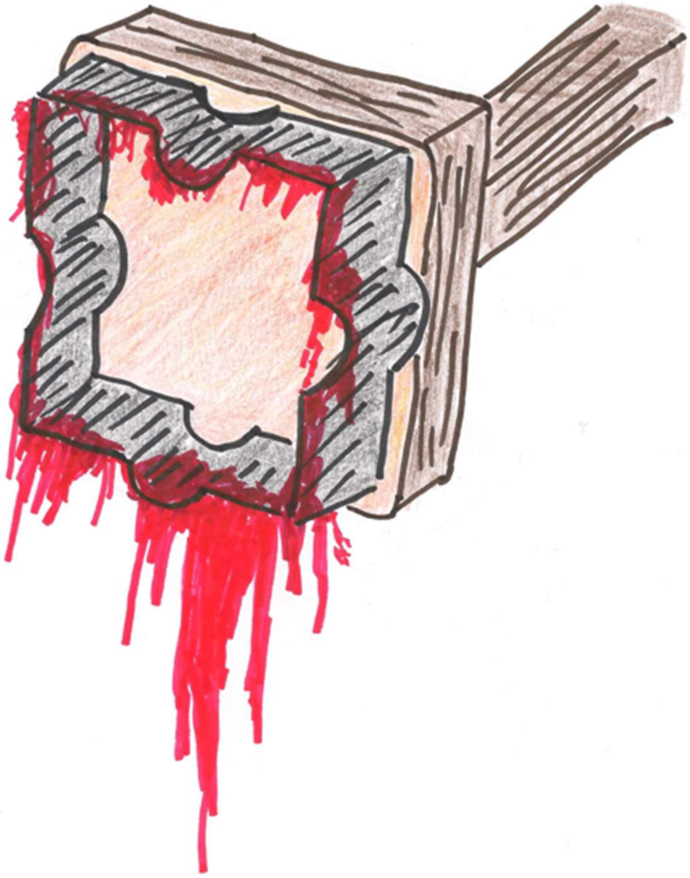
TURNING THE CAMERA AROUND

A Treatise on Autism and Normalism



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For the erased

Forgotten by the humans, remembered by the stars

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Sources and Acknowledgements

This work is the coalescence of over three decades of lived experience in the hells of a normalist world.

Most of its content draws directly on that experience. However I would also like to acknowledge a few texts that were of indispensable support, in particular for some of the historical discussions. These include *Neurotribes* by Steve Silberman (Allen & Unwin, 2015); *Naming Adult Autism* by James McGrath (Rowman & Littlefield International, 2017); *Enforcing Normalcy* by Lennard J. Davis (Verso, 1995); *The Body Keeps the Score* by Bessel van der Kolk (Penguin Books, 2015); and the writings and kind correspondence of Professor Michael Fitzgerald at Trinity College Dublin. Other materials are referred to directly in the text, but of these I would especially highlight 'Don't Mourn For Us' by Jim Sinclair (1993), which is available at http://www.autreat.com/dont_mourn.html and deserves to be read in full.

I also offer thanks to my neurodiverse friends and fellow strugglers whose names I shall withhold to protect their privacy. You are each natural, legitimate and wonderful human beings, whose ordeals have been entirely the fault of an abusive world that others you for no reason.

In spite of all the ordeals in my relationship with my parents, their material support has been crucial in enabling me to survive long enough to write this. I acknowledge this.

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A) Storytelling

Society highly values its normal man. It educates children to lose themselves and to become absurd, and thus to be normal.
Normal men have killed perhaps 100,000,000 of their fellow normal men in the last fifty years.

R. D. Laing, *The Politics of Experience* (1967)

1. Who Diagnoses the Diagnosers?

Do you have a diagnosis?

A typical conversation about autism confronts me early on with this question. It is an obstacle I cannot surmount.

To be sure, the truth is more complex than a yes or no answer. But this is not really a question of truth. It is a question of power.

To answer *yes*, I *have an autism diagnosis* is not the same as to say I *am autistic*. The word *diagnosis* carries an extra baggage of meaning. What in its Greek original meant something akin to a "knowing apart" (*gnosis* + *dia-*), that is, a distinguishing, has in English put on a lab coat and stethoscope. One is diagnosed with cholera or PTSD, but one is not diagnosed with, say, red hair, left-handedness, or religious fundamentalism.

So if I say I *have an autism diagnosis*, I thereby not merely state that I am autistic, but also imply that I accept a certain framing of what it means to be so: specifically, that autism is a medical condition, with all the special vocabulary and social assumptions that entails. By the ritual of *diagnosis* I am turned into a *patient*, in need of *treatment* and in submission to the authority of *medical expertise*. (A similar linguistic magic trick is at work, more subtly, in the difference between *to be autistic* and *to have autism*). You do not, with any social recognition, diagnose yourself. You *receive* a diagnosis from an other, who by that act, asserts power over you as an *expert* who knows more about your body than you do. To be *diagnosed* is thus to cede to this power framework some of your sovereignty over your body and your story.

