Joel Smith’s definition of empathy VI: the basis

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Abstract. Smith’s definition refers to the basis of empathetic knowledge. I present a case where there are different ways of interpreting the basis.


Joel Smith tells us that 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.

How can we dispute this definition? Are there some questions to be raised about the basis? I shall present a case I devised, in case it is of use.

Imagine that I have some artificial intelligence software on my computer, which occasionally makes suggestions about my writing. Sometimes it says, “Would you like to write this paper as an imitation of R.K. Narayan?” But it did not on a recent occasion when the question was appropriate. Now I am annoyed with the artificial intelligence software. You say, “I know how you feel. Sometimes I am annoyed when the computer fails to spot a grammatical error.” It is not clear how to apply Smith’s definition to this case.

Should we apply it like this: you are aware that I am in the state of being frustrated by a computer advisory system; you are aware of what that feels like; on this basis you are aware of how I feel? Or is what is going on better described as follows?
I. You are aware that I am in the state of being frustrated by a computer advisory system which failed to ask me, “Would you like to write this paper as an imitation of R.K. Narayan?” when the question was appropriate.

II. You are aware of what it is like to be frustrated by a computer advisory system which failed to spot a grammatical error.

III. You can use your experience as a basis for understanding my experience, making a kind of analogy.

The former description fits neatly with Smith’s definition. I am not sure about the latter.

Reference