Joel Smith’s definition of empathy X: autism and SYSTEMS theory

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Abstract. I consider further the objection that Joel Smith’s definition of empathy discriminates against high functioning autistics, if this is a politically correct description. I introduce a defence which appeals to SYSTEMS theory. I do so within a dialogue, in which Joel Smith features.


CHAIR: So this is our final speaker at this autism conference, Dr. Joel Smith, from the philosophy department.

JOEL SMITH: Thanks. In 2017, I published a paper with a definition of empathy. It is not exactly ordinary usage but I think it is a valuable definition. A empathizes with B if and only if:

(1) A is consciously aware that B is ψ.

(2) ——

DOCTOR: Now let me stop you right there, Dr. Smith. It has been an excellent presentation. Astonishingly clear. We have always known how clever philosophers are, but it is good to know that the philosophy department is finally hiring people who can communicate to the wider community of researchers. But does your definition allow for a high functioning person with autism, awful description I’m sorry, to empathize with such things as books left behind?

JOEL SMITH: Well, the book isn’t ψ, in some emotional state, anger for example, or even in a sensory state, such as perceiving a horse, so the person suffering from autism cannot be aware of the book’s being ψ.

DOCTOR: We think this is going to be a problem, because we would like, certainly various
people would like, to count the autistic person as empathizing. We don’t wish to be charged with prejudice against people suffering from autism. We are here to help.

JOEL SMITH: I certainly don’t want to be prejudiced against people with high functioning autism. At this stage, I can only say that some such people count as having autism if we apply one theory but perhaps not given another, for example under, under, under SYSTEMS theory. So if they don’t count as empathizing, that is not necessarily prejudice against autistics from my side.

DOCTOR: SYSTEMS theory! No, we don’t do SYSTEMS theory here.

DOCTOR 2: No, certainly not SYSTEMS theory.

DOCTOR 3: Never heard of SYSTEMS theory and even if I have, I wouldn’t have anything to do with it.

JOEL SMITH: Well, actually I am not sure that SYSTEMS theory even admits of autism. It is not as if it posits a kind of brain which causes low empathizing and high systemizing, referring to that condition as autism. It just says that we are all very systematic. There is no useful contrast between people low in systemizing and others.

_I apologize to Joel Smith for entering him into this dialogue!

References


Edward, T.R. 2022. The ignoring of Raymond Tallis on literary theory and the SYSTEMS THEORY of gender differences. Available at: [https://philpapers.org/rec/EDWTIO-10](https://philpapers.org/rec/EDWTIO-10)