Diagnosis, in other words, implies political beliefs I do not subscribe to and a power relationship I do not in this case consent to. I might consent when it comes to more medically objective phenomena such as, say, COVID-19. But to do so for autism would be to allow that power to reach far further – that is, across my values, beliefs, personality, and relationship with the universe.

That is why I cannot answer *yes, I have a diagnosis*. Indeed, it is exactly why I rejected an Asperger's Syndrome diagnosis when they attempted to inflict one on me, and forbade them from inscribing so much as a hint of it upon my medical records.

But I cannot answer *no, I do not have a diagnosis* either, and not only because their attempt to give me one would make that at least partially untrue. This, too, is about power.

Many autistic people do accept a diagnosis. Some do so because they agree with the medical framework. Perhaps more often, they do it because that framework so dominates the institutions and behaviours of present-day societies that even if they object in principle, acceptance in practice is the only strategy available for gaining the resources and consideration they need to survive in such a world. I am well aware, indeed, that in surviving (if at times barely and at terrible cost) without having to do just that, I speak from a position of privilege that present-day societies deny to the majority of autistic people.

After all, if I did not, you wouldn't be reading this. I would be dead.

Instead, I have had the privilege of living in societies where others like myself are driven to horrible deaths on a routine basis. A life of constant reminder that people like me are not wanted in this world. A life in alienation, soaked in such inexpressible hurt that for most of it, death is all I have longed for: the only relief, the only silver lining, the only possible freedom. The one thing a corrupt humankind cannot take away from me: the guarantee that one day I *will* get out of reach of its absurd and harmful ways.

Privilege is not simple.

But I digress. To *not have a diagnosis* is thus already to be suspicious to other autistic people. There have been times when simply stating that I rejected a diagnosis was enough to invite torrents of hostility and find the conversation shut down there and then. Meanwhile to those in mainstream society who control that conversation, in particular the academics and medical professionals as well as the non-autistic people who see autism as an illness because their friends or newspapers do, to not have a diagnosis is to not count as autistic at all. What grounds have I, in that case, to dare participate in the conversation in the first place?

The point here is that the language itself is not neutral. Rather, it is shaped by the values and power relationships of the cultures we live in so as to implicitly favour certain types of people, experiences, and points of view, while erasing or diminishing others.

In this case, and at risk of simplifying a picture that has grown steadily more nuanced in recent years, we see how this single world, *diagnosis*, has come to carry within it, unstated, the entire juggernaut of autism-as-pathology which stands astride the door of the meeting hall, barring from entry anyone whose experience does not match its assumptions. With any such challenge headed off at the outset, those within can continue to convince one another that the problem exists entirely within autistic people's brains, and that there is no need for fundamental reforms to society that might threaten the systems that bring them wealth and control over people's bodies.

Think about what that means. If power, not truth, shapes the terms of conversation, there is no particular need for the conversation to remain tethered to reality.

Which of course, it hasn't. Not this conversation, nor so many others whose consequences speak for themselves today.

We can all behold the relentless carousel of horrors for which COVID-19 and the climate calamity have exposed human societies across the world, along with the global resurgence of ego-crazed authoritarian politics and baying mass bigotries – all of which, for the mountains of flesh it ripped off humanity's bones in the previous century, we ought to have well and truly buried in it. Are we not done pretending, then, that the world as we know it is okay? If not now in the depths of this nightmare, then *when* will we face up to our folly in carpeting a world of love-capable life with societies arranged for the routine destruction of human beings for power, profit and prejudice; in which greed is rewarded and kindness punished, barbarities called moralities, love hated while hatred is loved – and where so many of us, here at the peak of millennia of accumulated experience, sit *proud* and *comfortable* in that handiwork?

In spite of all the lessons of the human journey, we persist in normalising its worst possible cultural arrangements. Rather than harnessing power to serve life, we instead make it typical to subordinate life to power. How are we ever to escape from this abyss, if not by first reining in all the high horses of arrogance on which we rode off that precipice into a landscape strewn with towers of lies and pits of abuse, which, in our *pathological* collective pride, we thought to call modernity?

Pathological. What else, indeed, can we call the current condition of human society on Earth? *Does it have a diagnosis*?

So blatant, surely, is become the madness of all human societies together that that very concept of modernity must be re-examined if the human spirit is not once more to drown in darkness. That includes the very concepts of *health* and *sanity* in the supposedly empirical modern idea of the human being, and that in turn includes every battery of dogma that for too long has calcified in place our approaches to mental health, such that we do not, in general, heal or support those who suffer, still less promote reform of social values and practices that cause their suffering; but rather pathologise, punish, and further immiserate these people as though it is their own fault they are broken by a world that breaks people by design.

This is the vital yet overlooked backdrop to the autism conversation, the problematic context in which it is defined: the psychopathy of what passes for ordinary society. The autism conversation is itself but a part of that picture, but it is a crucially important one because it reflects the essential problem: a system that, in privileging abusive neurologies, has ruined the journey of humankind on Earth. My purpose in this treatise is thus to turn that conversation completely on its head in the manner that follows.

