Autism, Humanity and Personhood

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A Christ-Centred Theological Anthropology

By

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This book is dedicated to all the anonymous people who have said to me over the years, “I would love to read that when it is finished.”

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FOREWORD

What does it mean to be human? That is the basic question that Jenny Cox wrestles with in this fascinating theological study of the human experience of autism. Contemporary society and often contemporary theology tend to offer us a distinctly limited view on what it means to be human. As one peruses the many and various textbooks on the ongoing conversations around ethics and personhood, one would be forgiven for thinking that the ideal of the human was an intelligent, clear thinking, self-aware individual who strives for autonomy, freedom and a valid voice in the public arena. Personhood and a certain form of cognition seem to be deeply intertwined. Within such understandings of persons, the humanity of those who relate differently, think strangely or who do not seem to fit into such hypermodern ways of being in the world can easily be brought into question. Having one's personhood and humanity questioned is never a healthy place for anyone to be within society.

Jenny Cox recognises the significance of this tension and seeks to use theology, or more precisely theological anthropology, as a means of enabling people to move beyond the "obvious" ways of being human and to begin to connect humanness with a wide variety of experiences that are not defined by rational encounters articulated via the limited idiom of reason. Autism is complex, complexing but deeply important if we are to understand the fullness of what it means to be human. For Cox, autism is a way of being human that challenges assumed perceptions about humanness. Being human is not a single "thing." Rather it is a range of possibilities, one of which is to live out one's humanness as an autistic person who has gifts, talents insights and perspectives that are vital for Church and for society.

In this book Jenny Cox provides us with a deeply inclusive and thoroughly theological anthropology, within which people with severe autism can find understanding and acceptance and where the stories of their lives are understood, respected and listened to. The task of the book is to help all of us together to re-think the meaning of humanness and to allow the experiences of people living with severe autism to tweak and perhaps even transform our understandings of God, Church and one another. Jenny's task is a vital one. I pray that those who read this book will emerge not just more knowledgeable about theology and

autism, but more faithful in their ministry of being human and living humanly.

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INTRODUCTION

A Pressing Question

Autism is a disability which is increasingly discussed in the media. It is no longer a condition which no one has ever heard of. Instead it has become almost a "flavour of the month" disability. Current estimates of the prevalence of the condition vary greatly, but in March 2014 the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention estimated that autism spectrum disorder affects 1 in 68 eight-year-old children in the United States.[1] The Australian Bureau of Statistics estimates that, as of 2012, 0.5% of Australians have autism.[2] The degree of impairment varies a great deal, but most certainly many people are severely affected by the disorder.

The existence of severe autism poses a challenge to theological anthropology. The juxtaposition of two things will illuminate the difficulty. On the one hand theological anthropology must uphold the nature of the human being as relational, as Christoph Schwöbel observes.

> Contemporary anthropological reflection is represented in a wide variety of forms. However diverse the different approaches may seem at first sight, there nevertheless seems to be a basic common element in most forms of anthropological thought and research. It consists in the understanding of human being as relational being.[3]

In other words, to be a human being is to be a relational being. Yet on the other hand severely low-functioning autistics seem not to regard others as persons but as objects. Michael Blastland, father of a low-functioning

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[1] David Mandell and Luc Lecavalier, "Should We Believe the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's Autism Spectrum Disorder Prevalence Estimates?," *Autism* 18, no. 5 (2014): 482.

[2] "Prevalence of Autism," Australian Bureau of Statistics, http://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/Latestproducts/4428.0Main%20Features32012?opendocument&tabname=Summary&prodno=4428.0&issue=2012&num=&view=. Accessed 16/7/2014.

[3] Christoph Schwöbel, "Human Being as Relational Being: Twelve Theses for a Christian Anthropology," in *Persons, Divine and Human*, ed. Christoph Schwöbel and Colin E. Gunton (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1991), 141.

autistic boy, writes of his son's life. His book is entitled *Joe: The Only Boy in the World.* Blastland explains why.

> I call him the only boy in the world because this is quite likely how it seems to him, living as he does without many of the commonplace nuts and bolts of ordinary human perception and understanding, in the absence of which he can never know even the elementary facts that he has kin and kind. That is, I think that is how it seems to him, because much is speculation, even among the experts, and Joe is in no position to put us right.[4]

> Is [Joe], in his own mind, the point of it all, with all his internal reflections, thoughts, motives just about all the thoughts and reflections there are? If so, though he would never stop to reflect on that fact, he would be the only boy in the world.[5]

If it is true that to be human is to be relational and if some autistic individuals do not engage in reciprocal relationships, then can we conclude that people with severe autism are not human beings? Can we conclude otherwise? This is the dilemma with which I began my exploration of autism and theological anthropology. And it is a genuine dilemma because parents of low-functioning autistic children do not want to dismiss their children as not human. Theologians do not want to deny that humans are made to be relational beings. I do not want to exclude a subset of those who are born to human parents as non-human, and I do not want to abandon the biblical truths that God is a relational God and he created human beings in his image, which implies that human beings are relational as well. This is the issue which I am addressing in this book. The goal is to provide a theological anthropology which is inclusive of people with severe autism.

