

“Against Bloom: A Defense of Smithian Fellow-Feeling”

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ABSTRACT

In his 2016 book, *Against Empathy: The Case for Rational Compassion*, Paul Bloom argues that “if we want to be good caring people, if we want to make the world a better place, then we are better off without empathy.” I’ve specifically chosen this formulation of Bloom’s position because it gets at the issue I will most directly challenge him on - that we would, or even could, be better off without empathy. The position I will defend is that our empathy plays an indispensable role in the development of our moral conscience, and an ongoing role in the cultivation of our moral concepts, that would be compromised by suppressing our empathy. On this understanding, I argue that we would generally be better served by cultivating our empathy to mitigate and overcome its shortcomings, rather than suppressing our empathy as Bloom recommends.

Introduction

Paul Bloom is against empathy and I am against Paul Bloom. Sort of.

In his 2016 book, *Against Empathy: The Case for Rational Compassion*, Paul Bloom argues that “if we want to be good caring people, if we want to make the world a better place, then we are better off without empathy.”¹ I’ve specifically chosen this formulation of Bloom’s position because it gets at the issue I will most directly challenge him on - that we would, or even could, be better off without empathy. Bloom’s problem with empathy is that “it is biased, pushing us in the direction of parochialism and racism. It is short-sighted, motivating actions that might make us better in the short term, but lead to tragic results in the future. It is innumerate, favoring the one over the many. It is capricious; our empathy for those close to us is a powerful force for hatred towards those who harm them. It is corrosive in personal relationships, exhausting the spirit and making us less effective at helping those we love.”²

The position I will defend is that our empathy plays an indispensable role in the development of our moral conscience, and an ongoing role in the cultivation of our moral concepts, that would be compromised by suppressing our empathy. With that understanding in mind, I argue that we would generally be better served by cultivating our empathy to mitigate and overcome its shortcomings, rather than suppressing our empathy as Bloom recommends.

What do we mean by ‘empathy’?

The view that Bloom takes himself to be responding to is what he takes to be a commonly held belief that there is no social ill that wouldn’t be in some way alleviated by the

¹ Bloom. *Against Empathy*. p.3

² “Choosing Empathy: A Conversation with Jamil Zaki”

introduction of greater empathy. “For every specific problem, lack of empathy is seen as the diagnosis and more empathy the cure.”³ Among the examples he cites for the mainstreaming of this view are the famous “I feel your pain” of Bill Clinton’s presidential campaign, as well as the numerous calls for greater empathy made by Barack Obama throughout his political career. An example that Bloom often refers to is a 2006 speech that then Senator Obama gave, in which he said “We have an empathy deficit. It’s time for a sense of empathy to infuse our politics.”⁴ Bloom emphatically disagrees with this view - both that empathy is something that we need more of, and that government policy is a domain in which empathy belongs at all. For Bloom, we can have a politics of kindness and compassion towards others, but a politics of empathy would tend to produce counterproductive divisions that he does not believe would be produced by more dispassionate cost-benefit reasoning.

This debate centers on what we do and don’t mean when we talk about empathy. There is no universally accepted definition of what empathy is in a specific sense, making it challenging to put different views in dialogue with one another. But the common feature of all understandings of what the term empathy is meant to capture is the phenomenon of coming to feel, in some sense, what someone else is feeling. As Bloom phrases it, “Empathy is the act of coming to experience the world as you think someone else does.”⁵ For Bloom, empathy is taking on what you think someone is thinking and feeling, which is importantly different from taking on what others are actually thinking and feeling. On an account such as Bloom’s, there is some role that the imagination must play, since we never have direct access to the thoughts and feelings of another. We can only speculate based on what evidence is available to us, creating for ourselves

³ Bloom. *Against Empathy*. p.20

⁴ Bloom. “Empathy and Its Discontents” p.24

⁵ Bloom. *Against Empathy*. p.16

an experience distinct from what the person we are empathizing with is actually going through. Empathy, on Bloom's account, can occur "automatically, even involuntarily,"⁶ but can also be "focused and directed by acts of will."⁷ Empathy can be both an experience that overcomes us unbidden, as well as an activity we initiate, or a mix of both in the right circumstances.

Bloom analyzes empathy into the fairly standard categories of cognitive and emotional empathy. Cognitive empathy, Bloom views as the ability to understand what one takes to be happening in the minds of others without sharing the same feelings.⁸ Bloom takes it to be the case that one couldn't actually be against cognitive empathy. Without some ability to imagine what is going on in the minds of the people we come into contact with, it wouldn't be possible to be a good moral agent or make our way in a shared moral world.

What Bloom is opposed to is emotional empathy⁹. Bloom believes his interpretation of emotional empathy to be indebted to Adam Smith's discussion of sympathy and fellow-feeling in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*.¹⁰ "As Smith puts it, we have the capacity to think about another person and 'place ourselves in his situation...and become in some measure the same person with him, and thence form some idea of his sensations, and even feel something which, though weaker in degree, is not altogether unlike them.'"¹¹ A point to note here that will be important for our discussion in the concluding section of this paper is that Smith would not share Bloom's view that empathy - sympathy or fellow-feeling as Smith would call it - can be fruitfully separated into cognitive and emotional parts. The cognitive and the emotional are thoroughly entangled in Smith's view. Where Bloom and Smith do seem to overlap is in their understanding

⁶ Bloom. *Against Empathy*. p.17

⁷ Bloom. *Against Empathy*. p.17

⁸ Bloom. *Against Empathy*. p.36

⁹ What Bloom calls emotional empathy is also frequently referred to as affective empathy in the literature.

¹⁰ Bloom. *Against Empathy*. p.35

¹¹ Bloom. *Against Empathy*. p.17

that empathy - whether emotional or cognitive for Bloom - entails imagining ourselves into the experience of another. We remain separate from them, but we imagine how we would feel in their place. We are simulating for ourselves a real experience of what we would imagine we would feel we're we another in the same circumstances. Smith's example of this: "When we see a stroke aimed and just ready to fall upon the arm or leg of another person, we naturally shrink and draw back our own leg or our own arm; and when it does fall, we feel it in some measure, and are hurt by it as well as the sufferer. The mob, when they are gazing at a dancer on the slack rope, naturally writhe and twist and balance their own bodies as they see him do, and as they feel that they themselves must do if in his situation."¹²

Bloom and Smith are far from the only interpretations of what we mean when we talk about empathy. Bloom says he does not want to get bogged down in a terminological debate about his version of empathy versus someone else's, though.¹³ In *Against Empathy*, Bloom largely avoids the myriad ways in which others might disagree with the distinctions he is making, or the particulars about how he is using his terms, but he does briefly give the debate some attention in his article "Empathy and Its Discontents" with an overview of the taxonomy done on the concept and its usage by C. Daniel Batson.

Batson maintains that empathy is generally used in the literature on the subject to refer to eight related but distinct phenomena.¹⁴ (1) Knowing another person's internal state, including his or her thoughts and feelings¹⁵, (2) Adopting the posture or matching the neural response of an

¹² Smith. *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*. I.i.1.3

¹³ Bloom. *Against Empathy*. p.39

¹⁴ Batson. "These Things Called Empathy: Eight Telated by Distinct Phenomena".

¹⁵ Which Batson notes is called by some "cognitive empathy" and others "empathic accuracy"

observed other¹⁶, (3) Coming to feel as another person feels¹⁷, (4) Intuiting or projecting oneself into another's situation¹⁸, (5) Imagining how another is thinking and feeling¹⁹, (6) Imagining how one would think and feel in the other's place²⁰, (7) Feeling distress at witnessing another person's suffering²¹, and (8) Feeling for another person who is suffering.²² What Batson takes any usage of the term empathy to be getting at, is an understanding of how we know what others are thinking and feeling, and how this causes us to respond to others.²³

When Bloom says that he is against empathy, he doesn't mean that he is against all of these phenomena. Bloom takes empathy to be a multifaceted umbrella term that refers to two separable phenomena.²⁴ First, by empathy we can mean understanding the thoughts and feelings of others, what he calls 'cognitive empathy'. This seems like it could correspond to Batson's first, fourth, or fifth phenomenon - either knowing what someone is thinking and feeling, perhaps because they told you or because they are behaving fairly transparently, or projecting yourself into their situation to imagine what they might be feeling, while not actually taking on those feelings. Second, by empathy we can mean experiencing for ourselves what we imagine someone else to be feeling, what Bloom calls 'emotional empathy'. It's a little less clear which of Batson's eight phenomena might capture what Bloom takes emotional empathy to be. There are elements of both the fifth and sixth phenomena that seem to fit, but with the fifth phenomena,

¹⁶ Which some may call "facial empathy" or "motor mimicry"

¹⁷ Some will refer to this as "emotion catching", "shared physiology", "sympathy", "emotional contagion", "affective empathy", or "automatic emotional empathy"

¹⁸ Capturing what is meant by the German term from which empathy derives, *Einfühlung*. Also called "aesthetic empathy".