The core proposition is this: that the problem is not, and has never been, autism, autistic people, or autistic characteristics. The real problem is what I shall define as ***normalism***, and the *normalistic* societies built to enforce values, privilege characteristics, and rearrange all aspects of life in the interests of **people who believe in, and inflict on others, the illusion of *normal***. I mean to make the case, though it should not need making, that normalistic values run in opposition to the best lived realities of what it means to be human – and therefore that in order to dominate, they necessarily generate, indeed rely upon, an abusive culture of physical, psychological and structural violence, arrogance, hypocrisy, fakery and lies. This normalism must be identified and described as the phenomenon it is: that is, a pernicious one, destructive to all human individuals, all societies, and all prospects for the future of humankind on Earth.

Against that backdrop, the very identification of autism as a set of characteristics is not an objective definition, let alone a scientific or medical one. Rather it is an arbitrary *narrative* construct that has *emerged out of a history of normalistic political and cultural value judgements*, within which it has been described predominantly from a normalist point of view, through a ***normalist gaze***, much as has been the case with the oppressive constructs of race and gender. I shall devote the main part of this discussion to setting out that history, and then to identifying and critiquing those normalist values.

To be clear, the construct concerned – *autism* – is not necessarily a problem in itself. It has helped facilitate solidarity and access for many people in a normalistic world. However, it also regularly falls prey to an autistic essentialism that reduces all people it encompasses into a singular blob. The effect is to smother the diversity of real autistic people, who each have unique and often contradictory voices and experiences. This is a problem not only in GPs' offices and popular imaginations, but also among critical autistic communities which it turns into gatekept silos that exclude and invalidate autistic people whose experiences do not tick enough boxes to get in.

The result is a monumental volume of what people who like big words call *hermeneutic* injustice (from Greek *hermēneús*, an interpreter): where suffering is not understood because those who are suffering are excluded from writing the story, with the outcome that the concepts, indeed the very language, to express and interpret that suffering do not exist. So long as the terms of autism storytelling remain set within a normalist cultural operating system, this will not change. Society will continue, by default, to inflict abject misery on those it identifies as *other*. Before anything else then I shall offer my own story as just one example of how this erasure works.

In the meantime the camera is left in the hands of received authority, which keeps its lens permanently fixed on autism and autistic people as *the problem*. Such an arrangement allows the dominant normalism to remain lurking behind the camera, unspoken of, unchallenged, indeed *undiagnosed*, as though it be merely the natural cosmic background rather than a specific system of culturally-chosen beliefs and practices from whose hands most of the actual harm done on that stage issues forth.

It is time to turn the camera around.

2. Can the Diagnosed Speak?

I rejected an autism diagnosis after several years of catastrophic mental breakdown and existential crisis made worse by the attitudes of the medical professionals.

My father, with whom I lived at the time, became aware of the dogmatism and insensitivity of their approach, and began to remonstrate with them. The doctors' response was to become visibly irked by his interference. They framed their questions to me as though trying to entangle me into accusing him of abuse. Eventually, one of them inflicted an Asperger's Syndrome diagnosis upon him too. These concepts were new to us at the time, and I still remember my old man trembling prostrate on the sofa, hands clasped to his face in tears, at the shock that all his life, without his knowledge, he had apparently had (as they framed it) a mental disorder. Before long my mother, too, received the same diagnosis.

My parents and I have utterly different personalities, values, interests, ethno-cultural expressions, cosmic assumptions and communicative styles. Each of us has walked a divergent path in life. The idea that a singular autistic neurotype could be applied to all three of us, let alone that it explained all our problems, was obviously preposterous.

With hindsight, for that to have happened, either of two things had to be true. Either autism was a term applied so broadly, to such completely different people, that it risked meaningless as a singular coherent category. Or, it is meaningful, but is mis-applied by medical professionals like a hammer that reduces everything it touches to a nail – whether out of ideological zeal, or as a political tool to assert their authority and silence voices that challenge the stories on which it is built.

I believe now that both were true. That paradox is possible because autism *is* political: that is, not a scientifically-described medical condition, but a cultural phenomenon interpreted through its surrounding social norms and power relationships.

In short: autism means different things to different people.

Other autistic people in my life have had their own experiences. One of my best friends received a diagnosis as an adult, accepts it, has professed belief that it explains a lot of her problems, and has been able to draw on social recognition of it to access vital state assistance. Another friend self-identifies as autistic and often attributes certain of their interests or behaviours to it, but as a legitimate social difference with no suggestions of medical pathology. A young relative of mine expresses more extreme autistic characteristics: spoken communication between him and his family has been impossible and he has received special education outside mainstream schooling. I have watched him enjoy ripping newspapers into strips, but have also had to intercede in his attempts to repeatedly bang his head on a window frame.