Upholding the humanity of people with severe cognitive and developmental disabilities is truly the purview of theology rather than medicine or psychology. A great deal of medical and psychological research has been devoted to understanding autism. The psychological and medical literature is extensive, and far too large to list. Medicine has made advances in understanding the causes of autism. Psychology may provide assistance to help autists and their families cope with the condition. However, medicine and psychology are not the right disciplines to answer the question of whether severely low-functioning autistics are human

[4] Michael Blastland, *Joe: The Only Boy in the World* (London: Profile Books, 2006), 6. Italics original.
[5] Ibid., 106.

persons. These fields are not able to deal with questions of meaning, value and destiny. Philosophy may not be the right discipline to do this either. Historically, philosophy has dismissed persons with cognitive disabilities as not human. Because reason and cognition have been so central to traditional philosophical accounts of the human, cognitive disability provides a serious challenge to recent philosophers.[6] Another quote from Blastland provides the case for the inadequacy of traditional philosophy in this arena.

> What we see when peering into [Joe's] mental machinery is a child possibly lacking almost all the philosopher's traditional definitions of what it is to be human. There is a list which varies a little but usually includes a high degree of self-awareness, sophisticated culture, rich use of technology or tool making, a sense of our own history, structured language, an advanced ability to reason, complex moralities, the ability to think in abstraction or metaphor, and so on. I know the academic distinctions, I've read arguments from philosophy, neuroscience and elsewhere about what makes our species unique, or not. If I follow these distinctions, if I accept their logic, I'm forced to a rueful conclusion: Joe, my son, doesn't qualify. If they are right about the attributes essential to being human, then I must face that chilling verdict. It is an outrageous question for a father to address, whether his child is one of us.[7]

Theology is able to provide a basis for the humanity of people like Joe, people who fail the test of being human by traditional philosophical definitions and possibly even by the expectations of the nature of humanity generated by the biblical creation accounts. The problem is real, but we must not despair because the Christian gospel is a radically inclusive one. The apostle Paul wrote of this radical inclusion in Gal 3:28: "There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus." My theological anthropology has assumed from the start the inclusive nature of the gospel. This book explores this inclusiveness to provide room for people with severe autism as well.

This book is an attempt to provide theological anthropology inclusive of low-functioning autistic people and is therefore theology of disability. Therefore, a word about theology of disability is needed. In disability

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[6] Licia Carlson and Eva Feder Kittay, "Introduction: Rethinking Philosophical Presumptions in Light of Cognitive Disability," in *Cognitive Disability and Its Challenge to Moral Philosophy*, ed. Eva Feder Kittay and Licia Carlson (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 3, 6.

[7] Blastland, *Joe: The Only Boy in the World*, 6-7.

literature it is customary for the author to state her qualifications to write about disability. There is an expectation that anyone who writes about disability will preferably have a disability or at least be the parent or partner of someone with a disability.[8] The catch-cry "nothing about us without us" is important to many people with disabilities, because for too long people with disabilities have been ignored and dictated to about their lives. I do not have sufficient qualifications according to these criteria to write about severe autism. Although I have a daughter with autism, she is intelligent and high-functioning. There are, however, reasons why I believe it is appropriate to write about autism without being a low-functioning autistic myself or the parent of one. Because of the nature of low-functioning autism it is unlikely that a person who is a severely low-functioning autistic would be able to consider the matter I am discussing. Although it might be preferable to have the qualification of being the parent of a low-functioning autistic child, I believe that the time-consuming nature of caring for that child may well have prevented me from writing anything. Stanley Hauerwas once remarked: "I have noticed that those that have retarded children and work with the retarded are often so busy doing, they have little time to reflect on why, how, or what they are doing."[9] Therefore, in the spirit of Hauerwas, I believe that it is acceptable to write this on behalf of those who cannot speak for themselves and on behalf of parents who have not the time to write.

How Might We Go About Answering the Question?

