2017 Klaus J. Jacobs Research Prize
"From the moral intuitions of babies to the messy morality of adults"

Paul Bloom studies babies and toddlers and how their social and moral capacities develop. He has made striking discoveries suggesting the existence of an early-emerging "moral sense".

What does this early-emerging "moral sense" contain?

Even before we reach our first birthday, we have rich moral capacities. Babies judge the goodness and badness of others' actions; feel empathy and compassion; and act to soothe others in distress; There is even some evidence that we are born with a rudimentary sense of justice and fairness.

But babies can't speak—how can we know this?

Developmental psychologists use a range of methods to explore babies' understanding and preferences. In some well-known studies done with his wife and colleague Karen Wynn, Bloom showed babies a series of one-act plays, where a character tried to achieve a goal (like climbing up a hill), another character helps it, and a third character hinders it. Even the youngest babies they could test preferred to interact with the "good guy" over the "bad guy". And when toddlers were given the opportunity to give or take away treats from the characters, they tended to reward the helper and punish the hinderer.

What do babies lack? What aspect of morality are <u>not</u> present early in life?

The same research that shows striking abilities on the part of babies also shows that our natural morality is limited, often tragically so. Babies are strongly biased to favor familiar individuals over strangers, and are naturally prone to divide the world into Us versus Them. The notion that all people have equal rights, that we all possess moral value, is not something we're born with.

Babies are also limited to responding at a gut level; they have no conscious access to moral notions and hence no idea why certain acts are good or bad. And it's this ability to reason about morality that gives rise to moral progress, making possible our moral discoveries, such as the wrongness of sexism, racism, and slavery. Bloom argues that reason and rationality are central to the development of a mature sense of right and wrong, and that this process of rationally building up a moral system is something that develops over time, both in individuals and within societies.

What are the implications of Bloom's research for educators and policy-makers?

Bloom's research on children's developing appreciation of good and evil across the course of development has profound implications for educators, clinicians, and policy makers. Knowing when and how children develop their moral psychology – what they know and, critically, what they need to learn – can help promote moral development and provide the

foundation for various programs and interventions that work to establish more just and fair communities.

What is the connection with empathy?

Bloom describes empathy as the act of coming to experience the world as you think someone else does. To empathize with someone "is to put yourself in her shoes, to feel her pain", Bloom says. He distinguishes this "emotional empathy" from what he calls "cognitive empathy" – "the more coldblooded process of assessing what other people are thinking, their motivations, their plans, what they believe" – as well as from compassion, "a more distanced love and kindness and concern for others."

Many people, including many psychologists and philosophers, are fan of emotional empathy; they think it makes us better people. Bloom claims that this is mistaken. He argues that emotional empathy is biased, that we are more prone to feel empathy for attractive people and for those who look like us or share our ethnic or national background. Also, empathy is narrow; it connects us to individuals, real or imagined, but it is insensitive to numerical differences and statistical data.

What does this mean for us a as a society?

In light of these features, our moral and political decisions will be fairer and more moral once we put empathy aside. Our policies are improved when we appreciate that a hundred deaths are worse than one, even if we know the name of the one, and when we acknowledge that the life of someone in a faraway country is worth as much as the life of a neighbor, even if our emotions pull us in a different direction. Bloom suggests that we should instead rely on what he calls "rational compassion"—caring for other people, and then using clear-headed rational thought to determine which actions lead to most kind and most fair outcomes.

For what will the Research Prize money be used?

With the prize money, Bloom plans to study at what age children develop an understanding of morality that extends beyond physical actions. Adults appreciate, for instance, that one can wrong just with words, by lying or deception. We appreciate that sometimes a failure to act can be morally wrong—if my child starves to death because I fail to feed her, I've done something terribly evil, though I haven't actually done any physical act. Using simple scenarios, Bloom plans to study when such understanding develops, starting with 12-month-olds, and to explore the forces that give rise to an increasingly rich moral psychology.

Bloom also plans to build on his previous research investigating the developing capacity for, and understanding of, generosity. What are the factors that lead babies and children to judge an act as greedy, as morally right, or as unusually kind, and how does this understanding relate to their own giving and sharing behavior? What are the factors that promote a sense

of obligation and desire to help those who are not family and friends? What leads children to become good citizens, to respect the lives of people from different ethnicities and backgrounds?

Bloom plans to address these questions through experimental methods and longitudinal studies that examine the relationship between cognitive and social accomplishments in a non-verbal infant and the emergence of moral insights in that same individual later in development.