¹⁹ Which some call "psychological empathy", "projection", or "perspective taking"

²⁰ Which some call "Role taking", "cognitive empathy", "projective empathy", "simulation", "perspective taking", or "decentering"

²¹ Which some refer to as "empathic distress", or "personal distress"

²² Which some refer to as "empathic concern", "pity", "compassion", "sympathetic distress", or "sympathy"

²³ Batson. "These Things Called Empathy". p.3

²⁴ Bloom. "Empathy and its Discontents". p.25

only imagining how someone else is feeling, as Batson describes it, doesn't seem to entail an implication for our own feelings. There is some reason to think that Batson's sixth phenomenon, imagining how one would think and feel in the other's place, would fit best, in part, because this is what Batson takes to best capture what Adam Smith meant by his term 'sympathy',²⁵ and it is Smith that Bloom is most directly responding to in his critique of emotional empathy.

Empathy is a slippery term. Batson's taxonomy of how the term is used is fairly comprehensive. Bloom and Smith are both fairly clear on how they define their terms, but trying to match Bloom to Smith, or either of them to Batson's taxonomy, is challenging. It will be important whether or not Smith and Bloom actually do understand emotional empathy in the same way, but for the moment we'll take Bloom to consider Smith emblematic of what he means by emotional empathy.

For clarity, the role of imagination can't be stressed enough in Smith's account of sympathy. A divide between observer and observed persists because our fellow-feeling is mediated by our imagination. We don't know, or take on, the identical emotions of those we observe, but imagine what we would feel if we were in their place. It's in this way that, for Smith, it makes sense for us to say that we can sympathize with the dead,²⁶ or that a mother can sympathize with their infant.²⁷ The Dead have no feelings for us to match, but that doesn't stop us from imagining ourselves in their place. Similarly, a mother can sympathize with the cries of their sick infant, but shaped by knowledge and concepts that the infant can't have developed yet.

Further, this fellow-feeling is not purely a product of the imagination, in that it is an automatic response to observing the feelings of another that triggers genuine feelings in us,

²⁵ Batson. "These Things Called Empathy". p.7

²⁶ Smith. TMS I.i.1.13

²⁷ Smith. TMS I.i.1.12

which are themselves influenced by feelings we have observed and felt previously. Neither purely cognitive, nor purely automated emotion, sympathy for Smith is more complicated than that. We will be returning to this point because I believe what Bloom doesn't fully appreciate about Smith is that the emotional and cognitive are entangled for him from the beginning, and that connection seems to be borne out by modern work being done by the likes of Patricia Churchland and Lisa Feldman Barrett.

A third common usage of empathy that Bloom acknowledges, but makes clear does not reflect how he uses the term, is empathy as the positive feeling towards the suffering of others that wishes them well without sharing in the other's feelings. Batson takes this sense of empathy to be captured by his eighth phenomenon. Bloom, however, will instead refer to this as 'kindness', 'concern', or 'compassion'. This distinction of compassion as something separate from empathy will be important to the argument he will make that we ought to replace our emotional empathy with what he will call 'rational compassion'.

What's wrong with empathy?

With Bloom's distinction in mind, it is easier to tease out what he means when he says that he is against empathy. Bloom is in favor of compassion in a limited sense, but doesn't consider that to be a part of empathy proper. He is in favor of cognitive empathy, but takes it to be the case that we wouldn't be able to interact with others at all without means to understand or read their minds.²⁸ What Bloom is opposed to is emotional empathy, which he considers to be something intrinsically more of a hindrance than a help for moral judgements, and a feature of our moral lives that we would be better off without. "It grounds foolish judgements and often

²⁸ Bloom. *Against Empathy*. p.36

motivates indifference and cruelty. It can lead to irrational and unfair political decisions, it can corrode certain important relationships, such as between a doctor and patient, and makes us worse at being friends, parents, husbands, and wives.”²⁹

Bloom concedes that empathy does have the power to motivate us to take good, prosocial actions, even when doing so requires a sacrifice on our part. Bloom acknowledges the widespread acceptance of what C. Daniel Batson calls ‘the empathy-altruism hypothesis’ - that you can make people more likely to help others by simply instructing them to take on another’s perspective.³⁰ However, he also takes great pains to point out the numerous contrary examples of empathy leading people to take cruel, and clearly antisocial, actions. Bloom prefers the metaphor of empathy acting as a spotlight, highlighting the needs and suffering of others in such a way as to motivate us to help,³¹ but also undermining our motivation to help those who happen to fall outside the light.

Bloom most often summarizes his criticisms of emotional empathy as it being inherently biased, parochial, and innumerate.³² He also often stresses that the emotional distress we can experience from engaging in too much empathy for the suffering of others can undermine our motivation to help others. It’s these shortcomings to empathy that Bloom believed makes it a poor guide to moral judgement, and something about ourselves that we should suppress if we want to be ‘good caring people.’

Parochialism and bias run together in some ways since parochialism is a narrower form of bias, but Bloom seems to want to call out different important features of bias by using each term. In terms of parochialism, our empathy is biased towards our friends and family, as well

²⁹ Bloom. *Against Empathy*. p.2

³⁰ Bloom. “The Baby in the Well”.

³¹ Bloom. “Empathy and Its Discontents”. p.24

³² Bloom. *Against Empathy*. p.36

those who we take to be in some way a part of our tribe or community - those people we know best or are already like what we already know. Our empathy is most easily activated by people we already identify with, or want to identify with. Empathy is parochial in these ways, but also in a more geographic tendency towards concern for those physically nearest us, within the borders of our local villages, states, and countries, as opposed to those on the other side of the world.

Empathy can also be biased in more general ways, akin to the kinds of cognitive biases that can affect our reason. Bloom highlights the example that we may be motivated by empathy to help, but our desire to help may overwhelm our reason in ways that lead us to help in non-optimal ways. In Bloom's view, we may be more likely to help those that we happen to empathize with, or help in ways that are immediately satisfying but not beneficial long term. Bloom gives the example of a parent who empathizes too much with the suffering of their child, and who may thereby fail in their role as a parent. "Any good parent, for instance, often has to make their child do something, in a way that causes the child immediate unhappiness but is better for him or her in the future: Do your homework, eat your vegetables, go to bed at a reasonable hour, sit still for this vaccination, go to the dentist."³³

By innumerate, Bloom means that empathy can lead us to favor "the one over the many and the specific over the statistical."³⁴ "It doesn't resonate properly to the effects of our actions on groups of people, and it is insensitive to statistical data and estimated costs and benefits."³⁵ We are more concerned by the disappearance of a single local child than we are by genocide happening in some far-off country. We will donate more money to save the life of one child whose name and story we know, than we will to save the lives of eight strangers.³⁶ Bloom notes

³³ Bloom. *Against Empathy*. p.35

³⁴ Bloom. "Empathy and Its Discontents". p.25

³⁵ Bloom. *Against Empathy*. p.31

³⁶ Bloom. *Against Empathy*. p.88

that what we are falling victim to here is what Thomas Schelling called “the identifiable victim effect.”³⁷ Putting a face or name to a victim is reliably a much stronger motivator to act on a victim’s behalf than the amount of help needed or the number of people needing help. Empathy doesn’t always stop to check its math. “To the extent that we can recognize the numbers as significant, it’s because of reason, not empathy.”³⁸

Bloom cites an experiment concerning a young girl on a waiting list for medical treatment as an example of empathy’s innumeracy.³⁹ Subjects in the experiment were told about Sheri Summers, a 10-year-old girl who is fatally ill and on a waiting list for a treatment to relieve her pain. The subjects in the experiment are offered an opportunity to move Sheri up the waiting list. Absent any other information, the majority of subjects declined to move Sherri up the list. However, if the subjects were first asked to imagine how Sherri felt, the results change. The majority of subjects would then decide to move Sherri up the waiting list. For Bloom, the results of this experiment show how our reason can be overwhelmed by our fellow-feeling, biasing us towards those whose emotions we take on over those whose emotions we are blind to. It seems clearly unfair to move Sheri up the waiting list ahead of those other patients. The introduction of empathy to the situation did motivate people to help Sherri, but in a way that directly caused harm to others.