I am not the first person to argue in favour of the humanity of people with cognitive and developmental disabilities. The more significant writers will be discussed along the way. What makes this book different to what has been written previously is my conviction that the humanity of Christ is the best basis for the humanity of people with cognitive and developmental disabilities. This conviction fits within my wider theological view as an evangelical who takes a mainly Reformed stance. The approach I have taken assumes that the Bible is the written word of God. I believe that any theology must take seriously the fact that humanity exists in a state of sin and is in dire need of redemption. Thus whatever we say theologically

[8] Deborah Beth Creamer, *Disability and Christian Theology: Embodied Limits and Constructive Possibilities* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 4-5.

[9] Hauerwas made this statement in a speech given to the 1977 annual dinner of the Council for the Retarded. (Stanley Hauerwas, *Suffering Presence: Theological Reflections on Medicine, the Mentally Handicapped, and the Church* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1986), 211.)

must assume our need of divine grace. For this reason the absolute centre of theology must be the person of Jesus Christ. Two quotations from 16th century Reformer John Calvin serve to exemplify my position in regard to Christ as the theological centre.

In *Institutes of the Christian Religion,* writing of Christ as redeemer, Calvin comments that we must not turn away from Christ even to the smallest extent, because to do so would result in being deprived of grace. He observes:

> Bernard's admonition is worth remembering: 'The name of Jesus is not only light but also food; it is also oil, without which all food of the soul is dry; it is salt, without whose seasoning whatever is set before us is insipid; finally, it is honey in the mouth, melody in the ear, rejoicing in the heart, and at the same time medicine. Every discourse in which his name is not spoken is without savour.'[10]

And a little later Calvin writes:

> We see that our whole salvation and all its parts are comprehended in Christ (Acts 4:12). We should therefore take care not to derive the least portion of it from anywhere else. ... In short, since rich store of every kind of good abounds in him, let us drink our fill from this fountain, and from no other. Some men, not content with him alone, are borne hither and thither from one hope to another; even if they concern themselves chiefly with him, they nevertheless stray from the right way in turning some part of their thinking in another direction.[11]

Christian theology is *Christian* theology because it is a way of understanding God and the world through the person of Christ. The way in which we come to know Christ is through the pages of the Bible and through the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. Theology which is not focused on Christ cannot rightly be called *Christian* theology. It may be theology in that it speaks about God or a god. However, it can only be *Christian* because of Christ.

I have sought to centre my theology of autism on the person and work of Christ rather than on the characteristics and experience of autism. The book begins with a description of autism for the purpose of clarifying what autism is and the issues which I am going to discuss. However, I have not

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[10] Bernard of Clairaux, *Sermons on the Song of Songs*, xv.6. (cited by John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (London: SCM, 1960 [1559]), II.xvi.1.)

[11] *Institutes*, II.xvi.19.

taken a disability perspective. I believe that putting disability at the centre, even in writing theology of disability, is to stray away from Christ to some degree, either small or great, and thus to be deprived of the grace which he gives. I do not think that wisdom about the world can be derived from the character and experience of disability without viewing these through the lens of Christ. Even more importantly, we cannot derive an understanding of Jesus by viewing him through the lens of disability.

I began with the fundamental conviction that the way in which God views humanity and deals with people is through the lens of grace. For this reason I anticipated from the start that the person and work of Christ would be a sufficient basis for affirming the humanity of people with severe autism. Some people have actually questioned the humanness and personhood of people with low-functioning autism. Therefore, I believe it is important to carefully spell out how the humanity of Christ is the basis for the humanity of each one. Positively affirming the humanity of people with cognitive and developmental disabilities is what I set out to do in this book.

Outline of the Book

Chapter one introduces autism to the non-psychologist reader. The purpose of this chapter is to set the scene for the book by providing a basic understanding of the core characteristics of autism according to the psychological literature. This chapter also provides some biographical descriptions of autism, one by an autistic woman and one by the father of an autistic boy. These more personal descriptions help the reader "get into the head" of someone with autism as far as this is possible without having autism for oneself. These descriptions lead towards asking the question which this book aims to answer: are people with severe autism really human persons? The next chapter deepens the scope of the issues.

Chapter two focuses on the story of creation as told in Gen 1-3. It considers the nature of God and the nature of the first human beings, in particular with respect to the characteristics of autism discussed in chapter one. In this chapter I argue that neither God nor the first humans have autism. Importantly, God exists as a triune communion of persons. Human beings are created in the image of a relational God. It is this fact which raises two important theological questions. First, if the first humans did not have autism, why is autism now in the world? I argue that the presence of autism in the world is one effect of the fall. The second question raised is the central question of the book. If human beings are created in the

image of a relational God, then are people with severe autism genuinely human persons?

