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The Autistic Savant as Cultural Inspiration

A recent Science Show (Radio National, 6 December 2008) ambitiously reviewed the phenomenon of autism. Its particular focus was 'autistic savants', a sub-group of people with autism. They were represented in this program in a consistently particular manner: artistically or conceptually brilliant loners who have achieved — or could be expected to achieve if they were properly facilitated — contributions that are in a different key, perhaps even on a different scale, to what is possible for the rest of us, the so-called 'neuro-typicals'. Geeks, the program seemed to be saying, are a radically under-appreciated resource.

Conjured-up, but never mentioned by name, a fascinating but absent presence hung over this program. Bill Gates, the man, is the perfect example of the class of persons whose value, indeed tremendous utility, was being invoked. Bill Gates, brilliant, astonishingly successful and, at least early on in his career, a person who ruthlessly pursued his visionary projects without the niceties of everyday exchange: interpersonally illiterate, executing his vision without making eye contact with partners or adversaries alike. We have all seen the clips: there he is rocking repetitively in his own world, uncaring, the ideal hero for our time.

Autism Spectrum Disorders

Before attempting to review this 'take home message' it is important, albeit in the merest summary, to outline how autism is defined and understood within conventional diagnostics. Mindful that autism is no longer presented as childhood schizophrenia, and that Aspergers Spectrum Disorder was only officially recognised in 1994, the current edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (DSM 4) situates autism in the following way. Unlike the 'personality disorders', such as the narcissistic and anti-social sub-types, which are all placed on 'Axis Two', autism is located on a 'Axis One', a location further clarified by its inclusion within the bracket 'pervasive developmental disorders'. That is, autism is understood as a developmental rather than a personality (or illness) issue. It is not considered a disorder of the self, but rather a neurologically conditioned developmental impairment. Using a term coined by the satirists Roy Slaven and H. G. Nelson, autism is a 'brainal' problem.

Perhaps surprisingly, this form of address is similar to that used by the experts when they speak of 'neuro-atypicals.'

In making a primary distinction between developmental and disease categories, readers may be aware that classificatory practices in psychiatry are constructed to demonstrate a quality of functional and descriptive utility, a criterion that contradicts what is generally held as the scientific ideal, where a formal quality of conceptual coherence is expected. That is, the established taxonomy of psychiatry, as embodied in DSM 4 and the International Classification of Diseases (ICD 10), rates as no more than a well-indexed almanac compared to the intellectual sovereignty demonstrated in a classificatory system such as the Periodic Table.

Proceeding descriptively, autistic people often experience a sensitivity to detail in comparison to neuro-typicals, for example, being intensely aware of the weight of their clothing, the random

MARK FURLONG finds an emerging representation of autism dangerously connected to the culture's obsession with a deformed autonomy.
dripping of a tap or the oscillation of fluorescent lighting. This sensitivity can amount to a focus so particular and so persistent that it can totalise a person's field of attention. Interests may become so narrow and consuming, their duration of focus so persistent, that the person can seem preoccupied to a dysfunctional degree — to be in a world of their own. Yet, this atypical cognitive style also represents a unique way of processing information, such that surprising, and potentially productive, patterns of thought can be generated.

One of the two postcard examples of original thought featured on the Science Show was that of Temple Grandin, Professor of Animal Science at Colorado State University. By her own account Professor Grandin is able to notice previously unrecognised stimuli that animals about to be slaughtered encounter as they proceed towards execution. These stimuli are often small and apparently random — reflections off metal, a wariness about darkness — yet they trigger enormous alarm. In turn, autonomic reactions release bursts of adrenaline which provoke fear and stress, unwanted responses which spoil the quality of the produce taken from the carcass. Building on this talent for detecting item and pattern, Professor Grandin was able to devise systematised methods for removing these stimuli. Her success has been so enormous that she has now designed nearly a third of all slaughterhouses in the United States, and in such a way that they produce meat of a demonstrably higher quality.

Professor Grandin's claim to status is therefore twofold: animals die more humanely and an economic dividend is earned. But more generally, if the kind of facility Professor Grandin possesses is considered an attribute that is available to autistic people alone, what do we have? The program seemed to be suggesting that where onlookers might see only meaningless inaction and a heedless maintenance of focus for extended periods, in fact higher order conclusions can be the outcome of autistic subjectivity. This facility, like the mono-focus of the champion athlete or executive high-flyer, is a mode of being that is responded to ambivalently within the collective social sphere, but there was a clear enough message on the Science Show — that there is profit and advantage in its most highly realised forms.

Turning from the narrowly cognitive to the interpersonal, people with an autism spectrum disorder do less well socially; at least as this judgement is conventionally made. There is radically less eye-contact; less modulation of voice in exchanges; and far less taking-up of those intuitive pro-social cues which facilitate interactions that have a positive relational resonance, for example, the pre-conscious gestures such as the initiation of 'an anticipatory posture' that signals one's readiness to engage. And there is a disconcerting absence of both verbal and non-verbal signals that tend to sustain interaction. One can say that implicit reciprocities are de-regulated.

