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Empathy is Unreasonable: A Review of *Against Empathy*

Abstract

"In these fractured and partisan days, we could fix the world if we all had a bit more empathy, right? "

Posting about the book *Against Empathy* from *In All Things* - an online journal for critical reflection on faith, culture, art, and every ordinary-yet-graced square inch of God's creation.

<https://inallthings.org/empathy-is-unreasonable-a-review-of-against-empathy/>

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Comments

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in things

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Empathy is Unreasonable: A Review of *Against Empathy*

Donald Roth

Title: *Against Empathy: The Case for Rational Compassion*

Author: Paul Bloom

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In these fractured and partisan days, we could fix the world if we all had a bit more empathy, right? Some even say that orienting our entire worldview around empathy is necessary for thriving in a global society. At some point, empathy sounds like an absolute good. You can never have enough empathy.

Unless you listen to voices like Paul Bloom, a Yale Psychologist who is among a number of prominent researchers questioning our cultural assumptions about empathy. In fact, Bloom goes so far as to say that empathy actually does more harm than good, and I think he's probably right.

What Opposing Empathy is Not

Bloom knows that he's making a bold claim, and there are plenty of qualifications in *Against Empathy* to show he's not arguing that we should callously disregard other people. It comes down to definitions. The cultural emphasis on empathy has resulted in conceptual creep, meaning that plenty of people say "empathy" but mean kindness, compassion, or any general benevolent regard for others. Bloom is not opposing this broad, mushy sentiment. Bloom's critique centers on the classical definition of the

concept, the one captured in former President Bill Clinton's famous statement, "I feel your pain." This is *emotional* empathy, that is, the ability to mirror or simulate the emotional experience of another person. Bloom distinguishes this from *cognitive* empathy, or the ability to understand others' emotional states, which is vital, but, according to Bloom, not inherently benevolent. Emotional empathy is also distinguished from compassion and concern for the well-being of others, for which Bloom is actually arguing.

So why is Bloom opposed to emotional empathy? He does not deny that it can be a force for good, and he does not deny that it is a force that often powerfully shapes our actions. His critique is rooted in the nature of empathy.

A Dangerous Spotlight

According to Bloom, "empathy is a spotlight focusing on certain people in the here and now." As a spotlight, empathy focuses our attention on the plight of one person to the exclusion of others. At the same time, the intensity of that spotlight often causes us to prioritize immediate response over long-term consequences. This intensity can provoke strong, even violent, responses from us. The effort involved emotionally exhausts us, which can erode personal relationships and reduce our capacity to be concerned with others.

Bloom supports this diagnosis by focusing on different aspects of empathy across six chapters and two intervening essays. In these chapters, Bloom offers up research studies and arguments in moral philosophy in a pithy and readable format. I won't spoil all his reasoning here, but I will share a few strong examples that help demonstrate Bloom's point.

The first example demonstrates the spotlight effect. Think of the mass shooting that took place in 2012 at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newton, Connecticut. How do you remember the event? How does it make you feel? Did you know that more schoolchildren were murdered in Chicago in that same year than in Newton? In fact, **114 schoolchildren were murdered in Chicago from 2010-2014**, nearly six times as many as died at Sandy Hook. However, unless you have some close connection to those neighborhoods, you likely find it much easier to empathize with the parents in Newton than Chicago. The tragedy in Chicago is objectively greater, but it's diffuse (not involving one event), complex (many of these deaths are from gang violence, versus the relative innocence of the children at Sandy Hook), and, likely, more socially distinct from you than Newton. That's the spotlight effect, and we see it in social policy, which focuses efforts to address gun violence around preventing these spree killings, even though they make up less than .01% of all homicides in America.

The second two examples are shorter and demonstrate that emotional empathy may not be as beneficial to our social interactions as we think. First, imagine you suffer a serious injury. Do you want your surgeon to experience some form of the same excruciating, debilitating pain that you feel? Research shows that empathy can have a paralyzing, rather than galvanizing, effect in the face of emergencies. Second, imagine you are afraid to give a big public presentation—do you want your friends to share your fear in that moment? Both of these examples show that emotional empathy is often inferior to cognitive empathy (awareness of our emotional state) coupled with compassion. In other words, while it's important to care about others, it's less important to feel what they feel.

Lastly, I'll pull an example not from Bloom, but from [an article](#) that got me to pick up Bloom's book off my shelf and commit to reading it. Despite the increasing societal emphasis on empathy, Indiana University psychologist Sara Konrath's research shows that the current generation of young people is 40% less empathic than previous generations. Her colleague, Fritz Breithaupt, argues this isn't so much that these young people lack empathy as that "one of the strongest triggers for human empathy is observing some kind of conflict between two other parties." In other words, empathy drives us to pick sides and root for that team. Bloom adds to this that our empathy is biased towards those like us, meaning that it may be a force for furthering, not healing, polarization. It's not that we aren't teaching empathy to today's youth; it's that they get it, and they don't believe the emotional effort involved is worth expending on the other side.

Reason and Compassion are Better Tools for the Common Good

So, what is the alternative? Bloom argues that the alternative to the gut instinct to empathize is a more deliberative, but detached, application of compassion. In this area, Bloom's argument moves into a broader conversation taking place in psychology, where the landmark work of Nobel-prize winners like Daniel Kahneman have raised awareness of the interaction between our intuitive, gut-level responses and our deliberative, rational decisions. Classical thought emphasized reason, with the Enlightenment at times reducing us to what James K.A. Smith has called "brains on sticks." As this newer paradigm has emerged, the tendency has been to switch to the other extreme. Bloom describes responses to a *New York Times* article of his that emphasized how bad we are at cognitive empathy (that is, reading others' emotions). He ended the article saying, "[o]ur efforts should instead be put toward cultivating the ability to step back and apply an objective and fair morality." Many responses mocked the very possibility or considered it a product of a Western male-centered worldview. Even Breithaupt, who was critical of empathy in the article mentioned above, doesn't opt for rationality, he

simply argues that we give up on thinking of empathy as altruistic and instead selfishly embrace its utility for enriching our own minds.

Bloom seems to me to have the better point. If our capacity for rationality is merely an illusion, then why are we writing books and articles laying out rational arguments over the issue? Kahneman and others do agree that our deliberative system can override our intuitive one—reason can conquer emotion—but the effort is so taxing that we can't keep it up for long. If something takes a lot of effort, doesn't that mean it's precisely the thing we should practice doing, to build up that "muscle"? We don't have to cultivate our response to shining an emotional spotlight on someone, but we do have to cultivate being able to step back from that spotlight and still consider the context and long-term consequence of our natural response. There is something good about trying to direct that spotlight at people we wouldn't otherwise consider, but we're actually pretty bad at achieving empathy for people who are too different. As Bloom says, "empathy has to connect to kindness that already exists" in order to motivate moral action.

Ultimately, Bloom's highly readable text is an argument for seeking to think about our choices and to cultivate compassion and kindness toward others, since they are the underlying virtues that make empathy in any given situation "good." Many of us still root our morality in our empathy, but Bloom argues for alternatives. An alternative, in one quote, stood out to me: when asked where Jason Baldwin gained the capacity to forgive those responsible for his lengthy false imprisonment, he didn't point to "webs of empathy, forays of imagination, all the systems by which we inhabit the minds of others." He pointed simply to "his faith in Christ." Perhaps in an age of hostility and polarization, we could get farther by stepping back rather than focusing in, by emphasizing kindness over emotional resonance, and by shaping ourselves less by trying to experience the suffering of others as much as being made new through the suffering of Christ.