstrated, if you show someone a picture of an individual starving child, she will likely open her wallet. But if you tell her about hundreds of faceless, nameless children in need in some far away place, she will remain unmoved. “If our concern is driven by thoughts of the suffering of specific individuals,” Mr. Bloom writes, “then it sets up a

forget the many others who also need our help. Worse, since it is easier to empathize with those who are similar to us, empathy all too often reflects our biases.

“Intellectually, a white American might believe that a black person matters just as much as a white person, but he or she will typically find it a lot easier to empathize with the plight of the latter than the former,” Mr. Bloom writes. Thus, “empathy distorts our moral judgments in pretty much the same way that prejudice does.” Try as we may, Mr. Bloom insists, we are simply incapable of empathizing with

perverse situation in which the suffering of one can matter more than the suffering of a thousand.”

What, then, is the proper alternative to all this empathy-induced immorality? Championing the role of “deliberative reasoning” in everyday life, Mr. Bloom argues that “we should strive to use our heads rather than our hearts.” Human goodness depends, he says, on an “escape from empathy” and a turn towards rules and principles which alone make fairness possible and will lead to a far greater alleviation of suffering. Mr. Bloom does see a place—albeit a limited one—for emotions in the moral life. He advocates for compassion, which he insists is “a more diffuse concern for the fates of others” than empathy. Because such concern is less intensely focused, it can presumably be more widely directed and more thoughtfully applied.

It is fine and good to argue for a greater emphasis on reason in moral decision-making—a long line of distinguished philosophers past and present would agree—but one wonders whether it is really fair to assail empathy as ferociously as Mr. Bloom does. He writes that “the problems we face as a society and as individuals . . . are often due to too much [empathy].” Really? More than bigotry, bias or entrenched hatreds? And there is something downright bizarre about Mr. Bloom’s insistence that “we should aspire to a world in which a politician appealing to someone’s empathy would be seen in the same way as one appealing to people’s racist bias.”

Empathy can indeed limit and distort our moral vision, but Mr. Bloom fails to seriously engage with the fact that reason can also be marshaled for nefarious ends. Gesturing towards troubling research on how Nazi doctors “used their intelligence to talk themselves into doing terrible things,” he acknowledges that those doctors “would have been better off listening to their hearts.” Mr. Bloom opens this door but refuses to walk through it. If emotions can sometimes serve as a corrective to wayward reason, then why the glorification of the latter and the unrelenting suspicion of the former? Neither reason nor emotion guarantees moral goodness.

Mr. Bloom is undoubtedly right that empathy alone makes for bad policy: While it can motivate us to care, we need reason to help us design and implement policies aimed at reducing suffering. And I am extremely sympathetic to Mr. Bloom’s worry that our moral lives are too tribal (my word, not his). But like many other human emotions, empathy is double-edged. It can limit our horizons, but perhaps it can also expand them. We see the enemy as less than

human, until we notice her crying over the death of her child, just as we would. Frans de Waal reaches a conclusion antithetical to Mr. Bloom's: Empathy, he writes "is the one weapon in the human repertoire that can rid us of the curse of xenophobia . . . Our best hope for transcending tribal differences is based on the moral emotions, because emotions defy ideology."

It is naive to think that any one thing is "the one weapon" to cure what ails us. If we want to learn to care more deeply about others, especially about others who are distant from us, we will need both reason and emotion. But we ought to remember that neither reason nor emotion is static. We need not merely to deploy them but also to take responsibility for shaping and reshaping them.

Mr. Held is president and dean of the Hadar Institute. He is the author of "Abraham Joshua Heschel: The Call of Transcendence."

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