

Book Review

Bloom, Paul. (2017). *Against Empathy: The Case for Rational Compassion*. London: Bodley Head.

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In a world seemingly selfish, fractured and narcissistic, surely a big dose of empathy is a good thing. Not so, according to Paul Bloom, professor of psychology at Yale University. In fact, he states that “on balance empathy is negative in human affairs. It’s not cholesterol. It’s sugary soda, tempting and delicious and bad for us” (Bloom, p. 13).

In *Against Empathy* he develops a strong argument against empathy and explains why reasoning, kindness, self-control and compassion are much better alternatives, and central to what he calls a “good moral life” (p. 239).

The crucial point here is the definition of empathy. He differentiates between “emotional empathy” and “cognitive empathy.” The first concerns our ability to experience the world as someone else would, the proverbial “putting yourself in someone else’s shoes” and feeling their feelings and emotions, while the second is closely related to social cognition and intelligence, where one develops an understanding of how other people may experience the world, without necessarily being emotionally attached to the other’s experience.

His book is well-argued, weaving a thread of thoughts based on research and theory from different fields of knowledge, including psychology, history, philosophy, politics, and sociology, to create a picture which places empathy at the center of a distorted and biased morality, which negatively impacts both individuals and society.

Bloom uses an interesting analogy to explain why empathy, of the emotional type, leads to unfair, unsound and overall bad decisions. He says that empathy is like a spotlight: it focuses the attention, but it has a narrow focus. It reflects our biases and distorts our moral judgements in the same way prejudices do. Empathy, he says, is insensitive to statistical data and cost-

benefit analysis. The reason for this myopic view is that emotional empathy works at an individual level, making it difficult for us to empathize with a large number of people.

In addition, he cites studies in psychology and neuroscience that debunk assumptions about empathy. We are told that high levels of empathy are not necessarily related to stronger moral values and that people with low levels of empathy are not more violent, aggressive or cruel.

Even people who commit the most atrocious acts can be empathetic in other aspects of their lives. It is well-documented that Hitler loved dogs and that the Third Reich had various laws against the inhumane treatment of animals, however paradoxical this may seem in light of its barbaric treatment of human beings.

Empathy is modified by our beliefs, motivations and expectations, and it is driven by our moral values. This means that we are more likely to make disproportionately harsher judgements and display an un-empathetic response to people and acts which go against our principles or do not fit our world view. One example is a study where participants showed more empathy towards people who contracted AIDS via blood transfusion than those who contracted the disease via drug use – even though the human suffering in both groups were arguably the same.

The individual nature of empathy also means that we are less likely to act for the ‘greater good’ when motivated by an empathetic response. We are moved by individuals’ stories; our empathy is displayed towards those who are more like us, and we use rationalization to justify our biases. For example, there is a public outrage following a school shooting in a wealthy area in America, while rising death tolls in less salubrious neighborhoods are ignored.

The arguments against empathy at the macro level may seem sensible, but how does empathy fair at the micro level, in our day-to-day human relationships? Is it beneficial to have empathetic friends, partners or relatives? How about professionals, such as coaches, psychotherapists, doctors? Do they do a better job by being empathetic?

Bloom is equally damning of the impact of empathy in one-to-one relationships, arguing that compassion and concern are more useful concepts to consider. Over-empathy can be impairing. A doctor who feels his or her patients’ pain will not be able to function to the best of his/her ability. The same

applies to a therapist whose emotional empathy may be detrimental to developing a productive relationship with a depressed client, for example.

In coaching (and counselling) literature, there are many examples of the crucial role empathy plays in forging effective and productive relationships. Coaches who favor a person-centered approach will be familiar with Carl Rogers' (1957) core conditions of empathy, congruence and unconditional positive regard.

Here, the distinction between emotional and cognitive empathy can be a useful one; it is possible to show compassion, kindness and concern, and understand someone else's predicament, without getting caught in the emotional turmoil that it may bring.

Building on his argument in favor of a more rational position in relation to empathy, Bloom reminds us that humans have an enormous capacity for reasoning and, therefore, choice. "Human beings are not influenced by factors outside their control all the time, they have choice and the ability to think about the consequences of their actions. There is nothing magical about it" (Bloom, p. 225).

The debate about reason versus emotion in human behavior has captured philosophers' and psychologists' imaginations for millennia. And the question of how much our thoughts, actions and desires are influenced by factors outside our control is far from set in stone, with academics in both camps ready to defend their positions.

But if I was skeptical about Bloom's view on empathy in the prologue of his book, at the end I was truly convinced that there is a lot more to empathy than I had originally thought. Empathy is a complex construct, worth exploring not only as a professional coach, but also as a parent, partner, work colleague, neighbor and citizen. The book made me reflect about the role of empathy in the coaching relationship, both in general as well as in my own practice.

However, I am also left wondering if some of the arguments he makes against empathy could be equally used against compassion and kindness. Are we able to show universal compassion or is our compassion equally biased?

This is a thought-provoking book, and some of his arguments warrant further reflection and investigation. Empathy, like sugar, may be tempting, delicious and bad for us. But we have a choice in how much to use it and for

what purpose. Perhaps emotional empathy can be partly blamed for some negative aspects of the human condition. On the other hand, our ability to put ourselves in someone else's shoes is, in my view, one of the most cherished traits of human beings.

References

Rogers, C. R. (1957). *The necessary and sufficient conditions of therapeutic personality*. American Psychological Association.
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