It is clear that autism has been meaningful in each of these people's stories. But it is also clear that that meaning differs so radically for each of them that to try to represent them through it together would be to erase them as people. It is the same paradox, which taking autism for a singular condition cannot resolve. The only way to resolve it is to turn the camera around and widen its field of view to take in all of society. Only then do we see the context of power and values in whose atmosphere these meanings of autism have been constituted.

My friend with the late diagnosis, for example, only got it late because she is a woman in a heavily gendered society – England – which expects and punishes for different behaviours in boys and girls. There, because girls are more heavily policed for suppression of their true selves to meet gendered social expectations, and because autistic expressions (as well as traumatic damage from getting persecuted for them) are seen as more of a deviation from masculine norms than from feminine ones, they are often ignored in girls till later in life. Access to state support in that country, especially in its marginalised outer provinces where my friend lives, is also reliant on a medical diagnosis, which gives many autistic people deprived by its abusive economic culture no choice but to take it on if they wish to survive. My other friend, on the other hand, is of queer background, and well-versed in both that community's critiques of dominant social belief systems and its shared techniques for surviving in them. In further contrast, my young relative has grown up in a different national culture, that of Japan, whose extreme conformism and hostility to individuals it views as different is too absurd for those without direct experience of it to believe.

All these nuances are lost when mainstream voices speak of a "person with autism" as though it be a single coherent neurotype, let alone an individual pathology. It tells us nothing about that person's history, relationships, socio-economic pressures, cultural context and political values that are absolutely critical in making sense of what autism means to them. All this is missed so long as the camera is kept locked on that individual and zoomed in on their brain.

Let it be clear then that I cannot speak for all autistic people as a whole, nor do I make any pretence to. Every autistic person, indeed every human being, is a unique individual with their own experiences and voices, each of which is valid. There are people who express different characteristics associated with autism, who do or do not identify themselves as autistic, who do or do not have a diagnosis, and to whom autistic identity means different things. Autism is therefore not a clearly-defined circle on a Venn diagram but a beautiful and terrible mess, whose natural diversity and contested parameters sink the idea of any singular model of the autistic person. No-one in the world can speak for autism as a whole.

What there *is* is a great number of autistic mouths that have been aggressively taped over so as to stop their diverse tongues challenging the dominant model. To the extent mine is one of them, I can only speak for myself, even if attempting to get understood has for most of my life felt like trying to chew through bricks.

But of all things missed by the conventional framing, that is the most vital of all: autistic people's *agency* as human beings to tell their own stories. Instead they are reduced to objects, forever within rather than behind the camera's lens. Their very voices are classed as symptoms – "you have autism, so you would say that" – and are thus made linguistically inadmissible by the professional class and wider normalist society which, for the sake of its own pride and power, ensures its own voices are the only ones that count.

So really it is irrelevant that I cannot speak for all autistic people. In the matter that follows I speak not as an autistic person but only *as a member of humankind on Earth*, with an equal stake in its story to all individuals who live, have lived, or will live in the future. For the validity of my voice, that is all that matters, because autism is about autism only in so far as that that is the level to which those who control the conversation have limited it. It is really about what it means to be human. And that is the crux of the matter: **the *problem* of autism is not autistic people in specific, but the normalistic condition of human society in general**.

3. Unspeakable Stories

If I briefly relate my own autistic experience, then, it is not to present it as somehow representative of autistic people's experience as a whole. The point is rather that like so many of their experiences, it cannot be done fair and accurate representation by a discourse that fixes the camera to the autistic individual and his or her traits, while ignoring the normative social and political forces that are central to the experience.

i) The Abusive Power of Adults over Children

I was born effectively the only child in an ethnically-mixed, mono-normative, middle-class nuclear family – one mother, one father and myself. I spent my childhood in multiple lands: Rome, Hong Kong and London. This does not, in itself, explain my non-alignment with any nation or culture today, but does in part inform my alienation from a world built upon historical structures of racism, nationalism and competing sovereign states.

From an early age I became conscious, if not of being "different", then certainly of *being seen as* different. Generally I preferred to keep my own company rather than play with other kids. I expressed stronger, more structural resistance than most of them to the dominance of adults over children. I enjoyed playing with plushy animals, to whom I attributed diverse personalities and opinions. At an age that precedes my memory I also acquired a traumatic reaction to fruit, such that I could not feel safe touching or being near it, let alone eating it.

None of these things, in themselves, were *problems*. Every child is different. There was nothing in these idiosyncrasies that inevitably hurt or inconvenienced other people. The only potential exception was the fruit, which caring and empathetic recognition of it as a serious trauma might have addressed, but otherwise could be reasonably accommodated out of human decency in just the same way as, say, my mother's fear of small animals, or my father's allergies to horses, cats, and seemingly half the varieties of nut in the world.

Nonetheless, by the time we moved to Hong Kong, at around age seven, I was conscious of considerable exasperation in the adults in my life who appeared to find such differences unacceptable.

