

## **Empathy: Altruism and Egotism (Prof. Scanlan, English 2400)**

In general, **Empathy** is the capacity to understand or feel what another person is experiencing from within their frame of reference, that is, the capacity to place oneself in another's position. Since empathy and sympathy are so closely related, we will use the term empathy only.

In a series of ingeniously designed experiments, the psychologist Daniel Batson has accumulated evidence for what he calls the **Empathy-Altruism Thesis**. In arguing for this thesis, Batson conceives of empathy as empathic concern for others (or what others would call sympathy). More specifically, he characterized it in terms of feelings of being sympathetic, moved by, being compassionate, tender, warm and soft-hearted towards the other's plight (Batson et al. 1987, 26). The task of his experiments consists in showing that empathy/sympathy does indeed lead to genuinely altruistic motivation, where the welfare of the other is the ultimate goal of a person's helping behavior (the goal is not due to egoistic motivations).

“Feeling empathy for [a] person in need evokes motivation to help [that person] in which these benefits to self are not the ultimate goal of helping; they are unintended consequences” (Batson & Shaw 1991, p. 114).

A different interpretation of empathy, the **Egoistic Thesis** of empathy, shows that empathizing with another person in need is associated with a negative feeling or can lead to a heightened awareness of the negative consequences of not helping; such as feelings of guilt, shame, or social sanctions. Alternatively, it can lead to an enhanced recognition of the positive consequences of helping behavior such as social rewards or good feelings. Empathy, according to this interpretation, induces us to help through mediation of purely egoistic motivations. We help others only because we recognize helping behavior as a means to egoistic ends (making ourselves feel better about ourselves). It allows us to reduce our negative feelings (aversive arousal reduction hypothesis), to avoid “punishment,” or to gain specific internal or external “rewards” (empathy-specific punishment and empathy-specific reward hypotheses).

For Batson, the question of whether the agent will act on his or her altruistic motivations depends ultimately on how strong they are and what costs the agent would incur in helping another person.

Adapted from Karsten Stueber's article “Empathy” in the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy:  
<https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/empathy/>