

2017 Klaus J. Jacobs Research Prize Recipient Prof. Paul Bloom

Paul Bloom (Canadian and American, born 1963) is the Brooks and Suzanne Ragen Professor of Psychology and Cognitive Science at Yale University. He was born in Montreal, Canada, and was an undergraduate at McGill University, working with John Macnamara. He did his doctoral work at MIT with Susan Carey and Steven Pinker. He has published in scientific journals such as *Nature* and *Science*, and in popular outlets such as *The New York Times* and *The New Yorker*. He is the co-editor of the journal *Behavioral and Brain Sciences*, and the author of several books.

Scientific work

His research explores how children and adults understand the physical and social world, with special focus on morality, religion, fiction, and art. Much of his research explores moral psychology—looking at morality in babies, developing intuitions about moral responsibility, and the role that feelings such as disgust and empathy play in our moral lives. Bloom argues that humans are in fact born with an innate sense of morality. Drawing on his research at the Infant Cognition Center at Yale University, in collaboration with his colleague and wife, Karen Wynn, he demonstrates that, even before they can speak or walk, babies judge the goodness and badness of others' actions; feel empathy and compassion; act to soothe those in distress; and have a rudimentary sense of justice.

In one of Bloom's first studies of moral evaluation, he used a three-dimensional display in which real geometrical objects, manipulated like puppets, acted out helping/hindering situations—for instance, a yellow square would help a blue circle up the hill; a red triangle would push it down. After showing babies the scene, the experimenter placed the helper and the hinderer on a tray and brought them to the child. It was recorded which character the children reached for, on the theory that what a baby reaches for is a reliable indicator for what a baby wants. In the end, Bloom and his team found that 6- and 10-month-old infants overwhelmingly preferred the helpful individual to the hindering individual. And this was not a subtle statistical trend; just about all the babies reached for the good guy.

In other studies, Bloom and his team turned their attention to older babies and toddlers. They exposed 21-month-olds to the good guy/bad guy situations described above, and gave them the opportunity to reward or punish either by giving a treat to, or taking a treat from, one of the characters. They found that when asked to give, toddlers tended to choose the positive character; when asked to take away, they tended to choose the negative one.

Bloom argues, however, that although the moral foundations are innate, a fully developed morality is the product of culture, not biology. Our initial morality is limited, tragically so—we are strongly biased to treat individuals from our own group as more morally significant than everyone else. A more enlightened morality – one in which all beings capable of reason and suffering are equal – is not the product of evolution and is not present in babies. Rather, it arises in development through our imagination, our compassion, and our uniquely human capacity for rational thought.

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Future plans and aspirations

With the prize money Bloom will expand his work beyond the evaluation of physical actions (e.g., helping or hindering puppets). Using simple lying and inaction 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.

Honors and awards

Whitney J. Oates Fellow at Princeton University (2015); DeVane Lecturer, Yale (2011), William James Book Award (2011); The Visiting Distinguished SAGE Fellowship at the UCSB SAGE Center for the Study of Mind (2010); the Templeton Lectureship at Johns Hopkins University (2007-8); the Nijmegen Lectureship at the Max Planck Institute at the University of Nijmegen (2006); Fellow of the American Psychological Society (2006); President, Society for Philosophy and Psychology (2005-6); Lex Hixon Prize for teaching excellence in the social sciences (2004); Stanton Prize for outstanding early-career contributions to interdisciplinary research in philosophy and psychology (2003); Harris Visiting Professorship at the Harris Center for Developmental Studies at the University of Chicago (2002).