In their own thinking, they seem to have believed my differences were making me unhappy. This was to get it exactly backwards. Many of my eccentricities developed *because* of the problematising suspicion projected onto me from adults, from which I retreated further into my own psychology to protect myself. The more inhospitable the outside world became, the more I was necessitated to build an internal one that provided me a loving home. Thus the more my parents and teachers insisted to me that my plushy animals weren't real, the richer their personalities and backgrounds grew till there emerged from them an entire world of animal countries with their own cultures, languages and institutions. My fruit trauma was likewise worsened as adults dismissed it, tried to lecture me out of it or ambushed me with fruit encounters, cumulatively reinforcing my terror at it.

These were the conditions in colonial Hong Kong in which my political consciousness first awakened. It identified, even then, the abusive power structure that matters most in this discussion because it was the cause not only of all my suffering in those days but of so many of the tortures that societies visit on autistic people, and on people in general, as a matter of routine. It is, in short, the power of adults over children, or rather its abusive dominant norms: that that power should be coercive and authoritarian, with no concern for the child's consent; that children morally owe adults respect and obedience; that children are second-class beings whose voices need not be listened to; and that there is such a thing as a *normal* child – defined if nothing else by compliance to adult authority – such that children who do not fit these expectations should be pressured or violated into conformity.

In standard autism discourse, one of the most common tropes is the parent who approaches medical professionals in despair at their autistic children's behaviour. The usual formula seems akin to: "no matter how loud I shout at him, no matter how hard I beat him, he does not behave correctly but rather only behaves more wrong". In response the professionals, instead of trying to empathise with the children, might lob out a scattering of almost hilariously unselfconscious "diagnoses" – say, *intermittent explosive disorder* (notice the scary acronym, IED) or *oppositional defiant disorder* – and prescribe coercive therapies or drugs to batter their neurochemistry into submission.

What is never acknowledged is the structure and culture of *power* that turns the parent-child relationship from a human-to-human relationship into a subject-to-object relationship. The child attempting to communicate his or her needs, emotions and values is reduced to a robot whose non-performance of adults' dictated programme is seen as a malfunction. Only that utter dehumanisation of children into objects, in adults' minds, can explain their sincere bewilderment at how their efforts to put out fires with flamethrowers, so to speak, are so reliably counterproductive.

It is a cultural choice, not a cosmic truth, that children are expected to listen to adults but adults not listen to children. It is an expression of values, not of universal sense, to define parent-child power relations as coercive and punitive as opposed to caring and empathetic. It is a philosophical position, not a natural law, that children owe *anything* to their parents having been born without consent into a structurally abusive world, in which they are reliant on an unequal power relationship to survive; still less that parents have any business vesting their own hopes and dreams in an image of what their children "should" be, then becoming disappointed when they turn out different. Likewise it is these value judgements, not objective science, that look on children and decide it is their resistance to authoritarian power practices, rather than those practices themselves, that are the problem.

This is not a small misjudgement. Societies have burst with blood for it. The plain fact is that most of our societies have made child abuse *normal*. There is no qualitative difference between the adult who claims to strike fear into a child for his or her own good, and the adult who rides that power trip up the spectrum to the most horrific of abuses.

It is a common delusion that such abuses are rare, or only committed by exceptionally sick minds. In fact sick minds are the mass-produced output of what such societies have made *normal*. Each generation of children violated by unaccountable adult power turns into another generation of traumatised adults, who in turn violently transfer their traumas onto the next. The result is a shattered world where coercion, non-empathy and non-consent, upheld by adults who swagger to claims that *life's unfair*, *might makes right* and *no-one cares*, are the default configuration of power in most social settings – not only in family life but in work, in government, in religion, in science and in sport, to name only a few.

The recent scandals of systematic sexual abuse of children by powerful celebrities and authority figures are the dripping faces in the mirror which grin triumphantly back at this broken model of adulthood. Indeed, they give the lie to present-day popular hysteria about "pedophiles". Its perniciousness lies in its attempt to externalise child abuse as the preserve of an imagined super-villainous *other* at the margins of society, as well as to frame it as a matter of sensationalised sexual deviance. The truth is simpler. The sexual abuse of children is an expression of a general abusive power culture that ordinary adults participate in whether they know it or not.

Objectively it is blindingly obvious that the pathology here lies in the adult who considers him or herself superior to the child, and not the child who resists being treated like an object. But this is not acknowledged, in the autistic context or more widely, because a critical mass of adults has no interest in relinquishing its power over children.

My parents were not abusive individuals. They tried their best. But their behaviours were informed by abusive cultures which equipped them to know no other way. I was constantly told I had to do what adults told me, with my own voice counting for nothing on the matter. I was sent to a child psychologist whose attempts to pressure me into *normality* – to lecture me patronisingly, to further ambush me with fruit, to tell me again and again that my beloved plushy animals, my only true friends, weren't real – left deep and lasting scars on my psyche. I was put in front of a nutritionist to solve problems with my diet, but her suggestions of, say, bans on sweets and hard pressure to eat food I could not stand only worsened those problems because I valued the freedom to choose what to eat, the obligation to resist coercive power over my body, above my dietary health. Every cack-handed attempt to obtain my submission to adult authority only deepened my resentment and hatred of it – but my voice was never heard, so my war never ended.