Bias is not the only serious problem that Bloom sees with emotional empathy. Even if we were able to overcome bias, parochialism, and innumeracy, we would still have to contend with evidence that empathizing too much can be bad for our physical and mental well-being. Bloom refers to ‘empathic distress’ as our taking on more negative emotions from others than we can

³⁷ Bloom. *Against Empathy*. p.88

³⁸ Bloom. “The Baby in the Well”.

³⁹ Bloom. “Empathy and Its Discontents”. p.25

handle. In an empirical study of people prone to “an excessive concern with others and placing others’ needs before one’s own,”⁴⁰ Vicki Helgeson and Heidi Fritz discovered that such people were at higher risk for heart disease, diabetes, and cancer. Also indicative of the risks of excessive empathy are the high rates of burnout for stereotypically high empathy professions like doctors, nurses, and counselors.

This matters because the principal benefit of empathy is that it is supposed to motivate us to help and care for others. If too much empathy can also undermine our motivation to help, then Bloom argues we should look for a more reliable alternative. The alternative that Bloom recommends is rational compassion. He feels that compassion can preserve our motivation to help and care for others, but by prioritizing reason, we can aim to check the bias, parochialism, innumeracy, and empathic distress that he feels empathy is hopelessly subject to. As we look at Bloom’s rational compassion in the next section, a question worth having in mind for him is why we can’t accomplish his same goals with a reflective or rational empathy?

Rational Compassion

Important to the argument that Bloom will make in defense of rational compassion being superior to emotional empathy for informing our moral judgments is that compassion is something importantly different from both emotional and cognitive empathy. As Tania Singer and Olga Klimecki point out, “compassion does not mean sharing the suffering of the other: rather it is characterized by feelings of warmth, concern, and care for the other, as well as a strong motivation to improve the other’s well-being. Compassion is feeling for and not with the other.”⁴¹ When we feel compassion for someone, we feel something because of their situation,

⁴⁰ Bloom. *Against Empathy*. p.133

⁴¹ Bloom. *Against Empathy*. p.138

but those feelings are distinctly our own. Our feelings motivate us to help and care for the person that is suffering, but their feelings do not touch us. Compassion is also distinct from empathy in that it is specifically triggered by observed suffering, while empathy can be triggered by any observed feeling whatsoever.

An experiment conducted by Tania Singer with Buddhist monk Matthieu Ricard highlights both the differences between empathy and compassion, as well as the higher level of stress that comes from emotional empathy than comes from compassion. Ricard performed various compassion based and empathic based meditations while in an fMRI machine. In the case of the empathic mediation, Ricard was directed to give rise to a powerful feeling of empathy while imagining people experiencing great suffering. In the case of the compassion meditation, he directed feelings of love and kindness towards people he imagined to be experiencing great suffering.

It was possible to see that different areas of the brain were activated by the respective meditative states. Ricard also reported feeling invigorated and pleased by compassionate meditation, while he found the experience of prolonged empathic meditation to be exhausting and unpleasant.⁴² At issue for Bloom is not just that compassion is different from empathy and feels better than empathy, but that the distress that comes from excessive empathy can emotionally exhaust us in a way that contributes to our failures of moral judgments, and this distress does not seem to be present with compassion.

Bloom's embrace of compassion is actually somewhat guarded, though, in contrast to his full-throated defense of reason. "I want to make a case for the value of conscious, deliberative reasoning in everyday life, arguing that we should strive to use our heads rather than our

⁴² Bloom. *Against Empathy*. p.139

hearts.”⁴³ Bloom includes compassion as something that matters for our ability to be kind, but not as dear to us as self-control or intelligence.⁴⁴ For Bloom, we are best served by cost-benefit analysis, while keeping our kindness and compassion more muted, for many of the same reasons that he is concerned about emotional empathy.⁴⁵

Bloom’s hesitancy to rely on compassion is that it is also open to bias. “Compassion is biased; concern is biased; and even cost-benefit reasoning is biased. Even when we try hard to be fair, impartial, and objective, we nonetheless tend to tilt things to favor the outcomes that benefit ourselves.”⁴⁶ Bloom readily admits that many of the arguments that one can make against empathy could also be made against compassion, and that some of them can be made against reason itself. The problems with compassion and empathy are issues that he sees as being endemic to them. The biases of reason, on the other hand, come from our reasoning *badly*. Proper reasoning ought to overcome bias. “It’s only when we escape from empathy and rely instead on the application of rules and principles or a calculation of costs and benefits that we can, to at least some extent, become fair and impartial.”⁴⁷ Whatever biases compassion may be prone to, they can be remedied as long as our compassion is checked by our reasoning properly. Bloom doesn’t trust compassion, but he needs it to explain why we care about others and are motivated to help them. But on that understanding, it’s unclear why reason can’t be used to check empathy in the same way.

There is also some question of whether Bloom has so watered down the role of compassion in his view as to render it fairly impotent. Writing on the pitfalls of compassion,

⁴³ Bloom. *Against Empathy*. p.5

⁴⁴ Bloom. *Against Empathy*. p.35

⁴⁵ Bloom. *Against Empathy*. p.39

⁴⁶ Bloom. *Against Empathy*. p.50

⁴⁷ Bloom. *Against Empathy*. p.95

Trudy Grovier and David Boutland argue that “merely feeling compassion is morally empty if there is not even serious consideration of responsive action.”⁴⁸ In the previous example of Buddhist monk Matthieu Ricard, the fact that he felt invigorated and pleased after compassion meditation may itself be evidence against the idea that he would be especially motivated to help those whose suffering he was meditating upon. Grovier and Boutland highlights the concern that when feeling a non-distressing compassion, “there is a risk of deeming ourselves virtuous simply because we have the altruistic feeling of compassion, of taking the sentiment itself to be enough, and not putting enough effort into the quest for action.”⁴⁹ While it may be beneficial to Ricard that compassion meditation lends him more tranquility than empathic meditation, Grovier and Boutland highlight the view of Sophie Condorcet that “as human beings we feel an instinctive particular sympathy based on our physiology and early experience of care, and from that basis develop a reflexive General sympathy. She argued that in motivating moral action, feeling suffering and sorrow were more important than feeling pleasure.”⁵⁰ Ricard has escaped some suffering, but he may not necessarily be a better or more helpful person for it.

Motivated Empathy

Bloom would have us suppress our empathy in favor of the rational compassion that he advocates. Compassion, checked by reason, seems for Bloom to be the best path towards retaining at least some motivating force to our moral judgements, while ensuring that those judgments are as fair as possible. There are alternative approaches to contending with the

⁴⁸ Grovier & Boutland. “Compassion and its Pitfalls”.

⁴⁹ Grovier & Boutland. “Compassion and its Pitfalls”.

⁵⁰ Grovier & Boutland. “Compassion and its Pitfalls”.

shortcomings of empathy that are worth examining. One of the criticisms that Bloom has of empathy is that it can be manipulated in ways we are unaware of. For Jamil Zaki, the malleability of empathy is actually a beneficial feature that we can take advantage of. For Zaki, empathy has its flaws, but fortunately our empathy isn't fixed. We can cultivate a better empathy that can overcome its shortcomings.⁵¹ I will argue that Zaki demonstrates that we can overcome, or at least mitigate, the shortcomings that Bloom is concerned about, rather than having to suppress empathy and fellow-feeling.