Neuro-typicals, on the other hand, have a deeper capacity for communication and a quotient of empathy, a mindfulness for the interests of others, which is not, or at least is far less, available to those with the neurological markers of autism (although rights proponents would argue this is a difference rather than a deficit). 'Normal citizens' process social space based on the presence of, and a have a refined sensitivity to, the rules of the game — how to get along with others. They work with and according to implicit social rules — norms that have been forged and then more subtly refined throughout the subject's life-long engagement in their program of inter-personal studies.

Without this capacity to pattern, everyday social interaction can seem anarchic and unmanageable to those with an autism spectrum disorder. (This noted, Simon Baron-Cohen, from the specialist autism centre at Cambridge University, controversially argues that it is possible to teach, at least to some degree, empathy to those with this particular disability. See <www.thetransporters.com>). The average person is a social savant who knows how to get along with others, whereas people with autism tend to be unable to cope with what to them is the chaotic nature of human interactions. Whilst the normal citizen has naturalised this chaos, those without this filtering capacity are distanced by it. (Of course, first person accounts, such as Tim Page's recent essay in The New Yorker, offer a telling inside-out commentary on this.)

From a sociological perspective, people with the diagnosis could be understood to lack an internalised 'generalised other', to re-cycle a concept of George Mead; or, if one prefers the more recent formulation from psychology, these people have an inadequate 'theory of mind'. It pays the average person to be able to filter into the background this internalisation yet, crucially, to be able to remain oriented to this out-of-awareness knowledge.

In summary, problems with behavioural social skills, along with an associated impairment in being able to envisage the other and this other's interests is thought to be central to the problem of autism.

The 'Utility' of Autism

These social aspects of autism were far from the central concern of the Science Show. Indeed, the basic assumption was that, freed from neuro-typical 'normality', autistic subjectivity offers untold benefits, and more particularly, that with greater social inclusion of 'savants' economic benefits would flow. It would be in our interest to include them. This was not an argument put forward on the basis of social justice principles; nor was it an argument for the
inclusion of 'ordinary autistics', who as Dowert Dreissman, Professor of the History of Psychology at the University of Groningen, points out, are generally not represented in popular culture. Referring to the recent Bruce Willis movie *Mercury Rising*, where a child genius, someone who is hard to like, has the power of several Kray computers, he argues that the media is highly selective in its representation of autism, focusing on genius without heed to the fact that people with autism are no more geniuses than the rest of us.

Independent of the question of representativeness, though, is the larger matter of ethics. Claims to inclusion should not rest on any group 'adding value'. 'Autistic savants' are no different to any other sub-population which has been marginalised for a difference not of its choosing. All such groups deserve appreciation not for any potential contribution they might make but rather be afforded

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positive tolerance and appreciation on the basis of principle, not profit.

But what is really at issue here is a broader matter: to do with the norms and aspirations that are today shaping our understanding of worth and personhood. What are the norms that are in play today with respect to personal accountability and our conduct in interpersonal relationships? What are the customs that regulate our sociality with intimates, as well the interactions we transact formally, such as in our workplaces, or informally, such as when we are in a queue or on a train?

Historically, across these different domains it has been understood that a person's social acceptability is contingent upon their conforming to certain expectations, not least of which has been that the person must demonstrate an apparent concern for, and show an ability to reciprocally manage exchanges with others. Observing this norm has been a fundamental criterion for remaining 'in', for maintaining one's social inclusion. Yet, perhaps for the first time, a specific historical condition seems to have emerged that celebrates the breach of deep-set norms and orientations towards the other. Our culture is replete with examples. What is now celebrated as being 'out there' or as 'going for it' — seen as a sign of vitality and self-will — can also be seen as disregard for others and a valorisation of behaviour that in venal fashion calibrates to whom and in what circumstances one will act with 'empathy' or even politeness. 'Rude' is to be in good health.

By definition, all people located within the bracket 'autism spectrum disorders' to some degree breach the social criterion of being able to adopt an attitude of concern for and ability to reciprocally manage exchanges with others. Does the new cultural attitude to 'rude' liberate them, or might it be a thoughtless adoption of a cultural attitude that ultimately does little to assist people with autism? What does it say about the culture that autism now has a kind of hero status that meshes with the worst of a form of subjectivity celebrated in contemporary culture?

**Personhood in Neo-Liberal Culture**

The relatively new social attitudes and behaviours that were once considered unacceptable, and are well on the way to being naturalised, can be given a stark profile in the vocabulary of psychiatry. If these emerging patterns of personal and interpersonal conduct are examined, one can clearly identify dispositions that closely resemble narcissistic, anti-social, dissociative, grandiose, exhibitionistic and obsessive personality traits. Each of these once pathological personal specifications has found greater favour over the last several decades in Western, and possibly other, cultures. It is no coincidence that this larger cluster of emerging specifications — attitudes and behaviours that were once disapproved of or even reviled — is now merging with the positively represented attributes of the autistic savant. Crucially, both the narrow and the more general examples of a cultural attitude demonstrate a view that the subject can be defined in terms of utility, and that the new person so carried in these representations will have an increased quantum of it.