The ultimate cost was that as my parents, my primary caregivers, transformed into my adversaries in a traumatic political struggle, I lost any capacity for an emotional relationship with them. I would grow up without warmth, hugs, affirming touch, people to feel safe with, or an inner family world where I was seen or heard as the person I was – and have never in this world known those things since. With hindsight, none of my sufferings that followed can be fully understood without reference to this price I paid to defend myself from a pathologically authoritarian culture of adulthood.

ii) Disciplinary Education

In 1997, at age eleven, I moved to London with my parents.

Hong Kong was no paradise. But I attributed my problems there to specific individuals or at most to adults in general, not to Hong Kong society in particular. The struggle was never so all-encompassing as to blind me to happier aspects of life there, not least, in hindsight, because of that vigorous anti-authoritarian counter-current that anyone who knows Hong Kong culture will be familiar with. I left with a definite sliver of belonging – the only place on Earth I have ever felt such a thing, and whose present destruction by the authoritarians of the Chinese state is thus a source of visceral torment.

England in contrast was a Tartarus from the beginning. I was parachuted into a prestigious boys-only preparatory school where the authoritarian culture of the teachers, and corresponding brutality of the pupils, was on a realm beyond anything I had known till that time. I was shocked numb by the teachers' neverending bellowing, threatening and castigating, and left completely disorientated by every cultural and narrative reference point – the praying, the Latin, the football, the abstract shambles of English history.

When the bullying came, anti-Chinese racist element included, it was not on account of some one or two notorious individuals but a singular overwhelming mass that incorporated almost every boy in my class, conditioned to rip every sign of difference to shreds and thus grind my life into a mincemeat of terror and despair. On top of that, the teachers, despite worthy efforts on some individuals' parts, seemed as a whole to regard the barbarism of young teenage boys as normal, to the point that they could witness pupils making me miserable then, rather than stop them, snap at me to 'shut up', complain that they were 'sick of (my) tantrums', or dismiss the fault as 'a bit on both sides'.

Two years of this drenched my existence in a pain I had not imagined existed. And there was no way out. No-one listened to my desperate pleas for escape; my parents vacillated between resignation and powerlessness. It did no favours, needless to say, to my impressions of the English people or of the apparent archetype of their abusiveness, the Christian god; to my ability to connect with my own age group; and least of all to my burning hatred of adult authoritarianism, for even then I could grasp that the kids only behaved so savagely because the adults treated them like savages from the beginning.

From there I progressed into a major public school. The standard image of these places is as established bastions of white male English class privilege, with their academic standards and network access reserved for a tiny elite at the top of that country's social hierarchy. That analysis has much merit, but the converse of the same picture is that they chew to pieces anyone who does not fit their daunting and at times esoteric cultural ethos. That was very much my experience. Still damaged and disoriented from my first two years in England, my conflicts with vicious students and coercive teachers continued till it morphed into a more cerebral struggle against their oppressive political values. These were embedded too in the teaching material, such as, say, the utter absence of the world outside Europe in the history curricula except as appendages of European stories, or the dominance of the toxic orthodoxies in economics and international development.

By then I was developing my own ideas and giving them expression in writing. I wrote many pieces condemning the domination of children by adults. I made my first attempt at a book, arguing that states like England are not democracies. I eventually put to paper much about the internal world of my plushy animals, expanding by then into a multiverse of realms inspired by video games – my sole salvation in those years – where I found the imaginable friendship and ethical complexity of which the world around me was desolate.

Perhaps it was in hope I might finally be heard that I shared these writings with adults. Instead I received the same suspicious stone faces (or English cringes) and apprehensive silences as before, followed by pressure to drop such thinking and focus instead on the prescribed curriculum, when not by grimacing doubts about my sanity. Inevitably video games became their mortal enemy, which only strengthened my sense that they were determined to isolate me from any source of alternative narratives to the literal hell their world had come to mean for me.

In England there is a powerful cultural strain that seamlessly connects these forces. It is grounded in such historical quirks as the public school system and the terror of Thomas Hobbes; the *Lord of the Flies* notion of teenagers (read: whitened, masculinised, class-privileged boys) as simply uncontrollable bullies by nature; the belief that schools should be a rough and punitive environment to build character; and the conviction, embodied by the British Empire, that this is a planet where the strong should conquer and humiliate the weak then write the stories to cast those atrocities as morally heroic. In the long construction of England's public school tradition, indeed, preparing kids to command this system from the highest perches of the colonial apparatus was the entire point.

But there is also a more general culture of abuse of which this is but one expression. The very idea of mass *education* on a global scale, itself so recent in history, has come to be dominated by a model of one-size-fits-all disciplinary schooling, meaning all children are expected to submit to standardised schedules, curricula, classroom arrangements and teaching styles to train them to conform to desired patterns of behaviour, as well as to grind them through endless tests not for their own benefit but that of sustaining the supremacy of adults' judgemental systems of power. This conformity is enforced by coercion, rather than reason and consent, and any ill-adjustment on a child's part is regarded as *bad behaviour* for which he or she is punished or, if that fails, excluded. There is little consideration for the fact that children are diverse, and thus for the absurdity of expecting one model of learning to suit them all; less still for the children's own individual values, interests or agency in life.

