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Book Review:
Making Sense of Empathy

The Empathic Civilization: The Race to Global Consciousness in a World in Crisis, by Jeremy Rifkin, Tarcher/Penguin, 2009, 688 pages, 1101171189, 9781101171189, \$25.00.

Against Empathy: The Case for Rational Compassion, by Paul Bloom, HarperCollins, 2016, 304 pages, 9780062339348, \$18.00.

Enlightenment 2.0: Restoring Sanity to Our Politics, Our Economy, and Our Lives, by Joseph Heath, HarperCollins, 2014, 336 pages, 0062342894, \$26.00.

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In 1948, Martin Luther King, Jr., took a bachelor's degree in sociology from Atlanta's Morehouse College. Especially in the years just before his 1968 murder, King often publicly expressed his sociologist's concern about issues of human survival. "We've learned to fly the air like birds; we've learned to swim the seas like fish," King repeatedly warned, "and yet we haven't learned to walk the Earth as brothers and sisters." A half-century later, King's question lives. Will we, the members of the self-aware, partially self-controlling species *H. sapiens*, somehow conjure values and institutions capable of preventing our technical powers from fatally outrunning our comparatively slow-growing capacity for self-understanding, mutual regard, and continued existence?

In *The Empathic Civilization*, Jeremy Rifkin, the wide-ranging, free-wheeling independent scholar and consultant, explains why he thinks he sees the main road to a positive answer: rebuilding human civilization around our expanding powers of empathy. This reconstruction, in Rifkin's view, is already underway. Dominant institutions, Rifkin maintains, have so far embodied "the long-held belief that human beings are, by nature, aggressive, materialistic, utilitarian, and self-interested." This error, Rifkin contends, was a mark of juvenile exuberance, of a too-hasty failure of appreciation. Fortunately, through our epoch's own ongoing teenaged explorations, we are, he says, now coming to grasp the import of a "radical new view of human nature...emerging in the biological and cognitive sciences" – a view that, if we can but give it a chance, will save us from ourselves. "The Age of Reason," Rifkin asserts, "is being eclipsed by the Age of Empathy."

Rifkin locates the impetus for the rise of "empathic civilization" in what he calls "the empathy/entropy conundrum," an institutional contradiction that has, he says, played a "central

role...in determining the direction of human history.” The main engine of this conundrum has been humanity’s greed-and-reason driven habit of heedlessly inventing and expanding. As a result of this habit, “new energy regimes have combined with new communication revolutions, creating ever more complex societies.” Because this still-dominant process is, in Rifkin’s framing, founded on values and assumptions that are blind to the importance of thermodynamic entropy and physical limits, staying its course is, Rifkin argues, a recipe for doom. Luckily, our speed and greed have a silver lining, however. As they have unfolded, our naïve expansion and complexification “have brought diverse people together, heightened empathic sensitivity, and expanded human consciousness.” Stumbling along toward oblivion, we find ourselves, thanks to the side-effects of our own main strivings, coming into possession of “the psychological mechanism that makes the conversion and the transition possible”: an empathy-based “biosphere consciousness” capable of saving the day. This new capacity may still end up losing its race against the Age of Reason, but its existence and ascendance are, in Rifkin’s view, clear.

This is Olympian (and familiar) stuff, both analytically and politically. Throughout *The Empathic Civilization*, Rifkin’s level of abstraction is sky high. Consider, for example, Rifkin’s claim that events in recent times have been deepening and improving formerly opposing social groups’ appreciation of one another. While this strikes me as an important thesis, if not a major truth, asserting it risks eliding the violence, trauma, and psycho-social intricacies of the processes by which cognitive globalization has happened. If one were to start from Rifkin’s perspective, would doing so belittle one’s appreciation of the many lessons to be learned from careful study of how we humans have treated each other as classes, races, nations, sexes, genders, freaks, geezers, and just plain others? Without a robust and careful sense of the workings of such divisions, is it possible to navigate the very conflict between old and new worldviews emphasized by Rifkin? If we don’t spend time attending to the intricacies of existing harms and hurts, do we not risk turning ourselves into obtuse and unrealistic proponents of yet another variety of New Thought?