Some part of our empathy is given to us, but we are not forever stuck where we start out. "Yes, empathy and kindness are partly genetic, but there is still room for non-genetic factors - experiences, environments, habits - to play a crucial rule."⁵² Part of the empathy level we start our lives with is dependent upon the background environmental conditions we are exposed to. As Zaki discusses, "One-year-old children whose parents express high levels of empathy show greater concern for strangers as two-year-olds, are more able to tune into other people's emotions as four-year-olds, and act more generously as six-year-olds when compared to other children their age."⁵³ Conversely, there is also the example of the psychologists that studied neglected orphans in Romania and discovered higher levels of psychopath-like empathy deficits.⁵⁴ For good and ill, our readiness and ability to empathize with others can be greatly determined by the circumstances of the earliest years of our life. Trauma, like with the Romanian orphans, is not necessarily determinative of our ability to empathize in only one direction. Zaki cites numerous examples of people who had experienced abnormal levels of suffering or trauma who also demonstrate long term higher levels of empathy and prosocial behavior. "Victims of political

⁵¹ Zaki. *The War for Kindness*. p.15

⁵² Zaki. *The War for Kindness*. p.23

⁵³ Zaki. *The War for Kindness*. p.24

⁵⁴ Zaki. *The War for Kindness*. p.24

violence and natural disasters volunteer at unusually high rates to help homeless people, the elderly, and at-risk children.”⁵⁵

Empathic level can be changed in long term ways by major life events, but empathic levels can also shrink and grow in short term ways based on our circumstances, and we can also deliberately cause our empathic levels to grow and expand ourselves. Evidence suggests “that simply *believing* it is possible to change one’s empathy helps make it so.”⁵⁶ In a study Zaki conducted with Karina Schumann and Carol Dweck, subjects were presented with a scenario that describes someone that has a history of being unsympathetic towards others. For one group of subjects, the scenario continues on to describe that person as going on to work a job repossessing homes and how this is unsurprising because empathy is fixed trait. For the other group of subjects, the unsympathetic person is described as having become a social worker and how this is unsurprising because empathy is a skill that can be cultivated. Subjects were then asked to read statements that described empathy as either fixed or a trait and say whether or not they agreed with the statements. The subjects who had heard empathy described as fixed tended to agree with the statements that agreed with that position, and the reverse was true for the subjects that were told empathy was a skill. More importantly, subjects were presented with a chance to volunteer for a cancer awareness campaign, either in an easy job participating in a walkathon or a more challenging job of sitting in a cancer support group and hearing their stories. All subjects volunteered for the walkathon at the same rate, but the subjects who believed that empathy was a skill volunteered for the more difficult job nearly twice as often. Not only can empathy motivate us to help others when we take on their perspective as Batson and others describe, simply priming people to believe that we *can* become more empathetic will nudge people towards more

⁵⁵ Zaki. *The War for Kindness*. p.26

⁵⁶ Zaki. *The War for Kindness*. p.27

altruistic, even uncomfortable, behavior. Not only can empathy make us better people, just getting people to believe empathy can make us better people can make us better people.

Zaki takes Bloom to task for believing we are hopeless to correct the misfires of empathy we experience. Zaki quotes Bloom as saying “Empathy will have to yield to reason if humanity is to have a future.”⁵⁷ But that view rests on an understanding of empathy as immune to the influence of our reason, which is not the case. “By thinking differently, we can choose to feel differently.”⁵⁸ Studies that show the ways in which our empathy can be biased can also be seen as ways in which an understanding of those biases can allow for us to take steps to nudge us towards the behaviors that we do want. “In one set of studies, men and women viewed videos of people telling emotional stories and then guessed how the speaker felt. Men performed more poorly than women. But in a follow-up, researchers told viewers that they’d be paid for accurately understanding speakers. This eliminated the empathic gender gaps.”⁵⁹ In an amusing corollary, “Men also became more empathetic when told that women found ‘sensitive guys’ more attractive.”⁶⁰ This is not men becoming more empathic selflessly. In both cases, the men are being nudged toward empathy for self-interested rewards, but the altruistic behavioral changes that follow from empathy can persist independent of how you came to be more empathetic.

One study that Zaki discusses, highlighting both the good and bad of empathy, involves psychologists studying tribalism in British soccer fans. Fans of the team Manchester United were told to write about what the team meant to them before heading to a separate location to record a video for the team. On the way to the location they would encounter a jogger with a twisted

⁵⁷ Zaki. *The War for Kindness*. p.37

⁵⁸ Zaki. *The War for Kindness*. p.37

⁵⁹ Zaki. *The War for Kindness*. p.44

⁶⁰ Zaki. *The War for Kindness*. p.44

ankle. The subjects were significantly more likely to stop to help if the jogger was wearing a Manchester United jersey than if the jogger was wearing one for another team. However, when the study was performed where the Manchester United fans are instead told to write about why they love soccer in general, they become about as likely to help the jogger in the jersey for a different team as they are to help the jogger in the Manchester United jersey. However, as Zaki notes, a jogger in a plain jersey was still significantly more likely not to be helped.⁶¹ This study highlights the way in which our empathy can be biased towards people that are like ourselves, but, importantly, it also shows that we can be nudged to expand our circle of who we view as like ourselves. While our empathy is prone to bias - as we saw argued by Bloom - we are not helpless to do anything about that bias.

In a study from Tania Singer, over the course of a two-year period with a group of three hundred participants, subjects underwent training in loving kindness meditation - a technique concerned with deliberately extending kindness to all people, especially those whom we have the greatest difficulty empathizing with. Subjects were also paired together to practice listening and telling one another their emotional and personal stories on an almost daily basis. Singer made a number of observations at the conclusion of the study: (1) subjects had a significantly more refined understanding of their own emotions and the emotions of others; (2) Subjects were more motivated to help when encountering others in pain; and (3) the empathy-related parts of the brain of the subjects had grown in size. As Zaki, notes, “Singer’s team showed for the first time that through purposeful effort, people can build long-term empathy and, in the process, change their biology.”⁶² This change in biology takes advantage of the plasticity of the brain. There are of course limits to the kinds of impact we can have on our own brains. We can’t meditate our

⁶¹ Zaki. *The War for Kindness*. p.45

⁶² Zaki. *The War for Kindness*. p.49

way to a fundamentally different structure or neurochemistry, but this does show that we can at least develop certain areas with sufficient practice and effort.

A subtler way to overcome bias is simply to increase the amount we interact with those that are unlike us. Zaki discusses the ‘contact theory’ of Gordon Allport, which claims that the source of bigotry is generally a lack of acquaintance, and can be remedied through substantive exposure. Simply increasing the amount of different other group members that someone sees can actually be counterproductive, triggering feelings of difference and exacerbating tribalism,⁶³ but “the more time someone spends with outsiders, the less prejudice they express.”⁶⁴ When we spend quality time with those that are different from us, when those interactions are substantive, we see a diminishment of the kind of outgroup bias that Bloom is concerned about.

Another less obvious way to grow empathy is through theater training. Drama students showed an increase in cognitive empathy after a year of theater study, medical residents who trained in drama interacted more emphatically with their patients. And kids with autism performed better on empathy tests and in social situations after a two-week theater program.⁶⁵ These studies are noteworthy for our discussion of empathy in an interesting way. Consider: the changes that are described being produced by theater training largely concern cognitive empathy, but the activity that brought about those changes involves taking on and acting the behaviors and emotions of the characters being portrayed. It’s the emotionally empathic practice of acting like someone else that produced these cognitively empathic rewards for the drama students, medical residents, and autistic children.

⁶³ Zaki. *The War for Kindness*. p.62

⁶⁴ Zaki. *The War for Kindness*. p.62

⁶⁵ Zaki. *The War for Kindness*. p.81

In a similar vein, fiction can also be a useful tool for cultivating one's ability to empathize with others. Psychologist Raymond Mar has found that avid readers identify emotions in others more effectively than those who read less, and that young children who read develop mind-reading skills earlier than kids that don't read.⁶⁶ In another study, people's attitudes towards immigrants and LGBTQ people were improved by exposure to characters from those communities.⁶⁷ This point about understanding and emotional granularity is important. Through greater exposure to different kinds of experiences, emotional and otherwise, avid readers didn't just become better able to empathize with others, their ability to identify and understand emotions themselves improved. The more contact we come into with people that think differently than us, the more cosmopolitan our world view becomes, it's not just that we become better able to empathize with ever wider circles of people, the substance of that empathy is improved as understanding of the emotions involved becomes more refined.