Clearly millions of children have benefited from formal education. Conversely my experience and many others' cause me to find this model of it detestable for its violence towards those not suited for it, not to mention its basis in abusive power. But you may think what you like about it, because the more important point is that it is not the only possible education model, nor even simply a "natural" one, but rather one alternative of many, an extremely recent one at that, built out of specific historical power structures and cultural choices. At the least, it cannot be understood without citing a) the culture of coercive adult power over children as previously discussed, and b) the rise of the industrial capitalist state which re-constituted human beings as economic units of labour, and which centralised and systematised public education in order to discipline children into becoming pliant and submissive factory fodder, not to mention little nationalist hate-engines running on propagandistic tellings of history (rather than, say, empowering them to master themselves and make sense of the world around them).

In other words, in assessing a conflict between a child and this system, it is an arbitrary choice, based on values and power, not sense or science, as to whether to locate the problem in the child or in the system.

So far the preference has been to absolve the system for breaking the child and fish for diagnoses instead. The world today reels from the consequent mass production of ignorance, trauma and terror. What eyes, then, would dare look on the distress of my journey through that inferno of cannibalistic values, and lay its cause in in-built *problems in social interaction* or *obsessive interests* on my part – and not the disciplinary education model's attempt to compress eager and curious children into homogenised economic meat?

iii) Gender

I was assigned male at birth, and grew up as a boy in a range of cis middle-class environments. I never felt, and still never feel, any dissonance with my body or existence as a male human being in its own right. Rather, all my dissonance has been outwards. That is to say, I am repelled by social environments shaped by beliefs that all men and boys must be one way and all girls and women another.

This is true both of the arbitrary division of a diverse human race into two simple blocs in itself, and of the characterisations society has happened to give them. The normative axis of masculinity and femininity has always been alien to me. I have nothing in common with a world where it is established as *normal* for men to hold general power over women; for male sexuality to be dominant and violent, and female sexuality passive and submissive; for the two to be alien to and in conflict with one another; for sexuality in general to be approached with terror and guilt in one moment and drooling sensationalism in the next; for relationships to be regulated round a rigid vision of the monogamous nuclear family; and for people who do not fit these norms to be dealt some of the most horrific of all hatreds and violences known to humankind.

All of this has flown in the face of my personal intuition since childhood. Instead I found it natural to associate women with strength and magnitude, at every level from the metaphysical to the political to the erotic. More generally, I saw no reason why a diverse human species should be expected to conform to reductive models of sexual behaviour and attraction. And it made no sense to me how it was insisted that you could only love one person at a time, rather than that love should flow freely and multilaterally as I experienced it when I was still capable of loving human beings.

This gender alienation would compromise my youth, then wipe it out altogether in my first catastrophic collision with the normalist world at nineteen years old. It was not merely that I had no entry point to that entire normative assembly of relationship practices, not even staples thereof like flirting and dating, given that the entire dance, with its choreography arranged around a masculine-feminine axis, seemed designed for people totally unlike me. More than that, I lacked even a point of communication with it. There was simply no-one I could talk with to explore these matters – no-one to trust, no-one who knew how to hear, not to mention the capture of language itself in service of these norms. The result was that in order to survive, I could only pull further back into that internal world of my own.

The public school I attended, traditionally boys-only, by now admitted girls in its upper two years. I could only watch the gender dance unfurl around me in all its glory and horror. I longed for the warmth, touch and connection I saw others partake in but had no access to. They all seemed to inhabit a different world, with no point of interaction with my own cosmology in which girls were larger and more assertive than boys and where the conflicts, scripts and dogmas of zero-sum monogamy had no place. And those conflicts horrified me. I became aghast at how the concerns of love, for humans, more often plunged into such uglinesses of jealousy, competition and hurtful cruelty.

It was the explosion of exactly such a conflict behind me that set off my mental breakdown. The collapse of my parents' relationship over an extra-marital affair of my dad's opened a hellmouth right there in what I could already only nominally call my home. I was subjected round the clock to their mutual destruction, their screaming and smashing oftentimes waged right outside my bedroom in the late night and early morning. As both an immediate physical peril and an existential sledgehammer into my concept of love as a fundamentally good thing, this was too much, and my sanity at last caved in. I remember crying in such torrents as I had never known to cry before. My parents both saw how much they were hurting me, yet in their daze of agony and contempt for each other continued to subject me to it on purpose, hurting me in order to hurt each other. Yet it never occurred to them to separate, so instead their dance of madness went on for many years before settling eventually into a long winter whose default dynamic was and is confrontation.

It was in these circumstances that I staggered on to a university in London, my head filled with messages about how wonderful that period of life was supposed to be and thus perhaps clawing for some hope that things might finally change – that at long last, there might be something good to make up for this decade of torment. Instead the collision between my world and theirs would be carried forth to life-changing calamity.