Despite such concerns, I think the main problem with *The Empathic Civilization* is not so much Rifkin’s level of abstraction as his sloppiness with his main psycho-cognitive concepts. For an eagle’s view of twenty-first century life, one could do worse things than reading this book, which contains many genuine insights and fruitful questions. The real weakness here, I think, resides in the details. For all his words about the dangers of heedlessness, it seems to me that Rifkin is too cavalier in his own handling of the very micro-social phenomena he would have us focus on and see his way: reason and empathy.

Is it legitimate and wise to blame reason for what has so far been done in its name? In *A History of Western Philosophy*, Bertrand Russell made a crucial distinction still not often entertained by those attempting to assess the character of the various sorts of Prometheans who have run human civilizations in recent centuries. Overly impressed by, or at least unwittingly acting out, an excessive faith in human technical capabilities, such elites have been, Russell intimated, not straightforward embodiments of science, but rather gangs of “insufficiently scientific optimists.” Even if they have been utterly sure of themselves and loudly claimed to

represent the cutting edge of science and rationality, there remains something less than rational, something scientifically immature in the way our overseers have acted in our so-called Age of Reason. If science has been used to wreck the planet and endanger the species, that does not necessarily mean, Russell tried to remind us, that science itself is to blame. Those who pursue oblivion, in fact, must face their own reasoned assessment and rational correction. Perhaps, if we have indeed been ruled by classes of insufficiently scientific optimists, our true Age of Reason still lies before us. This is a point Rifkin, in his heated enthusiasm for empathy, deletes from the agenda.

I think this conceptual carelessness compounds Rifkin's equally troublingly handling of his book's central concept: empathy. While *The Empathic Civilization* contains long sections outlining – often usefully -- the importance of empathy as a topic of contemporary research and organizational priority, Rifkin's own handling of the idea is hardly a model of ideal social-scientific practice. What exactly is “empathy”? What are its possible conceptual limitations? How much do we know about it, and how good are we at distinguishing it from other human processes? What are some major instances of events that have been deeply shaped by empathy in action – or by a lack of empathy in action? Rifkin gives a precis of his own view, but includes few caveats and qualifications.

As a result, many of Rifkin's illustrative examples seem trite, if not addled. He argues, for instance, that, as people “have come to empathize with the polar bears and penguins at the far corners of the Earth,” we are “beginning to ask a question never before entertained in history: Can we continue to sustain our species?” Apart from the question of whether human emotional ties to other organisms and natural phenomena are either culturally new or presently growing, this formulation simply assumes that it is empathy rather than knowledge that presses the question of sustainability. In the process, Rifkin subtly, and presumably unintentionally, shifts his own presentation from the terrain of social science to one of mere wishfulness. Rifkin really *wants* us to get aboard the empathy train, but the careful traveler would do well to think about the stations it speeds past.

Such complaints are precisely the stuff of *Against Empathy: The Case for Rational Compassion*, the 2016 book by Yale University psychologist Paul Bloom. “Many believe that empathy will save the world,” Bloom writes, “and this is particularly the case for those who champion liberal or progressive causes.” Naming *The Empathic Civilization* as a major exemplar of this trend, Bloom argues that empathy, in fact, makes a poor foundation for understanding, improving, and/or saving the world. Acknowledging that “it makes sense that empathy” would appear to be “the magic bullet of morality,” there are, Bloom counsels, nevertheless good reasons for remaining skeptical about any empathy-centered analysis and politics.

