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Book Review

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Author Peter Hampson

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Book Review of
Paul Bloom, *Against Empathy: The Case for Rational*
***Compassion* (New York: Harper Collins, 2016)**

Peter Hampson
Blackfriars Hall, University of Oxford

Empathy is big business. It seems there are over fifteen hundred books on amazon.com with ‘empathy’ in the title or subtitle, and scores of web pages, videos, and conferences now deal with the topic. Here’s yet another one, but this time with a critical edge. Paul Bloom’s intriguing and engaging book makes the plausible if startling case that human empathy, our ability to replicate the feelings of others, is more of a hindrance than a help in many situations. I suspect like many readers I set out a sceptic and ended a convert to Bloom’s thesis, though in my case conversion was partial.

To state baldly that one is against empathy is, of course, a little like saying one is against kittens, world peace, motherhood, or apple pie, and the book wears its publisher’s heart (and wishes?) on its sleeve; its provocative title is clearly designed to arrest. Bloom himself tacitly acknowledges that the title is overstated and is careful to explain that he is not against all empathy in all situations but mainly what he calls emotional empathy, when used to guide moral and, by extension, social and political decisions and choices.

Emotional empathy, for Bloom, is ‘the act of coming to experience the world as you think someone else does’ (p. 16). This he carefully distinguishes from cognitive empathy, or social cognition, as in ‘mind-reading, theory of mind or mentalizing’ (p. 17), or the ability to *understand* the thoughts and feelings of another without necessarily feeling them oneself. Bloom has some observations to make about the latter, especially its moral neutrality (even a torturer might empathise with the feelings of his victim in this sense, and probably has to do so to be good at her job), but the former is his main target. Supported by numerous pertinent examples and accessible reports of relevant

psychological experiments, Bloom's claim is that emotional empathy is 'biased and parochial; it focuses you on certain people at the expense of others; and it is innumerate, so it distorts our moral and political decisions in ways that cause suffering rather than relieving it'. (p. 36). Empathy biases us to favour those near and dear to us in other words. And while not wishing to remove empathy entirely from the interpersonal sphere, Bloom wants to rein it in. In his view too much empathy can even be debilitating, as with the surgeon who can no longer operate because she feels the suffering of her patients too directly, or the therapist who is emotionally drained from encounters with her clients. Surgeons need to be compassionate yet dispassionate; upset clients are the ones who need to develop emotional empathy with their calm therapists, not the other way round. On my interpretation, and applying Bloom's analysis to the Biblical parable of the Good Samaritan, we might even suspect that the Priest and Levite who pass by 'on the other side' from the injured traveller are not actually lacking in sympathy or compassion at all but might be suffering from too much empathy. This makes them overly distressed and unable to act when faced with the sufferings of their fellows. Even in very intimate, interpersonal situations 'unmitigated communion' or undiluted empathy can lead to 'empathic distress' in the empathiser (pp. 144-136). While, if deployed on a bigger stage, empathy with one group against another can lead us "to enact savage laws and enter into terrible wars" (p. 127).

So, "(l)ess empathy, more kindness" (p. 141) is Bloom's antidote to all this fellow feeling. To make the right choices what is really needed is a more balanced reliance on a combination of kindness, compassion, and reason. Taking his cue from Peter Singer's highly rational version of utilitarianism, Bloom suggests that when supporting charitable causes, for instance, "we should give intelligently, with an eye toward consequences..." (p. 101). Setting aside his tendency to downplay other interpretations of moral dilemmas, and to overstate his case at times, Bloom's critical thesis is well made and astute. A clear analysis like his which examines sceptically what is in danger of becoming a cultural bandwagon, owing to the over hasty dissemination and conceptually weak interpretation of psychological findings, has to be valuable.

But having been persuaded by his critique of an over reliance on empathy, I was much less impressed by his take on reason, and his assumptions about what constitutes morality. Reason, for Bloom, is effectively reduced to a rationality often used in the service of an

arguably simplistic consequentialism based on rational choice theory and cost-benefit analysis. The idea that a broader vision of reason-as-reasonableness is possible, drawing more widely on expertise, tradition, and experience as well as ratiocination, and explored by scholars such as Stephen Toulmin and Bent Flyvbjerg, is largely ignored. Acting morally might well be a prudential skill that mediates and manages the paradox of general principles with the special issues raised by particular circumstances, not a rational computation. Nor was there any sustained recognition that there are different and contestable rational traditions and preferences as to what should constitute 'goods' and 'the good'.

All this means that Bloom effectively sleep walks into a version of moral theory recently dubbed by Alasdair MacIntyre as 'Morality' (with a capital 'M'). This is closely related to, if ultimately more encompassing than 'the peculiar institution' of morality discussed by Bernard Williams in *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*.¹ MacIntyre notes that Morality like this is *inter alia* necessarily a) secular, b) universally binding and translatable across cultures and contexts, c) embeds the assumption that to work for the good of others is typically to work against our desires rather than perfecting them, and, tellingly, d) highly abstract and general and makes frequent use of terms such as 'rights', 'duty', and 'utility'. Moreover, Morality is typically, *the* official morality of post-Enlightenment modernity, where essentially competing individuals have to be constrained by universally agreed, rational principles.

Bloom's tacit acceptance of Morality is thus both ahistorical and limiting. Ahistorical, as his treatment fails to acknowledge properly that conceptions of morality are socially and historically embedded, so that different moral orders from our own have clearly existed. Bloom himself favours a never fully specified blend of Kant and consequentialism, rather than Humean emotivism, while, of course, the classical tradition of Aristotle and especially Aquinas, mediates the two. Limiting, because his account conveys little or no indication of how important it can be to retain an openness in moral thinking and decision making to *not* knowing, to the unbidden, to paradox, to poetics, to art, or to the sheer patience and resilience needed in international peacemaking, say, or even the resolution of interpersonal conflict. All is

¹ Alasdair MacIntyre, *Ethics in the Conflicts of Modernity: An Essay on Desire, Practical Reasoning, and Narrative* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), see especially pp. 114-140; Bernard Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1985), chapter 10, and discussion by MacIntyre, *op. cit.*, pp. 150-165.

clear, all is a problem, all can be rationally solved for Bloom, provided we only deploy reason and act with compassion and kindness. Optimistic this certainly is, but perhaps also a little naïve.

Bloom is, of course, a cognitive developmental psychologist and his background and formative influences come through clearly. Psychology and neuroscience have rapidly and recently developed a similar sort of authoritative reputation to that achieved by the biological and life sciences in the past 50 years. This can have its downside. Public communication of science leads to the welcome dissemination of laboratory findings into the world at large; in terms of the democratization of knowledge this has to be beneficial on the whole. But it can also too easily contribute to the growing scientism of our culture, with its insidious and erroneous assumption that there is only one route to knowledge, the empirical, only one notion of reason, rationalism (of a certain sort), and little serious critique of the secular. Although Bloom is a highly self-aware and astute writer, and a humane person with great respect for other traditions, especially the humanities, there is no doubt that his gold standard is still science; all else is ultimately measured by this. But whether science alone has sufficient, as well as the necessary resources for a psychologically and philosophically defensible moral epistemology is a very moot point indeed. Bloom, of course, does not set out to provide such a complete account explicitly, but from the subtext we get some inkling of what he thinks this might be.