Joel Smith’s definition of empathy II

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Abstract. I flag what seems to me to be some minor concerns about Joel Smith’s definition of empathy, but maybe they are important to someone.


According to Joel Smith, Person A empathizes with B if and only if three conditions are met:

1. A is consciously aware that B is ψ.
2. A is consciously aware of what being ψ feels like.
3. On the basis of (1) and (2), A is consciously aware of how B feels.

I think I was expected to find some problems with this definition apart from the worry I flagged last time about a lack of buyers, metaphorically speaking. But it is hard.

(i) It looks as if this definition will apply beyond emotional states. Person B is just seeing something red. Person A notices. Person A is aware of what it is like to see something red. Person A knows what that feels like. Thereby A is consciously aware of how B feels. We do not ordinarily count this as a case of A empathizing with B.

(ii) Can you empathize with someone for forgetting their mother’s birthday? But what does forgetting something feel like? A natural answer “It doesn’t feel like anything when you forget.” (Does this not even make it past the atmosphere of the planet?!) 

Appendix

What is that on Joel Smith’s PhilPapers profile, a television channel? Oh yes, I think I saw this sketch! There is an evil giant spider in a bathroom. I am babbling to a woman in another
room, looking C-grade or whatever. Babble, babble, babble! Then the spider gets up and leaves the bathroom and enters the conversation room. “I can’t take it anymore. You are mistreating this woman,” says the spider. He looks at the woman and she looks at him and he walks back about out.

Reference