Chapter three is the central chapter. The aim is to articulate a theological anthropology based on the gospel and which is therefore inclusive of people with severe autism. My anthropology does not rely on an intrinsic characteristic of the individual to make him or her a human person. Because theological anthropologies often rely on some capacity in the individual, some have tried to bypass this problem by suggesting that relationships are what make us human. However, relating to other people is precisely the problem for many severely low-functioning autists. The approach I have adopted relies instead on an extrinsic approach to theological anthropology. There is only one genuinely human person—Jesus Christ. He is both truly and fully human, and the true image of God. Therefore, it is necessary for everyone to find his or her humanity and personhood by participation in the humanity and personhood of Christ. Jesus Christ has lived a fully human life on our behalf, recapitulating the whole human lifespan. He has done for us what we cannot do for ourselves, having offered the perfect human response to God on behalf of humanity. Because Jesus is both divine person and human being, he is personalizing person and humanizing human. Thus human personhood is given by him, not something intrinsic to our being. Humanity and personhood are gifts from Jesus Christ.

Chapter four provides the necessary prelude to my discussion of the resurrection—in chapter five—by discussing the atonement and autism. The work of Christ in the incarnation cannot be complete without his death on the cross. Chapter four is intended to do two things. First, it explains how the death of Christ overcomes sin and death. Since the existence of sin and the inevitability of death in this fallen world are the real reason for the presence of autism in the world, it is necessary for these to be overcome in order for autism to be healed in the eschaton. In the second half of the chapter I argue that Jesus' experience of aloneness, loneliness and forsakenness in his passion has enabled God to understand the experience of being cut off from other persons.

Chapter five is the culmination of the argument, because it addresses the eschatological destiny of people with autism. Two different views about the resurrection of people with disabilities are outlined and critiqued. In contrast to these, I argue for the complete transformation of people with severe autism in the resurrection of the righteous. All that is proleptically true—that is, true in advance—of autistic people, because of the work of the incarnation, is brought to full realisation in the resurrection of the dead.

The final chapter explains how a person with severe autism can have faith in Christ. This is necessary, because throughout the book my argument has presupposed that full humanity is neither dependent on ability nor hindered by inability, but is achieved by union with Christ. If an individual with severe autism is to attain full humanity, then that individual must be united with Christ by faith. People with or without intellectual and developmental disabilities are brought to faith in Christ through the supernatural work of the Holy Spirit.

CHAPTER ONE

AUTISM

Introduction

In the novel *The Chrysalids* by John Wyndham, the world has experienced a catastrophic event that has left much of the planet uninhabitable. Birth defects are very common and crops do not breed true much of the time. The mutated crops and animals are destroyed by fire. Those who appear to be human but fall outside the definition of the true image are banished. The true image is drummed into the mind of the narrator even as he reads the plaque on the wall of his home: "ONLY THE IMAGE OF GOD IS MAN. BLESSED IS THE NORM. … THE DEVIL IS THE FATHER OF DEVIATION."[1] There is a detailed list of what constitutes the norm for a human being. The narrator recalls fearfully:

> The definition of man recited itself in my head: '…and each leg shall be joined twice and have one foot, and each foot five toes, and each toe shall end with a flat nail…' And so on, until finally: 'And any creature that shall seem to be human, but is not formed thus is not human. It is neither man nor woman. It is a blasphemy against the true Image of God, and hateful in the sight of God.'[2]

As the novel progresses it becomes clear that the narrator of the story has a mutation of his own, albeit an invisible one. He and several others have the ability to communicate telepathically over long distances. Although they look human, they know that being different will result in their expulsions or even their deaths.

Of course this is fiction, but like all good fiction it reflects enough of the real-life attitudes of people to raise several questions about what makes someone human. It causes us to ask what it means to be made in the image

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[1] John Wyndham, *The Chrysalids* (London: Penguin, 1955), 18. Capitalization original.
[2] Ibid., 13.

of God. Just like the characters in the novel, if we believe that an individual is not the image of God, and therefore not truly human, we fail to treat that individual with love and dignity. Autism, like the abilities of the narrator of *The Chrysalids,* is considered to be an invisible disability,[3] because the body is unremarkable but the mind is affected in ways which people cannot generally understand. The existence of this invisible disability causes many to question the humanity of people who are autistic.

Some readers will be all too familiar with autism because they have an autism spectrum disorder or live with someone who does. But others are less familiar. Therefore, this chapter contains an introduction to autism for the uninitiated. It begins with a brief history of the "discovery" of autism by two psychologists in different continents. Then it explains what is known as the autistic triad of impairments—impaired social skills, impaired reciprocal communication and repetitive or restricted interests and behaviours. There are differing views as to how we should perceive autism, as a tragedy or a part of human variability. What language people use varies accordingly. A more personal view is provided through the lives of two people with autism. The first is drawn from the autobiographical account of an autistic Swedish woman, and the second from a father's story of his severely autistic son.