For Bloom, one such reason is the very complexity of the phenomenon we call empathy. Unlike Rifkin in *The Empathic Civilization*, in *Against Empathy*, Bloom, while assuring us that he “*hates* [emphasis original] terminological arguments,” spends a fair amount of energy probing conceptual meanings, with an eye toward problems and detailed evidence. Helpfully,

as a research psychologist, Bloom is centrally concerned with the details of mentation and emotions. He is convincing when he complains that the burgeoning literature on “empathy” is especially prone to abusing its own core idea. Bloom reminds us that, despite recent advances in brain scanning, experts are far from understanding the neurobiology of human solidarity. Among the problems in doing so is the definitional issue Bloom raises. In brain-scan studies of a hypothesized “empathy circuit,” the results show that such a “circuit” appears to be “everywhere in the brain,” activating “ten major brain areas, some of them big chunks...all of which are also engaged in actions and experiences that have nothing to do with empathy.”

Bloom’s answer to this conundrum is to insist on conceptual discipline. If we wish to take empathy seriously, we need to start by saying what it is and what it is not. The key to doing this well, Bloom contends, is to begin by attending to what he calls “empathy proper – what happens in the brain when someone feels the same things another person is feeling.” This phenomenon, Bloom argues, is a reaction, not a whole-brain phenomenon. Modern brain studies, he explains, do confirm that, under certain conditions, seeing or thinking about somebody else’s pain or pleasure does indeed trigger “the same brain tissue that’s active when you yourself have that experience.” Empathy proper does exist, and is profoundly important in both human nature and human history.

The problem, however, is that, like so many other natural phenomena, the ways in which human empathy proper actually operates and ramifies are not, upon slow-and-close inspection, self-evident. The sun certainly *seems* to rise and set around us as we stand and deliver our lives on terra firma; we now know that this long-obvious perception rests on deep illusion. Similarly, there is real emotion in seeing somebody else being stabbed, kicked, or awarded a gold medal. How legitimate is it, though, to presume that such secondary experience can simply be inflated and projected into an adequate basis for designing a genuinely sustainable human civilization? What if empathy contains hidden secrets and dangers that might actually undermine or even prevent such an outcome from materializing?

This is exactly the problem Bloom wants us to ponder. *Against Empathy* offers, I think, two main reasons for accepting such restraint. First, much of what gets defined as empathy in books like Rifkin’s *Empathic Civilization*, Bloom argues, is actually a form of reason, of conscious deliberation and intentionally cultivated habits. The fact that we all (or almost all) feel empathy says little about the personal and socio-political processes by which we direct and focus our empathic capacities. Doing (and explaining) that, Bloom points out, is not itself an act of empathy, but of something else – of something needing its own, separate accounting. Bloom’s second objection to excessive enthusiasm for empathy is one that ought to be of special interest in our present moment, with its deepening split between populations harboring still-inchoate hopes for progressive survival and other, often armed and militaristic, ones preferring redoubled nationalism and neo-fundamentalist reaction. The third of the U.S. adult population that accepts Donald Trump as its leader, Bloom would undoubtedly point out, is at least as immersed in empathy as any group of globalist peaceniks. Their empathy simply attaches to different objects. Is it desirable or possible to try to out-feel such people? Bloom

offers what seem like much-needed caveats about this widespread but largely unexamined progressive assumption.

Where Rifkin sees the Age of Reason passing away and finds this a good thing, Bloom, who titles his concluding chapter “Age of Reason,” favors continuing (if this is what we’ve actually been doing) to privilege the disciplined pursuit of information and analysis. “We are not,” Bloom writes, “more empathetic than our great-grandparents.” Nevertheless, “our moral circle has expanded” and “we are watching moral progress happen in real time,” as “attitudes about the rights of women, homosexuals, and racial minorities have all shifted toward inclusiveness.” This, Bloom argues, has happened because of the improvement of our intellect, not an expansion of our emotions. “We really don’t think of humanity as our family and we never will. Rather, our concern for others reflects a more abstract appreciation that, regardless of our feelings, their lives have the same value as the lives of those we love.” In this view, it is more and better information, not expanded emotionalism, that drives us toward greater decency and kinder actions.

