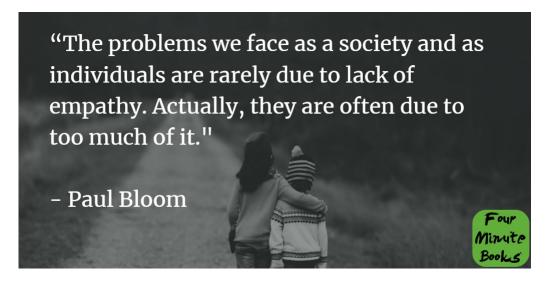# Against Empathy Summary

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1-Sentence-Summary: *Against Empathy* enlightens us on the problems with society's obsession with empathy by sharing its limitations and gives us better alternatives.

Read in: 4 minutes

Favorite quote from the author:

If you're like me and read the title of this book, *Against Empathy,* you were immediately curious. How can anyone be against empathy? Isn't that like being against something inherently good and innocent like puppies or babies? Not exactly. If you step back and really think about empathy, you might be surprised about what it drives people to do.

Empathy is an emotional response that allows us as humans to 'feel' what other people are going through. It is not to be confused with sympathy, which is feeling for someone, rather than feeling with them. Though stepping into another's shoes doesn't seem all that bad, it does come with limitations. Because empathy is based on emotion, not logic, it doesn't always judge fairly.

In *Against Empathy: The Case for Rational Compassion,* author and Yale psychologist Paul Bloom encourages us to open our eyes and realize that empathy isn't perfect. It doesn't always steer us in the right direction. Empathy is biased, prejudiced, innumerate, overly emotional, and sometimes selfish. The book focuses on research and provides a persuasive argument against empathy in today's world. Though he's not calling for an abolishment of feeling for others, he wants to help people realize that their empathy is getting in the way of making the *best* decisions.

Here are 3 intriguing lessons I've taken away from this book:

1. You don't realize it, but your empathy comes with a personal bias.
2. Empathy can cloud our judgment and lead us to make poor choices.
3. Rational compassion will help you make better decisions than empathy.

Are you ready to start helping the world with your head rather than your heart? Let's learn!

Lesson 1: Our empathy is selective and biased, and we don't realize it.

Putting ourselves in the shoes of someone else doesn't seem all that bad. The problem is, we can't put ourselves into the shoes of *everyone,* making it biased.

When the tragic shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary took place, it deeply affected many people. Especially those who have children or have had children. So many people expressed outrage and poured out love and support. It got to the point where the state had to actually ask for people to stop giving because it became too much. However, there have been many awful mass shootings since, though none have received the same level of support or outrage.

Sadly, we tend to show even less concern for people in different nations than our own. **Though Syrian parents also lost even more children in acts of horrendous violence during the war, there was not nearly the same support from the world as there was with the Sandy Hook victims.** This is because it's easier to relate and feel for people more like us.

Sometimes our concern for other people comes dependent on our perception of whether someone deserves it. In a study, researchers had people watch a video of AIDS patients struggling to cope with pain. Participants were told some had contracted the illness from a transfusion, while the others got it from drug use. The viewers were much less empathetic to those who they were told contracted AIDS from drug use. Unfortunately, it's clear we are selective with *who* we feel with.

Lesson 2: Empathy can lead us to make bad decisions.

Sometimes, empathy can drive us to fix problems in the short term, which ends up bad for the long term. Think of a child crying desperately in the store for a sucker. Sometimes, the parent's empathy kicks in, and they may buy the sucker. Sure, this helps the short term goal of calming the child down. But how about that long term goal of raising a kid without spoiling them rotten? Not so much.

People can also abuse empathy. **This is true in some Cambodian orphanages, where the people running it take advantage of foreign donors and pocket the money.** In some cases, they even have bribed parents to abandon their children to open up more orphanages, and those children are subject to the terrible conditions of these 'orphanages'. People donate, thinking they are helping, but it is making the problem worse.

It also can be dangerous when we feel such strong feelings of empathy for a minority that we make a bad decision for the majority. An example of this is when a girl named Rebecca Smith received a tainted vaccine dose that nearly took her life. The terrifying story was easy for people to empathize with because of the publicity the girl got. What people didn't relate to, however, were the faceless statistic of children whose lives were saved by the very same vaccine, and this led some campaigning against it.

Lesson 3: Try rational compassion instead of empathy.

There's no denying that empathy does drive people to do good things. But there are better, less flawed reasons to help others. If you see a child drowning in a river, what motivates you to help? Probably not empathy for the child as much as just the fact that it's the right thing to do. You don't have to *feel* the desperation and fear of the drowning child in order to help. It actually would probably make things a lot harder if you did.

This drives home the point that we are able to do good without having to feel what another person feels. Morality, logic, [spirituality](#), and [rational](#) compassion can all guide us to making the right choice.

Bloom's suggestion for us isn't to stop helping people. It's about helping people more *logically.* **Instead of going with our gut, we should think first to make the best decisions.** Bloom's definition of compassion is "simply caring for people, wanting them to thrive."

He also recommends a more depersonalized approach to helping others that focuses more on cost-benefit analysis. Hence, the two together become "rational compassion." Rational compassion, he argues is particularly important in today's world. If political and social policymakers were more objectively compassionate rather than empathetic, we would be able to extend help to more people and do it without the bias. Wouldn't it be great if we could extend our arms wider to take in those that truly need it?

Against Empathy Review

Against Empathy is very compelling, and it's meant to capture your attention by calling out a societal norm so idealized that you think he can't be serious at first. But rest assured, he's serious, and his argument is surprisingly persuasive. Bloom's arguments about why empathy hinders us are solid and thought-provoking.

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Who would I recommend the Against Empathy summary to?

The 20-year-old psychology student, the 58-year-old philanthropist who wants to his help to extend to more people who need it, and anyone who likes a good philosophical debate.