The "Discovery"[4] of Autism

Autism has existed for a very long time; possibly as long as human history.[5] However, the history of the label "autism'" for the set of behaviours we associate with the term is very short. Autism was first used by Eugen Bleuler in 1908 to describe the unsocial and withdrawn behaviour of schizophrenic patients.[6] Early in the 1940s two men, working independently and in different countries, both used the word autism to

[3] See for example Roy Richard Grinker, *Isabel's World: Autism and the Making of a Modern Epidemic* (London: Icon Books, 2007), 79.

[4] "Discovery" is given inverted commas, because autism was always there. Asperger and Kanner "discovered" autism in a similar way to Columbus "discovering" the Americas; the Native Americans always knew it was there. In reality Kanner and Asperger labelled autism rather than discovered it.

[5] Amanda L. Richdale and Kimberly A. Schreck, "Assessment and Intervention in Autism: An Historical Perspective," in *Clinical Assessment and Intervention for Autism Spectrum Disorders*, ed. Johnny Matson (Amsterdam: Academic Press, 2011), 4.

[6] Miklós Győri, *Autism and Cognitive Architecture: Domain Specificity and Psychological Theorising on Autism* (Budapest: Académiai Kiadó, 2006), 59-60.

describe a childhood syndrome. Leo Kanner, working in the United States, published his study of eleven children with what he described as "infantile autism," and thereby was the first to coin a name for the syndrome. The following year in Austria, Hans Asperger described children with a similar set of symptoms. Following this "discovery," cases of autism began to be found at all major psychiatric facilities.[7]

Kanner studied eleven children all under the age of eleven years, eight boys and three girls. He concludes:

> These characteristics form a unique 'syndrome,' not heretofore reported, which seems to be rare enough, yet is probably more frequent than is indicated by the paucity of observed cases. … The outstanding 'pathognomonic,' fundamental disorder is the children's *inability to relate themselves* in the ordinary way to people and situations from the beginning of life. … There is from the start an *extreme autistic aloneness* that, whenever possible, disregards, ignores, shuts out anything that comes to the child from the outside.[8]

Kanner's children exhibited some common features. Predominantly they wanted to be left alone. Most did not use language meaningfully and some did not speak at all. The world external to the child—food, noises, moving objects and people—was perceived to be threatening to internal peace. Kanner observed that the children all had "an *anxiously obsessive desire for the maintenance of sameness*".[9] No one could move the furniture around or change routines—even the order in which words were spoken—without upsetting the children greatly. People were largely ignored by the children in favour of attending to objects, possibly because objects never change and do not impinge upon the child's desire for aloneness. The children even seemed oblivious to the presence or absence of their parents. They only interacted with people if no other choice existed, and then only with a hand or a foot as if it were an object.[10]

The situation changed as the children grew older.[11] They had more contact with people and became more communicative, but people were still only tolerated. Kanner observes:

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[7] Uta Frith, "Asperger and His Syndrome," in *Autism and Asperger Syndrome*, ed. Uta Frith (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 5-9.
[8] Leo Kanner, "Autistic Disturbances of Affective Contact," *Nervous Child* 2 (1943): 242. Italics original.
[9] Ibid., 245. Italics original.
[10] Ibid., 243-49.
[11] When Kanner first wrote about them, the children were between nine and eleven years old.

> [P]eople are included in the child's world to the extent to which they satisfy his needs, answer his obsessive questions, teach him how to read and to do things. … though people are still regarded as nuisances, their questions are answered and their commands are obeyed reluctantly, with the implication that it would be best to get these interferences over with, the sooner to be able to return to the still much desired aloneness.[12]

Half a world away and a year later than Kanner, Asperger wrote that he had studied several children who had a "fundamental disturbance," which "results in severe and characteristic difficulties of social integration. In many cases the social problems are so profound that they overshadow everything else."[13] This he chose to call "autism," a disorder which he describes this way:

> Human beings normally live in constant interaction with their environment, and react to it continually. However, 'autists' have severely disturbed and considerably limited interaction. The autist is only himself (cf. the Greek word *autos*) and is not an active member of a greater organism which he is influenced by and which he influences constantly.[14]

Asperger believed that that the children did not *develop* autism, but began life that way. Every aspect of the personality is affected, changing over time, but always present. It is in relationships with other persons that the disorder is most clearly seen. This is especially so within the family of the autistic child; parents of autistic children are emotionally wounded by their children's behaviour. Parents frequently described the children as living among others as strangers, or as being oblivious to surrounding activity. Asperger observes that autistic children displayed extremely narcissistic behaviour, being uninterested in restriction or the desires of others.[15]

