

Pathos

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Pathos is empathic concern. It results from the accurate perception of the selves of others, combined with a decentering of the ego. The decentering of the ego is essential, since only then is a value assigned to the experience of others.

Essential Steps Involved in Empathy

Psychology breaks down pathos into the following sequence

1. Empathic Perception: This is called EQ or emotional intelligence, and includes the ability to perceive verbal and non-verbal signals, and grasp the meanings, purposes, perspectives, motivations and emotions of others.

2. Perceptual Participation / Mirroring: Such perception triggers a mirroring of the emotional state of the observed in the observer. This mirroring is an automatic reflex action.

3. Cognitive Participation / Attention / Simulation / Imagination: The holding of attention to the observed then triggers a simulation or imagination, where the observer puts themselves in the shoes of the observed. This simulation is also automatic, as long as attention is held, and as long as the observer has a capacity for imagination. This involves taking the perspective of the other.

4. Decentering Ego: Valuing the other's state. Does the experience of the other matter. Ego-centrism blocks empathic concern – empathic concern is restricted to circles where the observer already identifies the other as significant to their self-definition. So, a person who has low ego centrism will experience empathy for all they perceive, whereas a person with high egocentrism will only experience empathy for themselves or those they see as part of their definition of self – such as close family, friends etc.

The default is that pathos is limited in scope. People are more responsive to emotions that

- Align with their self-interest
- Appeal to their pre-existing values

The extent to which pathos is aroused in an audience depends upon whether the audience already values the target of the emotions. Emotional appeals must connect with what the audience cares about. Some audiences are less ego-centric, and can respond to more universal appeals. Others respond primarily through self-interest – either way, values must be engaged.

So, pathos can be felt more widely, depending upon the degree of ego decentering.

5. Affective Participation / emotional resonance: This only occurs after decentering enough to allow that the other's inner life is valued. Affective participation is where you feel the emotions of the other in a deep way, as if you were them. It gives rise directly to empathic concern.

6. Altruism: Arises from empathic concern if there is an effective way of helping the other

These steps help us understand why some people find it harder to empathize because they –

1. Lack emotional intelligence

- I. Have a deficit in their ability to perceive or read emotional signals.
- II. Have a deficit in their ability to simulate the other's state, and place themselves in the others shoes.

2. Have emotional intelligence, but are more ego-centric, so they perceive the experience of the other, but devalue it more.

There are degrees of empathy rather than a complete on or complete off. So even in a person who is more ego centric, there will be some empathy for other selves still getting through. The factors that make up emotional perception are all continuous variables rather than discrete variables, so they are present in varying degrees. Ego-centrism is also present in varying degrees. The result is that empathic concern will result on a sliding scale of varying degree, rather than completely on or completely off.

Emotional resonance (feeling something of what others feel) Can be faint or strong

Perspective-taking (understanding another mind) Can be effortful or automatic

Empathic concern (caring motivation) Can be weak, selective, or broad

High ego involvement (threat, pride, shame, status defence) tends to:

- Narrow attention
- Increase self-referential thinking
- Reduce openness to others' inner states

But this usually acts like **turning the volume down**, not cutting the signal entirely.

So, a highly ego-centric person might still:

- Feel bad when someone they like is hurt
- Show compassion in low-threat situations
- Respond to suffering when it doesn't challenge their identity

The empathy channel is still there — just **narrower and more conditional**.

When does it approach "off"?

Empathy gets close to "digital off" mainly in:

- Extreme threat or fear states
- Intense dehumanization of others
- Certain clinical conditions (e.g., severe antisocial traits)

Even then, it's often **selectively off**, not universally off.

What this means is that all people are affected by pathos to different degrees depending upon the balance between the strength of their emotional perception, and the strength of their ego-centrism. Ego-centrism can increase in threatening or competitive situations, such as situations of scarcity, and decrease in cooperative and peaceful conditions of abundance. Even in a predominantly ego-centric person, some degree of empathy for other selves usually

still “gets through”, though it might be faint, inconsistent or restricted to a smaller circle. Human social cognition is fundamentally relational, so **total empathic absence is the exception, not the rule.**

How Empathic Concern Expresses Itself

Empathic concern can express itself in two ways –

1. in positive virtue: acts of altruism, where we act to help others
2. in negative virtue: acts of restraint, where we refrain from harming others

Because all people are limited in their resources and capacity to help, therefore they can only afford to help those nearest to them – their family, community and friends. This is a physical limit on positive virtue.

