

"Brilliant, powerful, and provocative, *Against Empathy* is sure to be one of the most controversial books of our time."  
—DANIEL GILBERT, author of *Stumbling on Happiness*

# AGAINST EMPATHY

The Case for Rational Compassion



PAUL BLOOM

Author of *How Pleasure Works* and *Just Babies*

## Empathy, War & Personal Responsibility

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Whereas most people associate empathy with kindness, it prompts Paul Bloom to think of war. (p. 188) In *Against Empathy: The Case for Rational Compassion*, he asserts that it is generally a poor moral guide because it leads to foolish judgments and motivates indifference and cruelty. (p. 2) Indeed, he suggests the problems facing individuals and societies rarely stem from a lack of empathy but more often from too much of it. (p. 5)

His thesis takes on urgent meaning in the context of the viscous attack of Russian "peacekeepers" on the Ukrainian people:

... some argue that the myth of pure evil gets things backwards... it's not that certain cruel actions are committed because the perpetrators are self-consciously and deliberately evil. Rather it is because they think they are doing good. They are fueled by a strong moral sense. (p. 184)

In terms of the evolutionary dynamics that have created our emotional makeup, "Creatures who favor their own are at a huge advantage over those who are impartial." Thus, we are not naturally egalitarian. Indeed, Bloom suggests there is something almost repugnant about the thought of caring for everyone equally, with no special love for friends and family. (p. 8)

Accordingly, empathy is an insufficient guide for broader moral action extending beyond our hereditary gene pools and tribal associates. Although we are not genetically engineered for it, [consequentialism](#) is required – taking into account the costs and benefits of our actions over the longer term. (p. 191) Indeed, Bloom asserts that fair, moral, and beneficial policies are best devised *without* empathy. (p. 207) Among our baser emotions, anger in particular makes us

irrational. (p. 209) Moreover, if others are angry, we may become so as well. Indeed, in light of groupthink, it may be difficult to opt out of tribal warfare. (p. 210)

Adam Smith outlined two personal qualities as being most utilitarian – “superior reasoning and understanding” accompanied by “self-command.” The former supports foresight in recognizing the future consequences of our actions and the latter enables us to delay gratification in order to focus on longer-term results. In short, our goals are unlikely to be met if we aren’t smart enough to figure out what is required or are unwilling to make the necessary commitments. (p. 235)

Putin apparently believes either that: a) his point of view is so morally superior that the horrendous impacts of his dictates upon nonmembers of his tribe are inconsequential or b) members of free societies have become so soft and complacent that they will ultimately fail to make the commitments required to uphold their values.

It's doubtful that rational thinkers would ascribe to Putin the deity required to support the former assumption but it falls to each of us to disprove the latter. Our charge is clear. We must coalesce around dispassionate, well-conceived plans and effectively coordinate our actions to realize a more morally defensible future.

Good, old-fashioned politics as usual ([#gofpau](#)) will not suffice. Nor will deferring to others that for which we should be taking personal responsibility, in partnership with those who share our values. What's at stake is quite literally a matter of good versus evil.