Asperger and Kanner came to very similar conclusions about the disorder they called autism. Years later in the 1970s some English researchers tested a large group of children and concluded the features of autism identified by Kanner and Asperger are consistent. These features have become known as the autistic triad of impairments: impaired social development, impaired language and communication, and rigidity of thought and behaviour. The English study established that difficulty in

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[12] Kanner, "Autistic Disturbances," 249-50.
[13] Hans Asperger, "'Autistic Psychopathy' in Childhood," in *Autism and Asperger Syndrome* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 37.
[14] Ibid., 38.
[15] Ibid., 39, 67, 77-78, 81.

engaging in reciprocal relationships is the key characteristic of autism. If a person has deficits in social skills then that person will also have deficits in communication and will exhibit rigid behaviour.[16] Difficulty with social relationships is a problem which will impact our discussion of what makes someone human. But first we must look at the characteristics of autism more closely.

The Core Features of Autism

Impaired Social Skills

Autism is most clearly defined by impaired social skills. The symptoms and behaviours associated with social impairment change over time and vary with the degree of intellectual impairment. However, the fact of social impairment itself is a constant throughout the life of a person with autism. One way the social impairment of autism can be described is as a lack of empathy. People with autism are unresponsive to other people's suffering; they do not give or receive comfort. Empathy involves the skill of knowing what the other person is thinking or feeling, even when this differs from your own thoughts or feelings. This skill is difficult for even the most high-functioning person with autism.[17]

Children with autism are often unable to establish and maintain relationships with their age peers. This difficulty becomes more obvious as children grow older. Many children with autism tend to be on the periphery of groups of children, without desiring or being able to join in. If they do interact with others it is often in inappropriate ways, such as a child trying to make friends by talking about his special interest endlessly, when it is evident (at least to others) that no one is interested. The normal two-way interaction of social conduct—asking questions about friends, taking turns, paying attention to the other person—must be explained to people with autism. But, while many people with autism do not appear interested in social interaction, many high-functioning people do desire social interaction, yet experience intense difficulty in initiating and maintaining relationships.[18]

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[16] Uta Frith, *Autism: Exploring the Enigma* (Cambridge: Basil Blackwell, 1989), 56-57, 61.; Rita Jordan, *Autistic Spectrum Disorders: An Introductory Handbook for Practitioners* (London: David Fulton Publishers, 1999), 13.
[17] Frith, *Autism: Exploring the Enigma*, 139, 54-55.
[18] Raphael Bernier and Jennifer Gerdts, *Autism Spectrum Disorders: A Reference Handbook* (Santa Barbara, CA: ABS-Clio, 2010), 6-7.

Some psychologists explain autistic difficulties with social interaction using what is known as theory of mind (ToM). Theory of mind is the instinctive knowledge of what another person is likely to be thinking or feeling based on an understanding that other people have similar thoughts and feelings to the individual who "mind reads". This is the way neurotypical—that is, not autistic—individuals function successfully in social interaction.[19] Simon Baron-Cohen has described what he calls mindblindness as a way of understanding what people with autism experience. Most neurotypical people are aware of mental states, and can therefore attribute thoughts, beliefs, knowledge, desires and intentions to other people as an explanation of their behaviour. People with autism are mindblind to varying degrees; they are unable to read minds as others do every day.[20]

Of course, not all people with autism are alike in their awareness of other people and their capacity to read minds. People on the autism spectrum vary greatly in their ability to understand the thoughts of others.[21] It appears that people with autism, who lack the faculties which others use intuitively, must use cognitive processes to make sense of emotional stimuli. Temple Grandin—a successful, intelligent woman with autism—has written about her own difficulties due to her autism: "I had to think about every social interaction … a scientist trying to figure out the ways of the natives."[22] Yet even high-functioning autistic people find it difficult to understand and interpret the emotional interactions which are the foundations of social relationships.[23]

In extreme cases of autism, self-awareness appears to be lacking. If psychologists are correct about theory of mind, then it follows that children with severe autism may not be self-aware. Self-awareness comes about by reflecting on mental states. Extreme difficulty understanding mental states would suggest a lack of awareness of one's own mental states or a lack of self-awareness. Having no self-awareness means no ability to

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[19] Andrew Cashin and Philip Barker, "The Triad of Impairment in Autism Revisited," *Journal of Child and Adolescent Psychiatric Nursing* 22, no. 4 (2009): 19.

[20] Simon Baron-Cohen, *Mindblindness: An Essay on Autism and Theory of Mind* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1995), 1, 5.

[21] Cashin and Barker, "The Triad of Impairment," 190.

