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BOOK REVIEW | NONFICTION

Empathy Is Good, Right? A New Book Says We're Better Off Without It

By SIMON BARON-COHEN DEC. 30, 2016

AGAINST EMPATHY

The Case for Rational Compassion

By Paul Bloom

285 pp. Ecco/HarperCollins Publishers. $26.99.

When I read about what happened in the West Bank village of Duma on July 31, 2015, I immediately felt empathy. Recall the awful events: Just before dawn a firebomb was thrown inside the home of a Palestinian family, the Dawabshehs. Local people heard cries for help, and when they got to the house they found the parents outside, on fire. Four-year-old Ahmad Dawabsheh was standing in the living room, yelling for his mother. He was also badly burned, but they managed to get him to safety. Another son, 18-month-old Ali Dawabsheh, had already burned to death. Within weeks, both parents, Saad and Riham Dawabsheh, succumbed to their wounds and died. The man charged with committing the attack, an Israeli settler, had graffitied the outside of the Dawabsheh's home with a Star of David and the Hebrew word nekama, meaning "revenge."

I empathized with that Palestinian family despite my being Jewish. And I'm sure whatever your ethnicity or religion, reading this triggers your own empathy for them.

But this is exactly the type of feeling that Paul Bloom, a Yale psychologist and

author of the polemic "Against Empathy," says is impossible. He is adamant on this point: "Asking people to feel as much empathy for an enemy as for their own child is like asking them to feel as much hunger for a dog turd as for an apple — it's logically possible, but it doesn't reflect the normal functioning of the human mind."

Bloom is on what he calls an "anti-empathy crusade." He does not mince words. "When some people think about empathy, they think about kindness. I think about war." (As someone who has represented the pro-empathy perspective, I have at times been a foil for his arguments — including in this book.)

Much of Bloom's vehemence stems from the very narrow way he defines empathy as being distinct from compassion or sympathy, even if most people think of these as synonymous.

For Bloom, empathy only occurs when you have the identical or mirror emotion to another person. "If you feel bad for someone who is bored, that's sympathy, but if you feel bored, that's empathy," Bloom writes. In contrast, I and most other empathy theorists use a much broader definition of empathy: Empathy is having an appropriate emotion triggered by another person's emotion.

Let's take an example. If your recent achievement makes you proud and that makes me happy, most empathy theorists believe that's still empathy, even if we're not in the identical state of mind. Or if I'm worried (or concerned, or distressed) that you're in pain, again that's still empathy, even though I'm not also in pain.

Bloom disagrees. He sees empathy as only occurring in those moments when we feel exactly as the other person. This leads him to bizarre conclusions: "I see a child crying because she's afraid of a barking dog. I might rush over to pick her up and calm her, and I might really care for her, but there's no empathy there. I don't feel her fear, not in the slightest." Well, if you define empathy narrowly as feeling the identical fear that the other person feels, then of course there's no empathy there.

Empathy, as he conceives it, would cause a therapist treating a depressed patient to also become depressed. Compassion, according to him, not empathy, is what a therapist needs in order to show kindness, without mirroring the patient's depression. The thousands of therapists out there who describe their work as

entailing empathy for their patients need not be confused. They're not wrong. They're simply using a broader (and to my mind, more common sense) definition of empathy, one that encompasses compassion.

The book, thankfully, moves beyond what is essentially a semantics argument. Yet, Bloom still draws a very strong conclusion about empathy: "On balance, we are better off without it." Leaving aside the narrow-versus-broad definitional issue, what's his bigger problem?

His first argument against empathy is that he believes it is "biased, pushing us in the direction of parochialism and racism." He writes, "It's easy for people like me to empathize with the children and teachers and parents of Newtown: They're so much like those I know and love. Teenage black kids in Chicago, not so much." While some people may find it more straightforward to feel empathy for people in their family or their in-group, that's not a limitation of empathy per se, but probably just reflects whom we are most familiar with. For me, that's a reason to build more empathy for those outside our in-group, not a reason to take a strong stand against it.

Nor do I think that empathy is necessarily parochial or racist. There are Israelis who empathize with Palestinians, and vice versa. What blocks or erodes empathy for an enemy is fear, anger or propaganda that whips up distrust or invites us to dehumanize. But if you choose not to give in to these emotions and instead ask yourself, "What would it be like if I were in my enemy's shoes?," then it's really not that hard to empathize with the other.

Bloom's second reason for being against empathy is that it is, he writes, "a spotlight focusing on certain people in the here and now," excluding those not directly in our field of vision. Again, I disagree. Of course empathy propels us to want to help someone we see in front of us who is suffering, but it doesn't leave us uncaring toward other, less visible individuals. For example, when we become upset at television reports about a rocket landing in a densely inhabited city, we are empathizing with people we cannot see. We are doing what Bloom claims we cannot.

For Bloom, empathy is bad because he claims it narrows your focus to just one person. He writes, "You cannot empathize with more than one or two people at the same time." A moment's reflection shows this must be false. When you read

about the Dawabsheh family you empathized with all of them, not just one or two of them. And we can even empathize with entire populations, such as the Syrians today forced to become refugees. Bloom argues that "it's better to save a thousand people than just one," which no one would disagree with, but he says empathy biases you to focus on just one person. Unless you share Bloom's unnecessarily narrow sense of what empathy entails, there's nothing to say it can only be directed toward one person, rather than whole groups of people.

I do, however, agree with Bloom when he argues that one can do good, and derive a moral code, without empathy, through the exercise of pure logic. My favorite example of this is the "golden rule": Treat others the way you want them to treat you. It doesn't require any exercise of emotion to realize that if everyone followed this rule, it would be better for everyone.

But Bloom and I again part company when he continues: "It's only when we escape from empathy and rely instead on the application of rules and principles or a calculation of costs and benefits that we can, to at least some extent, become fair and impartial." He pits reason against empathy as if only one of these can be the true path to morality. But it doesn't need to be either/or. We can use both empathy and reason.

Bloom likes being the provocateur on this point, writing that "many people think my attack on empathy is ridiculous" and that even his students tell him that he's "gone too far." But he is not giving up his cause. "I stand fast. On balance, empathy is a negative in human affairs." While Barack Obama might tell us that the biggest deficit we have in the world is an "empathy deficit," Bloom steadfastly disagrees. I agree more with Obama than with Bloom. I'm for empathy, not against it.

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