“Morality demands thinking with the head and not the heart”

Interview by Sabine Gysi
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Psychologist and cognitive scientist Paul Bloom talks about the complex process of building a sense of morality, justice and fairness, and how a too-narrow notion of “empathy” can cause misjudgments and harmful actions. He also warns of politicians’ empathy traps.

Sabine Gysi: From your book Against Empathy we learn that a seemingly benevolent emotion like empathy can trigger many good actions, but it can also be the root of very bad decisions and fatal misjudgments. Why?

Paul Bloom: People use the word “empathy” in different senses, and some people just use empathy to refer to morality and goodness. Nothing against that, but the concern in my book is something narrower: putting yourself in someone else’s shoes, feeling what that person feels.

And it turns out that this capacity is biased, it’s narrow and it’s shortsighted. If your morality is based on this kind of emotional empathy, you’ll end up caring a lot more about people who are close to you than about those who are far away. You will care more about people who are of the same race than of different races, you’ll care more about people who are attractive than those who are ugly. This is how empathy leads to bias, which is a terrible thing for morality.

Empathy also makes you innumerate, in that from the standpoint of empathy, 1 matters more than 100. And so the sorts of decisions we make when we’re at our best, when we think through rationally, push us in a different direction than decisions made through empathy.

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SG: When I read Against Empathy, this distinction between empathy and rational compassion made a lot of sense to me and it seemed very clear that the world needs less of the former and more of the latter. But how can I shift my behavior away from empathy and towards rational compassion?
On the one hand, there are individual ways to keep us from getting too caught up in empathy. Some people even suggest that mindfulness meditation helps; it gets us more caught up in caring about other people and less caught up in feeling what they feel. On the other hand, a more general and more practical way in which, as adults, we could adjust our lives is just by knowing about the weaknesses of empathy and being careful about it.

I see an analogy here to racism: We all have some racist bias, whether we know it or not, whether we want it or not. And the solution to prevent this from leading to bad moral decisions isn’t to become less racist, but rather it’s that if you know about it you could act to combat it.

In the case of empathy, one example I think about a lot is the need to avoid empathy traps. When a politician or somebody in a position of power wants to persuade us to favor some program, or go to war, or attack some group, and does it by appealing to our empathy, we want to step back and say “What’s happening here? I can feel myself being moved, but is this right?”

SG: How do politicians use empathy traps?

PB: The unscrupulous ones use them whenever they want us to go to war. For instance, they tell stories about suffering of innocent victims – real stories sometimes – and they use that to say: “Now we must strike back at those who have caused their suffering.” Maybe in some cases going to war is the right thing, but our empathy makes us too vulnerable to these acts of persuasion, it strips from us our skepticism and our caution.

In this modern world of social media, we encounter so many more empathy traps; nowadays, people just show us videos. Donald Trump, a few weeks ago, re-tweeted videos of Muslims attacking an innocent kid, and the purpose is to make us feel bad for the victims and to motivate us to hate another group. So I think we should view these kinds of posts very skeptically.

SG: In order to develop this healthy skepticism, we need to build up morality, and this starts when we’re young. How and when does a child develop a notion of good and evil?

PB: This question doesn’t admit of a simple answer. Some understandings of good and evil are present as early as we can test a child. Maybe they emerge at birth, maybe they emerge in the first few months of life, but research we’ve done at Yale suggests that at a very early age, children have some understanding of right and wrong. They can tell the good guys from the bad guys.

On the other hand, a sort of mature morality that recognizes more subtle, moral notions like the idea that a stranger’s life is as valuable as a friend’s, that things like sexism and racism are wrong and, more generally, the ability to think about morality, to rationally develop morality, shows up quite a bit later. In short: Some of this morality is present already to start with and some develops later on.

SG: Research has shown that children start dividing their fellow human beings into in-groups and out-groups at a very early age. How does this relate to an actual desire to help people, and why can it lead to something seemingly contrary, like forming prejudices and even being cruel?

PB: One aspect of human nature, as you put it, is to split the world into us versus them, and, in fact, this is central to our development of morality – we care intensely about those around us, we love them, we want to help them, but we don’t feel the same towards out-groups.

I don’t think this is necessarily an evil thing, it might be evil if I say, “Oh, I care much more about white people than dark-skinned people,” but suppose I tell you “I care more about my children than
other people’s children” – it doesn’t seem that bad. And, in fact, morality is essentially intertwined with thinking about peoples’ groups and about out-groups versus in-groups.

“Being good people in the world we live in now, with billions of strangers, involves working to psychologically dissolve the boundaries between us and them, and that’s not easy.”

But the problem is that we take these groups too seriously and are much too quick to split the world up into us versus them. Being good people in the world we live in now, with billions of strangers, involves working to psychologically dissolve the boundaries between us and them, and that’s not easy. It involves rational deliberation; it involves doing things which feel unnatural. It’s very unnatural for me to say, “The life of a stranger in Africa matters as much as the life of my own son,” but intellectually, I recognize that it’s true.

SG: So should we teach children to care about someone from a different religion or a distant country just as much they would care about their cousin or playmate?

PB: I guess I would reject the premise of the question. They’re never going to care about somebody from another country as much as they care about the people they love. You should stop trying to make it so.

So you try for something different. Morality doesn’t demand equality of caring, it doesn’t demand equality of love; you try to get kids to appreciate issues of rights and justice and fairness. Get kids in a situation where they say, “Look, there are these immigrants and I don’t know them, I don’t love them, I don’t know what their lives are like. I can’t imagine it, but they’re people.” And so, what rights do they have as people? What obligations do we have towards them as people? What principles justify treating them this way versus that way? Again, it’s thinking with the head and not the heart.

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In some way, I think you should encourage children to become moral philosophers. I know this is a very unfashionable view; everybody says we should be in a world of emotions, of feelings; an emphasis on rationality is a very 19th-century idea, and a lot of people reject it. But I think this emphasis is exactly right.

SG: Some of your critics argue that emotional empathy is a precursor to compassion and that, in order to fully understand someone who is suffering, purely intellectual understanding is not enough. But you believe that compassion and empathy do not come as a package, as you once said. Please explain.

PB: Developmentally, we see compassion and empathy as distinct; very young kids care about other kids but they don’t necessarily feel their pain. There’s actually research on this, and it turns
out that putting yourself in somebody else’s shoes versus caring about that person are psychologically different processes. We find this in neuroscience labs; there’s some wonderful work by Tania Singer, the German neuroscientist who studies this.

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But you don’t need the laboratory studies; common sense tells you this, too. Imagine you have a friend who’s extremely anxious, she’s having a panic attack. It’s one thing if you feel her anxiety, you panic along with her. It’s quite another if you say “I care about you; I’m going to try to calm you down.” You’re not anxious at all, but you love her, you want her to feel better and so you care for her. So yes, I do think we can separate compassion and empathy.

Paul Bloom is a Canadian-American psychologist. He is the Brooks and Suzanne Ragen Professor of Psychology and Cognitive Science at Yale University. His research explores how children and adults understand the physical and social world, with special focus on language, morality, religion, fiction and art.

Paul Bloom received the 2017 Klaus J. Jacobs Research Prize in recognition of his research into the origins, nature and development of children’s moral thought and behavior.

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