It is noteworthy here that this calculus is not applied to the larger suite of psychiatric disorders. Manic-depression, schizophrenia, dependent/inadequate personality disorders, and so forth, are generally thought to diminish utility. Indeed, they lack the market cachet of the 'brilliant autistic', the single-minded psychopathic achiever, the free-standing and self-loving loner, or the long-distance visionary-isolate.

Interestingly, we can also find here a reworking of the culture's take on autonomy. Mindful that any thoughtful reading of personal moral autonomy positively embraces interdependence as the essential condition of human life, in the current period autonomy has been rendered in neo-liberal terms, with bourgeois psychology providing the apologetic ballast of the 'well-adjusted self' being sovereign unto itself: a self-determining, firmly bounded, self-reliant unit with a capacity for and an active program of ceaseless activity and economic agency. Another worrying twist may be that in popularly representing these with autism as culture heroes, the profound dependency needs of many will be lost to view, and likewise the lifelong commitment of significant others, usually family members, who care for them. With economic utility becoming the lens through which these people are viewed, the actions and interests of carers risk being not only instrumentalised but also invisible.
Anthony Macris recently noted that ‘the norms of the market have become internalised as the core values of our Western societies’ (quoted by Andrew McCann in Overland 192). In so far as this is true it follows that traits identified with certain disorders, such as the autistic and the narcissistic, are likely to align more closely with the position descriptions offered for success in our techno-consumerist world. Put more formally, a supervising criterion has been devised and is being given a vigorous gate-keeping role: candidate descriptions will be screened on the basis of their claims to a productive autonomy. As a corollary, anxiety, dependence, ADHD and schizophrenia will continue to have highly negative connotations: their characteristic traits are not aligned with market success. These conditions will remain at best unpopular, at worst intensely vilified. Those with unavoidable dependencies will continue to find themselves regarded as dysfunctional and worthless.

Coda: The Hug Machine

Temple Grandin, the autistic savant mentioned above who has single-handedly re-fashioned best practice in slaughterhouse design is a star to two quite different audiences. Dressed in country and western gear, the whole string-tie and Stetson pithcée, ordinary folk at rodeos and country fairs adore her as a fantastically successful, yet reassuringly familiar, icon. To those seeking an inspiring model for the post-human, on the other hand, she wondrously approximates an autonomy that is as flamboyant as it is self-exercised.

Supporting this latter status is Professor Grandin’s invention of the ‘hug machine’. Sometimes called the ‘squeeze machine’ or the ‘hug box’, it allows the user to self-administer an experience of intimacy and physical containment, and to do so in an exactly controlled manner so that (in her words) ‘a relaxed feeling of being held’ is delivered <www.youtube.com/watch?v=QDWH_Shootb>. Initially modelled on a ‘squeeze shoot’, a mechanical device for immobilising cattle as they proceed along a race, Professor Grandin designed this machine in her late teenage years to help her manage feelings of anxiety. This brilliantly simple contraption, perhaps most easily pictured as an upholstered, human-sized waffle iron, is now used by thousands, maintaining an ongoing, well-marketed presence on the web.

Why did Professor Grandin wish to have her consolation auto-administered?

Autism profoundly affects both social interactions and sensitivity to sensory stimulation, often making it uncomfortable or impractical to turn to other human beings for comfort. Grandin solved this by designing the hug machine so both she and others could turn to it for sensory relief, whenever needed or simply desired <www.en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hug_machine>.

One can imagine a larger application. To a public hungry for but fractionally about intimacy, the prospect of having total control over the satisfaction of desire is an intoxicating fantasy. And, insofar as we are all becoming more ‘autistic-like’, having naturalised the anonymous and unaccountable forms of relationship characteristic of mediated exchange, we come to want a power that is totally asymmetrical: imagine, never again having to negotiate with another around the reciprocal exchange of preferred distances, never again having to risk being overwhelmed or side-swiped by interpersonal stimuli?

One would never again have to forgo, buy-in, compromise or limit one’s appetites — if only the right device is available.

Towards this purpose Professor Grandin offers inspiration. Not only is she an ingenious inventor and avatar of self-sufficiency, she is a winner in the marketplace. Of course, this context has progressive moments, but it is also presages a dystopian prospect: just as the forms of relationship present in mediated communication are becoming the templates for human sociality across prior limits and boundaries (ethnic, gendered, around disability and other such statuses), the particularly configured autonomy Grandin presents offers a model of personhood that wilfully contradicts the age-old assumptions on which love and connection are founded: where human action and autonomy is grounded in the messy, but potentially satisfying, condition of social interdependence.

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