However, it uses no resources or capacity to refrain from harming, therefore negative virtue is not confined to an inner circle, but is applied universally.

Overriding Empathy

In intensely competitive situations, or situations of severe threat to safety, ego-centrism increases in strength, because all the attention of the person is focused on themselves. This is especially the case when the other is perceived as the source of threat – such as in a situation where resources are scarce, or where the other is perceived as the carrier of a novel virus. During these situations people can override their normal feelings of empathy.

In such situations, others may also be dehumanised by

1. Devaluing their perspective as “selfish”, “threatening”, “irresponsible”, “irrational”, “dangerous”
2. Devaluing their identity using derogatory labels such as “anti-vaxer”, “conspiracy theorist”, “right-wing”, which enable the easy dismissal based on identity category.

Typically, people must be actively devalued and dehumanised BEFORE empathy can be overrun. During pre-war Germany, it is doubtful that Germans would have tolerated abuse of Jewish citizens without propaganda that portrayed the Jews in a negative way.

Context cues	Tends to activate
Safety, stability, shared identity	Broader empathy, cooperation
Threat, scarcity, uncertainty	In-group focus, out-group suspicion
Strong norms of fairness & pluralism	Inhibition of dehumanization
Norms that legitimize exclusion	Faster moral disengagement

Variables that Affect Valuation

Typically, empathy is affected by 3 forms of valuation -

1. **Affective/emotional:** threat tends to increase the intensity of ego centrism, whilst safety tends to decrease it.
2. **Cognitive/symbolic:** Redefining identity changes the scope of the self – so outgroups can be seen as in groups
3. **Purposive/normative:** Redefining what is harm for the individual, or for the greater good.

So, if another self is perceived as safe, as one of us / a self like me, and within a moral field that prohibits harm, then such a valuation will allow empathy to be unimpeded. But if they are perceived as a threat, as alien / objectified / dehumanised, or if harm is justified for a greater good, then empathy will be impeded.

What I am trying to say is that most of the time people operate with a norm of caring for their own, and refraining from harming others - both of which express empathy naturally limited by their physical resources of time, energy, money. Most of the time people regard others as having a self like themselves, and as having the same needs for avoiding harm and finding fulfilment.

What can happen is that under a perceived threat, where people are rendered faceless, uniformed or socially distant, and treated as numbers for a greater good, and where they are seen as criminal and irresponsible, irrational, insane, then empathy will be inhibited.

What happened during Covid does not negate the default that people are caring of their own and respectful of others. What it DOES show is that under circumstances of severe threat, where people are dehumanised and distanced, and accused of irresponsibility, then empathy can be overridden, and people harmed.

I think that what I have deciphered here are variables governing valuation. Rather than seeing ego-centrism as a kind of structural limit, I am redefining ego centrism as a sliding scale dependent upon threat, identity and the definition of Good. The other thing I am saying is that the default in a peaceful society is where families care for their own, and refrain from harming others. If this were not the case, then societies would rip apart. Any prolonged society is evidence of this default. And so, all societies cross-culturally will have these norms as default.

Also, some occupations attract overly ambitious candidates, who see themselves as in high competition for power or wealth. They may be neurotic, so have traits of threat sensitivity, and they may consider themselves superior or elite compared to others. Finally, they may evoke ideas of greater goods to justify harming others. This explains why politicians are often ego centric, because of the money, power and competition involved. It also explains why the billionaire class can feel they have a special identity, and reduce others to "useless eaters", numbers or animals.

Summary

Due to empathic perception, empathy is always present, but in varying degrees. In a persistent society it is the natural default, since persistence requires empathy as a necessary condition expressed in refraining from harming others and caring for one's inner circle. The default valuation of others is that they are not a threat, they are like me, and we are all vulnerable to the same harms and same happinesses.

This default condition can be undermined by creating a threat, dehumanising others, and justifying harm.

Henrich et al., *The Secret of Our Success* (2004, 2016) – shows cooperation and harm avoidance as universal social norms.

Boehm, *Hierarchy in the Forest* (1999) – hunter-gatherer societies enforce norms to prevent interpersonal harm.

Tomasello, *A Natural History of Human Morality* (2016) – humans have innate moral intuitions, including a baseline avoidance of harming others.