Zaki does share Bloom's concern regarding empathic distress, but thinks that there are solutions available to this problem as well. Members of the medical professional community are particularly prone to the effects of over-empathizing with their patients and the corresponding burnout that can come from that. While this looks like a situation where empathy is a problem, it may be that *more* empathy is actually the solution. At Johns Hopkins they created a hospital-wide peer-to-peer empathy network called Resilience in Stressful Events. The idea being that having someone who can knowledgeably empathize with the very specific demands of being a medical care professional can create an outlet for people to work through their feelings when mistakes happen or things go poorly with a patient. What the heads of the program found was that those who took advantage of the program were less likely to take days off or leave their job

⁶⁶ Zaki. *The War for Kindness*. p.81

⁶⁷ Zaki. *The War for Kindness*. p.82

than those that did not.⁶⁸ As helpful as the advice and compassion that one can get from a therapist can be, support from a peer that actually knows what it feels like to go through a particular situation can be therapeutic in a more powerful way.

Zaki describes how modern technological advances have played a significant role in diminishing empathy levels as people experience fewer face-to-face encounters with others. “Countries with greater internet usage also have lower average levels of empathy, and individuals who spend relatively more time on the internet, social media, or gaming platforms report greater trouble understanding others. And when people read each other’s words, as opposed to hearing their voices, they’re more likely to dehumanize them - especially if they disagree with what they say.”⁶⁹ This seems like a point that could have some implications for Bloom's view. In what seems to me something like a naturally experiment of what a society would look like when empathy is broadly suppressed, what we see is greater difficulty understanding one another and a greater tendency to dehumanize others. Perhaps Bloom might argue that this is a situation that would be improved by more compassion, and maybe he would be right, but this is definitely a situation where things were made worse by less empathy.

To make that case that the issue here is the lack of empathy and not technology per se, Zaki discusses an experiment involving using technology to increase empathy for the group of people who we often have the most difficulty empathizing with: the homeless. Using an Oculus Rift virtual reality device, subjects in the experiment were presented with an experience of gradually becoming homeless. First selling possessions to try and stay afloat, then losing their apartment, moving into and then losing their car, finally being forced to seek shelter on an all night bus. A month after the study subjects who had this experience were more likely than the

⁶⁸ Zaki. *The War for Kindness*. p.110

⁶⁹ Zaki. *The War for Kindness*. p.147

control group to support ballot initiatives targeting homelessness, and less likely to dehumanize the homeless.⁷⁰ A criticism levied against the idea of trying to empathize with an ever wider circle of people is that you can't empathize with the entire world. On this point, Bloom's concern about the problem of innumeracy for empathy still seems strong. Maybe empathy is a spotlight whose beam we can widen, but it will never be able to encompass everyone at the same time. That does seem true. However, it would help mitigate the effects of innumeracy if we know that we could empathize with anyone, in principle, if we could train ourselves stop to take the time to do so. In the example of the soccer players, we saw we could be nudged to empathize with all soccer fans, but we happened not to empathize with non-soccer fans. In the example of Sherri Summers and the waiting list, we empathize with Sherri enough to override our sense of fairness and move her up on the list above those that we hadn't empathized with. But note that we could have, in principle, stopped to take the time to empathize with the others on the waiting list as well. As we see with our ability to cultivate a sympathy for the homeless, we should be able to cultivate empathy with anyone if we make the effort to stop to take the time to do so, and when it's relevant, train ourselves to stop to take the time to try to empathize with the people we come in contact with generally. Though he doesn't develop it in this way, this seems like what Bloom's idealized version of how rational compassion would work. Bloom doesn't say this explicitly, but in presenting the case of Sherri Summers as a problem for empathy, and rational compassion as a solution to the problems of empathy, it seems that he would believe that Rational Compassion should stop us from unfairly moving Sherri Summers up the waiting list. If compassion still motivates us to help those who are suffering, but reason is sufficient to check our inclination to help Sherri over the other individuals on the waiting list, if rational compassion

⁷⁰ Zaki. *The War for Kindness*. p.155

makes us stop to take into account the others on the waiting list, it remains unclear to me why a reflective or rational empathy couldn't work in a similar way. If Rational Compassion can get us to stop to consider the other members of the waiting list, or stop to also consider the non-soccer fan in need of help, or otherwise overcome the biases that afflict both compassion and empathy, then it seems reflection and reason should be able to be brought to bear on empathy in the same way.

The Indispensability of Fellow-Feeling

Bloom argues that “if we want to be good caring people, if we want to make the world a better place, then we are better off without empathy.”⁷¹ My goal in discussing Zaki was to show that, contrary to Bloom, employing the strategies that Zaki presents, we can use empathy to nudge others to be better, and cultivate a better empathy in ourselves that can make us better people. It does not seem to be the case, as Bloom suggests, that we would in fact clearly be better off without empathy. Bloom's rational compassion may also be a worthwhile strategy to pursue, but Zaki seems to show us that there are alternative empathic strategies that may work just as well.

In this section, we will be asking whether it even makes sense to say we could be better off without empathy. We will be discussing, first, the indispensable role that emotional and cognitive empathy play in the development of our moral conscience. Second, we will discuss the role that emotional empathy plays in the development of the emotional concepts that power our cognitive empathy, and how awareness of that fact can allow us to pursue a strategy of using our emotional empathy to cultivate ever more refined emotional concepts that would help us

⁷¹ Bloom. *Against Empathy*. p.3

understand others better - a project that would be undermined by the suppression of our empathy as Bloom recommends.

Important for this part of the discussion will be situating empathy in the context of human life as a social animal. Where Bloom guardedly concedes some importance to emotional empathy is its role in the family unit and in our interactions with our loved ones. We would feel correct in judging those dear to us for not extending us empathy, and we would chastise ourselves for doing the same. Even recognizing this, Bloom would still prefer us to throttle back our empathy as much as possible in everyday moral judgments, and to remove it entirely from social policy. Zaki also discussed how our earliest upbringing and environment shapes our capacity for empathy in long lasting ways, but emphasizes that our empathy level is never fixed and we can still cultivate our empathy in more desirable ways.

The works of Patricia Churchland and Lisa Feldman Barrett highlight empathy's indispensability. Churchland examines the social and neurological underpinnings of our social nature. Barrett examines the intersubjective way in which we rely on interchange with others in order to form our emotional concepts. Both offer evidence that emotional empathy and fellow-feeling are an indispensable part of who we are and how we navigate our social world, and integral to any effort to try to become better and more caring people.

Churchland maintains that our understanding of how the human brain functions makes it challenging to discuss reason and moral judgement as distinct from feelings. Central to Churchland's view of human nature is that we have social brains that are wired to care about others,⁷² and that the core elements of our conscience are the interdependent features of feelings and judgments.⁷³

⁷² Churchland. *Conscience*. p.3

⁷³ Churchland. *Conscience*. p.3

Churchland roots other-directed care in the structure of the mammalian parent-child relationship. “All animals must have the basic circuitry for self-care, or they will fail to survive long enough to reproduce. In the evolution of the mammalian brain, the range of *myself* was extended to include *my babies*.”⁷⁴ At least so far, this isn’t too far from Bloom view, “From a Darwinian perspective these preferences are no-brainers. Creatures who favor their own are at a huge advantage over those who are impartial.”⁷⁵

Churchland’s understanding of the origins of other-care rest on the roles that the neurohormones vasopressin and oxytocin play in the brain of the mother and child, along with the opioids and cannabinoids that regulate pleasure.⁷⁶ Also key is that human young are born helpless for such an extended period that prolonged care becomes necessary for their survival. Being warm-blooded has evolutionary advantages, but brings with it a high demand for calories. A byproduct of this high-caloric diet is an increased brain size, which brings with it an increased capacity for understanding.⁷⁷

