

**BOOK REVIEW**

## ***Against empathy: The case for rational compassion*** **by Paul Bloom. London, UK: Penguin, 2016**

What are the politics and ethics of empathy? For many therapists, particularly those trained in the humanistic tradition, the active effort to “walk in another’s shoes” and to communicate that understanding is a cornerstone of therapeutic skill and practice. Empathy is one of the most firmly evidenced, “demonstrably effective” factors in psychotherapy research. For Carl Rogers it was, beyond this, a radical ethos of human encounter, education and community work, and international relations. This idea that empathy aligns with social progress, intercultural understanding and co-operation, and left/liberal/progressive values (broadly defined) has become, as psychologist Paul Bloom notes in his new book *Against Empathy*, a commonplace of twenty-first-century political thought. In a world where such values appear to be in retreat, it would seem that empathy is in too short supply.

All of which makes the challenge of Bloom’s title hard to resist. Bloom acknowledges the provocative intent, saying that being against empathy is “like being against kittens” (p. 15) (though the book has received lengthy and generally favourable reviews in the English-language broadsheet press). This is no paean to muscular individualism, however, but a sustained exploration of the basis of our capacity for compassion and altruism. The empathy that Bloom is decisively “against” is narrowly defined, as *emotional* (feeling what another feels) rather than cognitive empathy (making sense of another’s state of mind), about which he is more ambivalent. This hard distinction does a lot of work in the book, which at times reads like a proxy argument for a much older debate about the relative value of reason against emotion in human affairs.

Bloom’s case is wide-ranging. Emotional empathy acts as a “spotlight”, focusing on individuals in the here and now, but leaving us inattentive to wider and more systematic patterns of disadvantage and distress. It is a biased spotlight that, uncritically deployed, we turn towards those who are socially and culturally most similar to us. Empathy can be corrosive in personal relationships, rendering us “too-permissive parents and too-clingy friends”. Professionally, doctors and therapists guided by a distanced “rational compassion” are more effective (and less prone to burn-out) than those who feel deeply the suffering of those they work with. In politics, Bloom argues, empathy simply reinforces existing in/out group distinctions, through emotional identification; the distinction between right and left aligning only with our empathy “choices” – between communities subject to oppressive policing, and small businesses threatened by public disorder, for example (p. 122) – rather than higher or lower levels of empathy per se. And in climate change Bloom sees a progressive cause for which empathy is no help; the millions whose lives are or will be affected by environmental catastrophe in the future are a “statistical abstraction” with whom we cannot empathize, according to his definition.

To call all of this challenging, for a left-leaning and relationally minded therapist, would be somewhat of an understatement. But it was a useful and thought-provoking experience, for this reader at least, to think through these challenges and to clarify what it is about our understanding (and valuing) of empathy as a therapeutic and social practice that might be different to Bloom’s. One key question here is: what *is* this empathy that Bloom is against – gut response, willed action, social process? Bloom is sceptical of reductionist neuroscience explanations, and notes that emotional empathy can be actively nurtured and developed, or modified by beliefs and motivations. And yet, mostly, the empathy he discusses seems to just happen, involuntarily; an automatic emotional response, akin to anger for example. Often his examples are of quite *distanced* responses: emotional reactions triggered – and of course mediated/manipulated – by news stories of suffering. (Still others are what we might think of as pseudo-empathic gestures; Bill Clinton announcing “I feel your pain” in a televised speech). There is little or no discussion of empathy as a social,

dialogic *practice* of communication: the attempt to listen and respond, to understand and to feel, but also to check the accuracy of understanding and clarify feeling; to actively acknowledge, and attempt to bridge, difference; to reach for a shared understanding while recognizing the limitations of this.

Linked to this is the question of what we mean by the *effects* of empathy. Bloom's essential argument is that, on its own, empathy prompts us to make poor moral choices: to give to the wrong charity, to support the wrong policies, to prioritize actions that help one individual over those that help the many. What this implies is that the effects of empathy, good or bad, are measurable in terms of what the *empathizer* (imagined as relatively affluent, informed and altruistic) does to relieve the suffering of the recipient. Little attention is paid to what the effects might be of being empathized with, of in some sense "feeling understood". The argument "for" empathy in therapy terms, after all, is that being recognized has something to do with fully recognizing ourselves; with the *self*-understanding and self-agency that are the common goals, we might argue, of most forms of psychotherapy.

This argument can be extended to the social/political sphere as well. Public debates about what we understand by moral and social justice are inseparable from questions of whose voices are heard and recognized in these debates and, in particular, how marginalized social groups become self-recognizing collective voices and actors. Bloom suggests, for example, that attitudes to the rights of women, LGBT people, and ethnic minorities have "shifted towards inclusiveness" in recent times, as a result of our capacity for moral reason, an "abstract appreciation" of human rights (p. 239), rather than emotional identification. But this appreciation (which is, of course, in no sense universal) is surely anything but abstract; it is socially grounded in discourses arising fundamentally from the self-recognition of excluded communities and their assertion of these collective experiences in the wider public sphere. And this process originates, on some level, in "listening to ourselves", the hard-won articulation and recognition (emotional *and* cognitive) of shared and dissonant experiences – in empathy, that is, in my terms if not Bloom's.

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