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Against Fairness

Stephen T. Asma

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From the school yard to the workplace, there's no charge more damning than "You're being *unfair*!" Born out of democracy and raised in open markets, fairness has become our de facto modern creed. The very symbol of American ethics—Lady Justice—wears a blindfold as she weighs the law on her impartial scale. In our zealous pursuit of fairness, we have banished our urges to like one person more than another, one thing over another, hiding them away as dirty secrets of our humanity. In *Against Fairness*, polymath philosopher Stephen T. Asma drags them triumphantly back into the light. Through playful, witty, but always serious arguments and examples, he vindicates our unspoken and undeniable instinct to favor, making the case that we would all be better off if we showed our unfair tendencies a little more kindness—indeed, if we favored favoritism.

Conscious of the egalitarian feathers his argument is sure to ruffle, Asma makes his point by synthesizing a startling array of scientific findings, historical philosophies, cultural practices, analytic arguments, and a variety of personal and literary narratives to give a remarkably nuanced and thorough understanding of how fairness and favoritism fit within our moral architecture. Examining everything from the survival-enhancing biochemistry that makes our mothers love us to the motivating properties of our "affective community," he not only shows *how* we favor but the reasons we *should*. Drawing on thinkers from Confucius to Tocqueville to Nietzsche, he reveals how we have confused fairness with more noble traits, like compassion and open-mindedness. He dismantles a number of seemingly egalitarian pursuits, from classwide Valentine's Day cards to civil rights, to reveal the envy that lies at their hearts, going on to prove that we can still be kind to strangers, have no prejudice, and fight for equal *opportunity* at the same time we reserve the best of what we can offer for those dearest to us.

Fed up with the blue-ribbons-for-all absurdity of "fairness" today, and wary of the psychological paralysis it creates, Asma resets our moral compass with favoritism as its lodestar, providing a strikingly new and remarkably positive way to think through all our actions, big and small.

Watch an animated book trailer here: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GjPhTQ9zi5Q

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Jess Cooke:

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