[22] Temple Grandin, *Thinking in Pictures* (New York, NY: Doubleday, 1993), 133. (Quoted in Molly Losh and Lisa Capps, "Understanding of Emotional Experience in Autism: Insight from the Personal Accounts of High-Functioning Children with Autism," *Developmental Psychology* 42, no. 5 (2006): 810.)

[23] "Understanding of Emotional Experience in Autism," 810.

be present with another person or even with yourself. In this case people would be no more company than would a table or a chair. To quote psychologist Uta Frith, "The ability to make sense of other people is also the ability to make sense of oneself."[24]

Theory of mind is considered to be a well-established theory in psychology. However, there are potential problems with the standard formulation of the theory. One problem involves issues with experimental design and conclusions. Another major problem is that ToM cannot account for many everyday relational interactions between humans, such as misunderstandings between friends, broken relationships, and unwarranted prejudices against others. It ascribes too much cognitive processing to the realm of relationships. A deficit in ToM is a limited explanation of autism, since ToM does not properly account for the experience of neurotypical people.[25]

There are other ways of conceiving of what happens in the autistic mind. Philosopher Ian Hacking suggests that autists' problems with socialisation are the result of two things in combination. Autistic people do not translate social relationships into mental concepts, and they have problems with grasping at a glance what other people are doing.[26] Victoria McGeer extends the work of Hacking and suggests another option called "form of life". She describes learning about friendship as analogous to learning to play chess. Both have rules and both involve a process of learning. Friendship is learned in social environments and friends share in a form of life.[27] Nonetheless, whatever the explanation may be, real differences exist between autists and neurotypicals.

Impaired Reciprocal Communication

Impaired social skills are the core issue in autism, but autism is also characterised by impaired communication skills. This does not necessarily mean that people with autism cannot use language at all, although some do not. Estimates of mutism among people with autism range from 18% to

[24] Frith, *Autism: Exploring the Enigma*, 169.
[25] Michael Plastow, "'Theory of Mind' II: Difficulties and Critiques," *Australasian Psychiatry* 20, no. 4 (2012).
[26] Ian Hacking, "How We Have Been Learning to Talk about Autism: A Role for Stories," *Metaphilosophy* 40, no. 3-4 (2009): 505.
[27] Victoria McGeer, "The Thought and Talk of Individuals with Autism: Reflections on Ian Hacking," in *Cognitive Disability and Its Challenge to Moral Philosophy*, ed. Eva Feder Kittay and Licia Carlson (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 285-88.

61%, depending on how autism is defined by the study. Some autistic children who speak have a very small range of words. Some autistic people only speak to certain people or in certain situations. Those who are mute are also more likely to be low-functioning in other areas apart from language, such as behavioural range.[28] For those autistics who use some language, it is not language per se that is the problem, but the *way* in which it is used. People with autism, regardless of their level of language usage, will always have lower than normal skills in using language for the purpose of *communication.* More than 75% of autistic children who speak echo back what was said by others. This is called echolalia. The more a child echoes the less that child uses spontaneous language.[29]

Another unusual feature of the language of autistic children is labelled by Kanner, somewhat misleadingly, as "metaphorical language". An example of this is the case of Paul calling a saucepan a Peter-eater.

> An autistic boy, Paul, was two years old when his mother used to recite to him the nursery rhyme 'Peter, Peter, pumpkin eater'. One day, while she was doing this, she was working in the kitchen and suddenly dropped a saucepan. Paul, from that day on, chanted 'Peter eater' whenever he saw anything resembling a saucepan.[30]

The problem is that this use of language is idiosyncratic, based on situations and associations which do not refer to experiences which both the speaker and listener share. It is not helpful in communicating for the benefit of social interaction.[31] It serves to keep the autistic person isolated.

Just because a person with autism possesses a means of communication, be it language or sign, does not necessarily imply that she or he will be able to use it for communication or for thinking or learning.[32] The use of language is tied up with thought processes, emotional learning and social understanding. Each of these is impaired in people with autism. Indeed, communication involves understanding the attitudes and intentions of others, something which is strongly connected to social understanding.[33]

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[28] Mary Coleman, "Other Neurological Signs and Symptoms in Autism," in *The Neurology of Autism* ed. Mary Coleman (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 110-11.
[29] Frith, *Autism: Exploring the Enigma*, 120, 22-24.
[30] Ibid., 125.
[31] Ibid.
[32] Rita Jordan, *Autism with Severe Learning Difficulties: A Guide for Parents and Professionals* (London: Souvenir Press, 2001), 6.
[33] Marian Sigman and Lisa Capps, *Children with Autism: A Developmental Perspective (The Developing Child)*, ed. Jerome Bruner, Michael Cole, and

