Joel Smith’s definition of empathy IX: autism and cross-cultural research

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Abstract. Joel Smith’s definition of empathy is likely to be objected to as discriminating against high functioning autistics, if this is a politically correct description. Also there are difficulties with cross-cultural application, owing to its first condition.

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Person $A$ empathizes with $B$, says Joel Smith, if and only if these conditions are met:

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

I think this definition is likely to be charged with prejudice against high functioning autistics, if that is a politically correct description, who claim to empathize with objects, ones which we regard as without feelings. I recall watching a documentary with someone who said that they felt sad about a book left on the shelf. “Even if the book does not have feelings, we should count that as empathy.” I would not make this objection myself, but someone probably will.

Also there is a question of whether the definition is suitable for cross-cultural research, given cultures with a different list of appropriate objects of empathy: Amerindian perspectivism, etc. The crucial problem is condition (1). In order for $A$ to be consciously aware that $B$ is in a given emotional state, $B$ must be in that state. And we judge that by our scientific standards. A spider cannot feel like the grown-up in the room!