For whom do you spare a thought?

Constantine Sandis considers a cool look at how our biases may render altruistic acts less effective

Against Empathy: The Case for Rational Compassion
By Paul Bloom
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After George Michael’s untimely death, it was revealed that the pop star had, among many charitable acts, given a stranger £25,000 when he overheard her crying over debt and had secretly phoned a TV show to offer a losing contestant the £15,000 she needed for IVF treatment. Such actions are under attack in Paul Bloom’s new book for being irrationally empathetic. Bloom has nothing against niceness and compassion; he simply maintains that empathy typically leads to biased choices that render our altruistic acts less effective. As such, he sees it as a moral and political wolf in sheep’s clothing, causing harm within both personal and professional relationships.

One requires consequentialist sympathies far stronger than mine to feel the full intended effect of this reasoning, but the real snag is that Bloom isn’t really against empathy at all, at least not in the ordinary sense denoting compassionate understanding. He defines “empathy” from the outset as “the act of feeling what you think others are feeling”. Presumably this includes feeling someone’s loneliness upon hearing them talk about it, but excludes coincidentally feeling the same pain in one’s leg. Taken literally, this renders empathy akin to a pathological disorder. Indeed, Bloom allows that extreme cases of it fall into this territory, but resists the commonsense suggestion that, as with all things, empathy can be used for good or bad and we should strive for a golden mean between excess and deficiency of it.

As Against Empathy unfolds, Bloom replaces his initial definition of empathy as a kind of act with “the capacity for feeling what others feel”. But the distinction between having a capacity and acting upon it is crucial. Without the capacity to empathise, we’d be in the unenviable position of being unable to recognise the well-being of others as a reason for action. Bloom wishes to avoid semantic disputes, yet he frequently criticises pronouncements about empathy made by public figures who aren’t using the term in his technical sense (according to which, for example, empathising with Donald Trump’s supporters would imply some measure of agreement).

Typically, we are more empathetic towards those who are like us. Bloom assumes that empathy fosters bias, rather than the other way round. But the relation of empathy to bias isn’t all that different from that of our beliefs. It isn’t empathy, or thought itself, that biases us, but culture and upbringing, on the one hand, and innate dispositions towards our own kind, on the other. The problem, then, isn’t with empathy itself, but rather with the biases that narrow and distort its scope.

Despite these reservations, I both empathise and sympathise with many aspects of Bloom’s assault. The empathy literature has become a large industry obsessed with mirror neurons and the wrong-headed idea that empathy is some sort of magical tool needed to understand others. Its high priest, Simon Baron-Cohen, has even proclaimed that evil is identical to the absence of empathy. Bloom takes all these views down with characteristic clarity and good cheer. For this reason alone, Against Empathy should be required reading for anybody interested in the topic.

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