This thesis is certainly shared by Joseph Heath, whose *Enlightenment 2.0* addresses a question Bloom never quite reaches: If rationality is so powerful and important, why hasn’t it already saved the world? Why, as we fly around like birds and communicate in fractions of seconds, are we still obliged to worry about our sheer survival?

In Heath’s analysis, the problem resides in an insufficiently scientific attitude toward reason and science among those who have been its putative and actual champions. Had enough practitioners of the art of reason somehow been able to be more realistic about their own methodology, we might, Heath argues, have already fathomed that the effort of enlightenment has never been as simple as it at first seems. Just as it took a very long chain of unusual events and efforts to dethrone the eminently understandable conclusion that the Sun rises and sets around us, so does a truly scientific appreciation of human reason itself require a special effort to locate and probe the unexpected nuances and limitations inherent in human rationality. “Just look” and “just think” do not suffice for describing the actual mechanics and scope of human reason any more than they do in attempts to specify the laws of physics.

Ironically, this point has remained obscure until quite recently. Certainly, it was lost on the earliest proponents of what Heath wants us to see as Enlightenment 1.x, or the naïve phase of the self-conscious pursuit of maximally rational human society. Thanks to the thrill and disorientation inherent in “the sudden discovery of massive error in the ancient worldview,” there was, Heath contends, “considerable overreach in the [original] Enlightenment project.” Assuming that reason was both simpler and easier to implement than it actually is, it was, Heath says, “assigned all sorts of tasks that, in the end, it simply was not powerful enough to perform.”

Heath explains that the difficulties that escaped Enlightenment 1.x were of two sorts. First, contrary to both certain religio-philosophical traditions and immediate perceptual experience, we are neither as prone to nor as good at rational thought as we naturally think we are. Much of what we do and are able to do arises not from deliberate analysis and self-aware

understanding but from the bag of fast and easy tricks that researchers have come to understand as “System 1” thinking. For example, with a bit of practice, most humans become surprisingly good at catching thrown or batted baseballs. But using rational, step-by-step calculation to perform this act is always a disastrous strategy. Second, it turns out that not only is System 2 thinking rarer and more difficult than it at first appears, but it is also always a largely social, rather than purely individual, phenomenon. Not only do skilled practitioners of reason and science always rely on a host of tools and collaborative-maintained resources, but any effort to advance the cause of careful realism must always run up against the actual environments in which such efforts always take place. Copernicus sat on his heliocentric findings until the very end of his life because he knew they would expose him to severe retribution.

This is one of the main virtues of *Enlightenment 2.0* as compared to Rifkin’s and Bloom’s books. Unlike them, Heath devotes substantial attention to the ways in which social institutions and milieux can facilitate or stymie particular moral commitments and mental habits. He has especially insightful things to say about the woefully under-discussed and under-appreciated impact of commercial interests and organizations on the balance of reason and unreason in modern life. Heath also makes interesting points about the very structure of our informational climate. The emergence of CNN, for example, is often presumed to have facilitated a significant upgrade in our opportunity to understand and govern ourselves. Who wouldn’t want 24-hour access to the news? But, as Heath points out, the actual content of CNN is not 24-hours of reporting tailored to the dimensions of stories’ varying merits, but rather a daylong loop of repeating sound bites and conventional vignettes, no matter how epic the topic. Heath considers CNN to be a degradation, rather than an advance, from the perspective of the citizen hoping to make the world more reasonable.

Heath concludes with a call for “slow politics,” meaning a turn toward habits and organizations that acknowledge the difficulty of being rational and making a world that actually fits our best plans and aspirations. How we are to insert such a project into the sweeping rivers of cant, reaction, and raw power that seem to only accelerate all around us, Heath doesn’t quite say. But, in a world where the clock is ticking for us all, it seems a point worth grasping. Whatever we do next had better be wiser and more mature than what we’ve done and assumed up to now.