Human young have an incredible capacity for learning which makes humans highly adaptive to new environments and circumstances. The trade off to this lack of programmed instinctual behavior is the corresponding prolonged period of helplessness. Another trade off of having large-brained helpless young is having smaller litters that parents have to invest greater energy to take care of. The high demand of care for human young makes it evolutionarily profitable for mothers to have help. “In mammals, and birds, attachment to mothers, and in some cases to fathers, kin, and friends, is the platform for social behavior in general, and for moral

⁷⁴ Churchland. *Conscience*. p.22

⁷⁵ Bloom. *Against Empathy*. p.12

⁷⁶ Churchland. *Conscience*. p.24

⁷⁷ Churchland. *Conscience*. p.26

behavior in particular.”⁷⁸ These first relationships aren’t merely a historical antecedent to a shared social world, but are the persistent and overlapping elements from which our social world is constructed. Bracketing out the family as something anomalous from moral judgement, as Bloom is inclined to do, misses something important about the world as it is. Bloom’s own research in moral behavior in infants seems to indicate some of how this relationship between mother and child manifests from the earliest days of life - long before we would typically regard a child as being fully rational. “Some degree of emotional empathy is bred in the bone. The sight and sound of another’s suffering is unpleasant for babies and, as soon as they are mobile enough, they try to help, patting and soothing others in distress.”⁷⁹

Because of ethical difficulties in studying the functioning of neurochemicals in human subjects in controlled environments, much of the research Churchland cites concerns how these chemicals operate in the brains of fellow mammals like prairie voles. “In one experiment relevant to empathy, one partner of a prairie vole is exposed to a stressor (such as movement restriction), and then returned to the cage to rejoin the mate. Immediately, the unstressed partner hurries to the stressed partner and engages in intense consolation behavior - grooming and licking. Here is the control: if a pair of prairie voles are merely separated but no stress is experienced by the absent partner, a warm but less intense reunion occurs. If oxytocin receptors are experimentally blocked in the home-cage mate, intense consolation behavior towards a stressed partner is not seen.”⁸⁰ Because Churchland doesn’t recognize cognitive and emotional empathy as distinct in the way that Bloom does, and since we are unable to interview our prairie vole subject to ascertain whether their helping behavior was motivated by emotional empathy,

⁷⁸ Churchland. *Conscience*. p.40

⁷⁹ Bloom. “Against Empathy” Boston Review

⁸⁰ Churchland. *Conscience*. p.52

cognitive empathy, or rational compassion, we will need to take a bit of a leap here to better connect this experiment to our larger conversation. This is speculative on my part, but I don't believe that prairie voles have the requisite theory of mind needed for their helping behavior to be motivated by cognitive empathy or rational compassion, so suspect that what is operative here is something like what Bloom describes as the emotional empathy that motivates helping behavior in very young children mentioned above.

A number of behaviors are tied to hormone releases in mammal brains. Oxytocin is tied to maternal behavior in mothers, vasopressin motivates protective behavior in mothers for their children, oxytocin dampens fear and is released through physical contact between a child and its mother, endogenous opioids when released dampen pain and are typical released when "highly social animals are with kin or friends."⁸¹ In humans, these hormones don't determine behavior, but they do shape them in conjunction with reason as we try to reconcile and understand what we are experiencing externally and internally.

To summarize, for Churchland, we see the roots of moral conscience in the neurobiology of attachment. Attachment begets caring and caring begets conscience,⁸² and mate and familial attachment are explainable through the functioning of neurochemicals like oxytocin and vasopressin. That we care about others is rooted in our brain, feelings, and social structures; our innate capacity for adaptation and understanding allows us to engage these impulses reflectively rather than just reflexively. As we saw in Zaki, the brain is the background condition that determines our given empathy level, and as we see here, it is also the background condition that chemically predisposes us to care for and empathize with others. However, we shouldn't lose sight of the brain's plasticity. The given biology of our brain, what it's neurons and

⁸¹ Churchland. *Conscience*. p.57

⁸² Churchland. *Conscience*. p.42

neurochemicals can and can't do, places limits on just how much, and what kind of change we can affect on our brain. But the brain's plasticity and relative lack of hardwired instinctual behaviors means that we are able to stimulate lasting deliberate change. As we saw with Tania Singer's study of loving kindness meditation and mutual emotional storytelling, not only was a lasting behavioral change created in the subject's capacity and propensity for emotional empathy, that change can be seen in the enlargement of the empathy-related sections of the subject's brains.

Churchland offers an understanding of the neurochemical underpinnings of our fellow-feeling and sociability. Lisa Feldman Barrett offers an understanding of how our fellow-feeling and sociability in turn informs how we create our feelings and concepts. On Feldman's view of constructed emotions, "we find that your emotions are not built-in but made from more basic parts. They are not universal but vary from culture to culture. They are not triggered, you create them."⁸³

This process of constructing emotions begins with how our brain experiences the world. That is, not directly, but by creating simulations that predict what is happening in the world within us, and around us. "Your brain uses your past experience to construct a hypothesis - the simulation - and compares it to the cacophony arriving from the outside via your senses, and from within your body via interoception. In this manner, simulation lets your brain impose meaning on the noise, selecting what's relevant and ignoring the rest."⁸⁴ The difficulty with direct experience of the world is that it's inefficient and slow. The brain relies on simulation because it allows us to integrate background knowledge and expectations to prepare us to react to what we think is likely about to happen, rather than waiting to process all of our sensations to

⁸³ Barrett. *How Emotions are Made*. Introduction.

⁸⁴ Barrett. *How Emotions are Made*. p.27

decide what we are currently seeing, hearing and feeling. For this reason, “simulation is a common mechanism not only for perception but also for understanding language, feeling empathy, remembering, imagining, dreaming, and many other psychological phenomena.”⁸⁵

For Barrett, an emotion “ is your brain’s creation of what your bodily sensations mean in relation to what is going on around you in the world.”⁸⁶ The sensation that your stomach is upset is given a different meaning depending on your understanding of your current context. If you’ve been ill, or if you’re on a roller coaster, or about to give a speech in public, or if you see someone that you’re infatuated with, that upset stomach will represent a different feeling in each of these cases, which your brain will need to understand in order to respond appropriately.

This understanding of constructed emotions also inform how we understand others. “(Y)ou depend on emotion concepts each time you experience another person as emotional.”⁸⁷ in the same way that we use bodily and context clues to work out what we’re feeling and why, we apply the very same principles in predicting and understanding how others feel and why.

We have evidence that from our earliest days that our understanding and experience of emotions develops in tandem with the refinement of our understanding of different emotional concepts. In studying young children we find “two-and three-year-old children, when shown basic emotion facial configurations, are not able to freely label them until they possess clearly differentiated concepts for ‘Anger’, ‘Sadness’, ‘Fear’ and so on.”⁸⁸ This same idea persists throughout our life in that we use the emotional concepts that we’ve learned from our

⁸⁵ Barrett. *How Emotions are Made*. p.27

⁸⁶ Barrett. *How Emotions are Made*. p.31

⁸⁷ Barrett. *How Emotions are Made*. p.43

⁸⁸ Barrett. *How Emotions are Made*. p.47

experiences and interactions with others to understand how others feel. “We perceive others as happy, sad, or angry by applying our own emotion concepts to their moving faces and bodies.”⁸⁹

We don’t come to form our emotional concepts in isolation, based solely on our own feelings. Rather, we come to understand what our feelings are through our existing culture and our interactions with others, and we come to refine those understandings as we apply those emotional concepts to others. To highlight how socially dependent our emotional concepts are, Barrett discusses those terms and concepts that are unique to particular cultures. “Norwegians have a concept for an intense joy of falling in love, calling it ‘Forelsket.’ The Danes have the concept ‘Hygge’ for a certain feeling of close friendship. The Russian ‘Tocka’ is a spiritual anguish, and the Portuguese ‘Saudade’ is a strong, spiritual longing.”⁹⁰ Barrett provides many more examples that are all, to varying degrees, challenging to translate accurately into English because they represent emotional concepts that, though matter of course for native speakers of the relevant language, simply do not exist in the same sense in English. Danes can use the word ‘hygge’ to understand one another, but something gets lost when trying to convey the same understanding to someone lacking the concept. Importantly, this is not forever hopeless because through more and more discussion and example, an ever-greater understanding of the concept is conveyed. An English speaker who decides to learn Danish, and live amongst other Danish speakers, would likely come to understand ‘hygge’ in time.