Even for those autistic people who speak fluently, maintaining conversation is not simple, because it is easier for people with autism to speak about their own narrow, obsessive interests than to converse about the interests of others.[34]

Indeed using language for communication is not the only communication problem in autism. Autistic people have difficulty interpreting body language, facial expression, pointing, gesture and personal space.[35] Eye contact is vital in social relationships, but normal eye contact is missing in children with autism. Instead of meeting the gaze of the other person, the autistic child may look "through" or beyond the other person.[36] Alternatively, autistic adults may look at different parts of the face. Some high-functioning people with autism recount that sustained eye contact is painful for them. This may result in missing social cues.[37] It is not that autistic people do not try to communicate; they sometimes even use language in appropriate ways. Nonetheless, difficulties with sharing emotions, mindset and cultural assumptions hinder those attempts at communication.[38]

Repetitive or Restricted Interests and Behaviours

The third key characteristic of autism is restricted or repetitive behaviours and interests. As Kanner observes, children with autism have "an anxiously obsessive desire for the maintenance of sameness".[39] Children with autism are very resistant to change, often having severe tantrums or engaging in self-harm if their routines are interrupted or disrupted at all.[40] Unexpected change is extremely stressful for people with autism, although some cope successfully with change if given support. Therefore, routines are followed in an ordered and even formalised fashion.[41] Routines for the autist may be very complex, involving patterns of thought and behaviour

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Annette Karmiloff-Smith (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997), 62, 73.

[34] Bernier and Gerdts, *Autism Spectrum Disorders*, 7-8.

[35] Jordan, *Autism with Severe Learning Difficulties*, 6-7.

[36] Asperger, "'Autistic Psychopathy' in Childhood," 68-69.

[37] Bernier and Gerdts, *Autism Spectrum Disorders*, 5.

[38] Sigman and Capps, *Children with Autism*, 85.

[39] Kanner, "Autistic Disturbances," 245.

[40] Joseph E. Spradlin and Nancy C. Brady, "Early Childhood Autism and Stimulus Control," in *Autism: Behavior-Analytic Perspectives*, ed. Patrick M. Ghezzi, W. Larry Williams, and James E. Carr (Reno, NV: Context, 1999), 50.

[41] Cashin and Barker, "The Triad of Impairment," 190.

plus particular structures which cannot vary.[42] The autistic person may need to always take the same route to school, have food arranged on the plate in a certain way, keep the same daily schedule, carefully observe obsessive rituals, or strictly adhere to certain rules.[43]

Many people with autism engage in repetitive movements such as hand-flapping, patting, hand-wringing, watching objects spin, smelling objects or licking them, rocking back and forth, physical and verbal tics, and self-injurious behaviours like head-banging and arm-biting. These are known as stereotypies,[44] or "stimming" because they function as self-stimulatory. Some think that these are a means for an autistic person to calm herself when she is stressed or overstimulated by the environment.[45] Autistic people who are intellectually impaired can continue with hand-flapping, rocking and the like into adulthood. For others, stereotypies are usually replaced by obsessions by about age four.[46] Obsessions and special interests are common in those with autism spectrum disorder, particularly older children and adults.[47] Interests are usually narrow and unusual, for example, obsessive interest in clocks and watches, collecting unusual objects, or being interested in objects only for the purpose of dismantling and reassembling them.[48] However, obsessions and special interests can have positive value in later life when they can serve as a basis for a career.[49]

Autism over the Lifetime

The triad of impairments needs to be considered as a life-long experience. Autism is not only a disorder of childhood, but it persists throughout life, impacting on the person in many areas of his life. Over time the symptoms of autism change, looking very different in adulthood than in childhood.[50] Many people with autism develop strategies for coping with social situations in order to compensate for their difficulties, but autism involves a continuing battle with these limitations. As autistic people get older the

[42] Pamela J. Wolfberg, *Play and Imagination in Children with Autism*, 2nd ed. (New York, NY: Teachers College Press, 2009), 22.
[43] Bernier and Gerdts, *Autism Spectrum Disorders*, 11-12.
[44] Coleman, "Other Neurological Signs and Symptoms in Autism," 107.
[45] Bernier and Gerdts, *Autism Spectrum Disorders*, 11.
[46] Cashin and Barker, "The Triad of Impairment," 190.
[47] Bernier and Gerdts, *Autism Spectrum Disorders*, 10.
[48] Wolfberg, *Play and Imagination in Children with Autism*, 22.
[49] Bernier and Gerdts, *Autism Spectrum Disorders*, 10.
[50] Frith, *Autism: Exploring the Enigma*, 1.