

What is empathy for indeed? On Joel Smith's no-morality definition of empathy

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Abstract: This paper responds to Joel Smith's definition of empathy. It is unclear to me that it can serve as a dictionary definition of empathy, owing to the lack of a moral aspect, and I think Smith overlooks what its function is in specialist disciplines, such as psychology.

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Don't forget "only"

On cheques, in logic, when one and lonely

Joel Smith offers an impressively neat definition of empathy. 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.

But where is the moral aspect of empathy? I wish to raise a problem for him. The use of the word in ordinary discourse is so bound up with moral contexts that it is unclear that this can serve as a dictionary definition, which leaves the question: can it serve for disciplines like psychology? And Smith does not ask what it is doing there. Why do leading psychologists like Simon Baron-Cohen, keep talking about empathy?

An answer which may not be the official answer is: they are cleaning up the image of their discipline, tainted by foul experiments in the past. But then cutting out the moral aspect is a major problem! So my worry is that Smith's definition is at risk

of being beautiful but homeless. The dictionary-maker cannot take it and the psychologist, or the cognitive scientist, will be reluctant because in addition to its official function, it has some other function of showing that we value the moral capacities of people.

Reference

Smith, J. 2017, "What is empathy for?" *Synthese* 194: 709-722.