We need concepts to understand the world. “Without concepts, you’ll experience a world of ever-fluctuating noise. Everything you ever encountered would be unlike everything else.”⁹¹ This process is what makes communication with others possible. “Successful communication

⁸⁹ Barrett. *How Emotions are Made*. p.51

⁹⁰ Barrett. *How Emotions are Made*. p.146

⁹¹ Barrett. *How Emotions are Made*. p.85

requires that you and your friends are using synchronized concepts.”⁹² If our concepts are underpowered, or if that is the case of the person we’re trying to engage, communication will be difficult. “People who exhibit low emotional granularity will have only a few emotional concepts.”⁹³ And those concepts will set limits on what kind of communication will be possible.

As we saw in Churchland, one of the key features of the human brain is a relative lack of preprogrammed instinctual behavior combined with a high capacity for understanding that lends itself to conceptual plasticity. As Barrett puts it, “Your genes gave you a brain that can wire itself to its physical and social environment. The people around you, in your culture, maintain that environment with their concepts and help you live in that environment by transmitting those concepts from their brains to yours. And later, you transmit your concepts to the brains of the next generation. It takes more than one human to create a human mind.”⁹⁴

This is especially important to understanding the risks in taking Blooms division of empathy into the emotional and the cognitive too literally. As Barrett puts it eloquently, “Emotions are social reality. We construct instances of emotion in exactly the same manner as colors, falling trees, and money: using a conceptual system that is realized within the brain’s wiring. We transform sensory inputs from the body and the world, which are perceiver-independent, into an instance of (say) happiness in the context of a concept, ‘Happiness,’ found in many human minds.”⁹⁵ We come to understand the concepts we use with one another when we use them in the same way. In terms of emotions, we come to understand ourselves to be using our emotional concepts in the same way when we use them in correspondence to the same, or similar, feelings. There doesn’t seem to be a way to understand our usage of emotional terms that

⁹² Barrett. *How Emotions are Made*. p.94

⁹³ Barrett. *How Emotions are Made*. p.106

⁹⁴ Barrett. *How Emotions are Made*. p.111

⁹⁵ Barrett. *How Emotions are Made*. p.134

doesn't in some way rely on fellow-feeling. "Emotion categories, in my view, are made real through collective intentionality. To communicate to someone else that you feel angry, both of you need a shared understanding of 'Anger.'"⁹⁶ When we reduce empathy to the purely cognitive, it seems like we are limiting ourselves to understanding others based on the, now rigid, concepts we already have.

Bloom takes for granted that we need cognitive empathy for moral judgments. We need some understanding what is going on in the minds of others in order to regulate our behavior towards them. But if Barrett's conception of the role that emotional empathy plays in the formation of our emotional concepts is correct, it seems that emotional empathy is required for cognitive empathy. We can't say we truly have an understanding of what is happening in the minds of others if we don't share in the something like the same emotional concepts that they do, and suppressing our emotional empathy seems unavoidably like intentionally putting a barrier in the way of your understanding what someone else is feeling. If Barrett is correct, "(Y)ou need an emotion concept in order to experience or perceive the associated emotion. It's a requirement. Without a concept for 'Fear,' you cannot experience fear. Without a concept for 'Sadness,' you cannot perceive sadness in another person. You could learn the necessary concept, or you could construct it in the moment through conceptual combination, but your brain must be able to make that concept and predict with it. Otherwise, you will be experientially blind to that emotion."⁹⁷ If we understand others only through the concepts we already have without making the effort the bridge our concepts with those of others using fellow-feeling should be better equipped to handle, we will tend towards emotional parochialism. As Barrett puts it, "Your emotions are guided by your predictions. And as I observe you, the emotions I perceive are guided by my

⁹⁶ Barrett. *How Emotions are Made*. p.135

⁹⁷ Barrett. *How Emotions are Made*. p.141

predictions. Emotional communication happens, therefore, when you and I predict and categorize in synchrony.”⁹⁸ It’s in this sense that I think Barrett’s understanding of the ongoing social element of how we understand others, as well as ourselves, relies on not closing ourselves off to one another in the way that seems unavoidable on Bloom’s account.

Empathy and Adam Smith

We conclude our discussion of empathy with a look at Adam Smith, the figure that Bloom credits with his own understanding of emotional empathy, because I believe that everything that we’ve discussed so far from Zaki, Churchland, and Barrett in response to Bloom, was already present from the beginning in Smith’s moral theory. We can piece together from these contemporary writers the different strategies we’ve discussed to contend with the problems with empathy that Bloom has raised, but it’s my contention that something like these contemporary ideas were present in Smith all along. We’ve asked at times in this paper whether or not a reflective or rational empathy would work in place of Bloom’s rational compassion, and reflective empathy actually does seem like a good way to describe just what’s happening in Smith’s moral theory.

Smith begins *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* with his discussion of sympathy. Sympathy denotes for Smith our fellow-feeling with any passion whatsoever.⁹⁹ For him, when someone triggers our sympathy and fellow-feeling, or when we direct our sympathy and fellow-feeling towards someone, what happens is we feel something like what we imagine the person we are observing to be feeling, or what we imagine we would feel if we were in their place. We don’t feel the identical feelings as someone else because we are limited by our own sensations

⁹⁸ Barrett. *How Emotions are Made*. p.195

⁹⁹ Smith. *TMS*. l.i.1.5

and the limits of our imagination. The role that imagination is playing here makes sympathy context dependent. “Sympathy, therefore, does not arise so much from the view of the passion, as from the situation that excites it.”¹⁰⁰ Sympathy, for Smith, is never just about the emotion that we witness someone expressing, but is always about our understanding of the emotion we imagine someone to have in the context of the larger situation they find themselves.

For Smith, everything starts with our nature as sociable creatures. Our affections for one another are themselves just a manifestation of our sympathies. “What is called affection, is in reality nothing but habitual sympathy.”¹⁰¹ And what affirms our sense of self-worth is that those whom we approve of and sympathize with will approve and sympathize with us. “Nothing pleases us more than to observe in other men a fellow-feeling with all the emotions of our own breast; nor are we ever so much shocked as by the appearance of the contrary.”¹⁰² Mutual sympathy plays an important regulatory role for Smith. How we understand what is right and wrong is rooted in what behavior we find others will and will not sympathize with. “And if we consider all the different passions of human nature, we shall find that they are regarded as decent, or indecent, just in proportion as mankind are more or less disposed to sympathize with them.”¹⁰³

Like we saw in Churchland, Smith also holds that it is within the context of our first intimate relationships, with those whom we first sympathize with, that we begin to form something like a moral conscience: “our first moral criticisms are exercised upon the characters and conduct of other people; and we are all very forward to observe how each of these affects us.

¹⁰⁰ Smith. *TMS*. I.i.1.10

¹⁰¹ Smith. *TMS*. VI.ii.1.7

¹⁰² Smith. *TMS*. I.i.2.1

¹⁰³ Smith. *TMS*. I.ii.intro.2

But we soon learn, that other people are equally frank with regard to our own.”¹⁰⁴ From our earliest formative days, we first start to understand how the behavior of others impacts us in terms of how it makes us feel, and we come to understand that others engage with us in the same manner. The interchange is always between our feelings and their feelings as well as our understanding and their understanding.

In turn, our desire to be sympathized with leads us to more generally desire to be the kind of person that is sympathized with. We come to desire to be worthy of sympathy, praise, and love. “Man naturally desires, not only to be loved, but to be lovely.”¹⁰⁵ In our desire to come to be praiseworthy to others, we come to learn, and formulate in concert with others, the general rules of behavior that will tend to be approved of by others. “The general rule, on the contrary, is formed, by finding from experience, that all actions of a certain kind, or circumstanced in a certain manner, are approved or disapproved of.”¹⁰⁶

Socially, humans crave mutual sympathy with others to validate what we think and feel. As Churchland argues, there appears to be a neurochemical foundation to this desire. However, we are not limited to a desire for mutual sympathy with just the particular individuals that we happen to come in contact with. Central to Smith’s view is that we are also able to abstract beyond the particular real observers of our behavior that we come into contact with in our day to day lives, to instead imagine an ideal impartial spectator that allows us to critically engage with any possible behavior we can imagine, even when there is no one observing us whose perspective we can take. We can imagine ourselves engaging in some behavior and can further imagine ourselves into the role of a general someone outside ourselves observing that behavior.

¹⁰⁴ Smith. *TMS*. III.1.5

¹⁰⁵ Smith. *TMS*. III.2.1

¹⁰⁶ Smith. *TMS*. III.4.8

“We endeavor to examine our conduct as we imagine any other fair and impartial spectator would imagine it.”¹⁰⁷

This imagined distance from ourselves allows us to approach closer to something like a more impartial view of our own behavior. “We can never survey our own sentiments and motives, we can never form any judgment concerning them; unless we remove ourselves, as it were, from our own natural station, and endeavor to view them as at a certain distance from us.”¹⁰⁸ For Smith, imagining an impartial spectator is the mechanism by which we form moral judgments in a way that will hopefully mitigate or overcome our own tendencies towards self-love and bias. “When I endeavor to examine my own conduct, when I endeavor to pass sentence upon it, and either to approve or condemn it, it is evident that, in all such cases, I divide myself, as it were, into two persons; and that I, the examiner and judge, represent a different character from that other I, the person whose conduct is examined into and judged of.”¹⁰⁹

This hoped for impartiality, though, relies on our first having internalized the perspectives of the people in our lives whose sympathy we desire, and, importantly, continuing to internalize ever more perspectives. The wider our understanding how others would think and feel in various situations, the better we are able to imagine how an impartial spectator would judge our behavior in a novel situation. The ideal impartial spectator is constructed as our best summation of all of the real spectators that we know and have known. Our moral conscience relies on our substantive interchange with others. “The man within the breast, the abstract and ideal spectator of our sentiments and conduct, requires often to be awakened and put in mind of

¹⁰⁷ Smith. *TMS*. III.1.2

¹⁰⁸ Smith. *TMS*. III.1.2

¹⁰⁹ Smith. *TMS*. III.1.6

his duty, by the presence of the real spectator.”¹¹⁰ On Smith’s account, we don’t get robust moral judgments without frequent, substantive, intimate interactions with others.

For Smith, we are born with a natural inclination to sympathize with others, and crave mutual sympathy. Smith’s Impartial Spectator is a metaphor that explains the most developed form of the evaluative component that is a feature of our sympathy throughout. For Smith, the impartial spectator explains how we come to form moral judgments, and, unlike with Bloom, it is our fellow-feeling that makes those judgments possible.

Now, how does all relate to our discussion of Zaki, Churchland and Barrett? Because of the time that Smith was writing, there can be an inclination to dismiss his view as being too much a product of the armchair, but the contemporary figures that we’ve looked at do seem to lend support to key features of his system. Churchland helps explain our natural inclination to sympathize with others that Smith takes for granted. Smith doesn’t have the neuroscience to frame his understanding of our social nature in the same way that Churchland does, but his system takes for granted that our sympathy and sociability are given to us by Nature. Even Bloom agrees that our impulse to empathize is “bred in the bone.”¹¹¹ Zaki’s research helps explain empathy as a trait that we can cultivate to mitigate, or overcome, its shortcomings. And Barrett’s research highlights how our moral judgment, as well as our understanding of ourselves and one another, depends upon our emotional interchange and fellow-feeling with one another.

Bloom credits Smith with his understanding of emotional empathy, but in looking more closely at Smith, we see something different. Smith’s sympathy is never wholly emotional. From the beginning, Smith’s sympathy is partly cognitive, not unlike what Churchland’s research would lead us to expect. Our sympathy and fellow-feeling play a critical role throughout our

¹¹⁰ Smith. *TMS*. III.3.38

¹¹¹ Bloom. “Against Empathy” Boston Review

lives in understanding ourselves and others in ways that Barrett's research would lead us to expect. Our desire for mutual sympathy drives us to want to be someone that others would sympathize with. We develop and cultivate the impartial spectator to guide ourselves to be better sympathizers, and worthy of the sympathy of others, in ways that should be familiar from Zaki's research. Smith's system begins with sympathy, and throughout it is the indispensable feature needed for us to become good caring people.

Bloom cites the following from Smith as evidence that Smith agrees with his own argument against empathy. "It is not the soft power of humanity, it is not that feeble spark of benevolence which Nature has lighted up in the human heart, that is thus capable of counteracting the strongest impulses of self-love. It is a stronger power, a more forcible motive, which exerts itself upon such occasions. It is reason, principle, conscience, the inhabitant of the breast, the man within, the great judge and arbiter of our conduct. It is he who, whenever we are about to act so as to affect the happiness of others, calls to us, with a voice capable of astonishing the most presumptuous of our passions, that we are but one of the multitude, in no respect better than any other in it; and that when we prefer ourselves so shamefully and so blindly to others, we become the proper objects of resentment, abhorrence, and execration."¹¹² While Bloom is correct about what role reason plays in making our moral judgments more impartial, more able to overcome bias and parochialism, what he fails to appreciate is the degree to which the formulation of the impartial spectator, the moral education of "conscience, the inhabitant of the breast, the man within," indispensably depends upon our fellow-feeling with the people that make up our social world.

¹¹² Smith. *TMS*. III.3.4

Conclusion

I began this thesis with: “Paul Bloom is against empathy and I am against Paul Bloom. Sort of.” I began that way on purpose because it captures two different ideas I wanted to get across. Paul Bloom is only sort of against empathy, and because of that, I am only sort of against his position. When he says he’s against empathy, he’s fully aware that he’s being provocative to anyone unfamiliar with the literature on the subject or with the nuances of his position. Further, he concedes the necessity of cognitive empathy for understanding the minds of others, the desirability of compassion and kindness towards others - which is often taken to be a component of empathy, and that for what shortcomings he sees with the fellow-feeling of emotional empathy, we would not want to do without it in our personal relationships. So, when Paul Bloom says he is against empathy, one way to understand him is that he thinks the fellow-feeling of emotional empathy, on its own, is often a poor guide to moral judgements, most notably in the realm of public policy decisions. Well, I agree with that. Experiments like the one involving Sherri Summers do seem to show that we can make unfair and irrational decisions when we unduly weigh our fellow-feeling for specific individuals at the exclusion of others that might be affected by our policy decisions. There is a version of Paul Bloom’s book that I would agree with entirely and he highlights an awareness of critiques like mine in the introduction when he says, “The most common critical response, which I’ve received from critics, friends, and students, is that I’ve gone too far. Perhaps I’ve shown that empathy, characterized in a certain way, might lead us astray. But nothing is perfect. Maybe the problem is that we sometimes rely on empathy too much, or that we sometimes use it in the wrong way. What one should do, then, is put it in its proper place.”¹¹³ Had this been his position, I would actually agree with him entirely.

¹¹³ Bloom. *Against Empathy*. p.12

Bloom is fairly emphatic that this is not his position, though: “if we want to be good caring people, if we want to make the world a better place, then we are better off without empathy.”¹¹⁴ On this point I think he is simply wrong. The fact that empathy can lead us astray does not entail that we are helpless to do anything to change that. We can cultivate a better empathy that is less prone to the shortcomings we have examined. As we hopefully saw with Churchland and Barrett, our fellow-feeling is fundamental to forming social ties with one another that makes us care about and understand ourselves and others as the subjects and objects of moral judgement. As we hopefully saw in Zaki, we can acknowledge the shortcomings of empathy without having to think of ourselves as helpless to do anything about them. We can take steps to cultivate a greater and more reflective empathy that can mitigate and overcome the shortcomings of empathy. And, as we hopefully saw in looking at Adam Smith, the understanding of sympathy and fellow-feeling as a complex process that integrates emotional, cognitive, and social elements in a way indispensable for moral judgment, and indispensable to us if we want to be good caring people, was present in the concept since it was first articulated.

¹¹⁴ Bloom. *Against Empathy*. p.3

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