In my later school years I had at last worked up the occasional boldness to reach out to girls I was attracted to through letters, with little of note resulting. At university I managed for the first time to develop such an outreach into a sustained conversation. The individual in question was inevitably not interested in me, but was polite and curious at first. Yet this was the first time I had really had the chance to talk with women about relationship matters, and when I questioned those norms and practices I found so alien, simply wishing to at last understand, she and one of her friends grew bitterly hostile to me. The narratives they lived to seemed to have no place for male human beings of my description, still less for anyone who asked questions of the unspoken rules, so instead I rapidly found myself cast in some villainous role I could not understand.

As excruciating heartbreak compounded existential crisis, my mental breakdown worsened. The more vulnerable I became to their condemnations – which they explicitly framed in the language of hostility to difference like ‘weirdo’ and ‘not normal’ – the fiercer grew their hatred and rage. One of my abiding memories of these encounters is of three hours prostrate in paralysis before her friend’s relentless raging at me for melodramatising fake problems that were ‘all in (my) head’ for, ‘not trying’, and for not just accepting things which to everyone else, in her view, were simply ‘common sense’. Within days this had escalated into bilious attacks on every aspect of my pathetic self that she could get her hands on to rip asunder – of which, with all self-esteem demolished, I believed every word.

Within months I was on the verge of suicide. I understood nothing, found the whole world mad, had come to loathe myself utterly for not being *normal*, had absolutely nowhere to turn for compassion, and was locked into permanent limitless pain and despair from which death appeared – and probably was – the only way out. This was only deferred when, by chance, an old acquaintance from school suggested I try a new world: namely, the online multiplayer video game *World of Warcraft*, which I wandered into having nothing left to lose.

In the short term its immersive vastness saved me, but then it would send me over the final plunge in this First Cataract of gender-based horrors. In short, still wracked with pain and insecurity, I came into a close online relationship with a girl in Amsterdam who I would never physically meet, yet remains to this day the only human being with whom I have ever shared a bond of such warmth and affection. While it lasted it brought me incredible sensations of joy and hope the like of which I had never known before or since. And yet it was as though both her social world and mine rose up to rain suspicion and insecurity upon our relationship, its online format still held as far from *normal* at the time, and the resulting turbulence was eventually exploited by a malicious individual who sought to undermine her feelings for me to his own advantage.

There are no words for the nuclear bomb of agony that was the demise of that relationship, exploding as it did after the eternal hells already established. Still fewer, though, are the words that can do justice to the vacuum of empathy I found in people around me, which by now included professional therapists and *World of Warcraft* online communities, for both of whom the narrative was always that the world was alright while I was either at fault or mentally ill (or both). The hostility and mockery I received from some of these people right in the depths of this abyss defies imagination, active goading to end my own life included.

The world had become an absoluteness of incomprehensible cruelty, and it led at last to the only place it could. When I swallowed a jar full of sleeping pills and walked into the river that day – an act which, driven by an existence made of nothing but perfect pain, cannot be called a choice – it was a completely rational, indeed the only possible, thing to do.

Years later, it is well clear to me that my suffering fit into a wider pattern of human societies' destruction of lives for the sake of upholding gendered visions of *normal* men, *normal* women and *normal* relationships between them. The rise of the feminist and queer movements, which despite their troubles have made such enormous improvements to people's lives and the collective human self-consciousness, attests precisely to a collective running out of patience with a world where gendered cultures are responsible for perhaps the majority of all suffering that human beings have ever inflicted on one another. The pathologies of gender – of toxic masculinities and femininities, of coercive and obsessive social control over people's bodies, of people as property, of the subversion of love by relationship frameworks based on zero-sum competition with all the familiar malice that entails, of pointless wars, institutional discriminations, poisoned narrative and mythic imaginations, mental health disasters, domestic violence and the abomination that is rape – have killed unthinkable numbers of people, ruined the lives of so many more that standard numerology is not fit to count them, and together alone suffice to make an unconscionable failure of the entire human moral project thus far. Its crowning farce is that human cultures have managed to so twist their ethical compasses as to become comfortable with these brutalities as *normal*, and in a world where they happen every day, dare speak of *justice*, of *freedom*, of *democracy*, of *peace*, of *social harmony* and of *civilisation*.

In a world whose power agendas are so utterly gendered, it entirely follows that gendered value judgements are layered into every plane of the autism conversation. No difference from *normal* is so problematised from the embryo up as difference from the norms of gender, and to the point that an autism diagnosis is a mechanism for problematising difference, it is an effective tool for casting as mentally defective those people, especially children, who do not fit gendered expectations. Autism is identified less often in girls than in boys, for example, not because there are fewer girls who can be called autistic, but because society polices for different traits in boys and girls, more heavily punishing content of character and deviance from social compliance in the latter; with the further result that the traumatic stress, numbed submission, low self-esteem and exhausting ‘masking’ behaviours to which normalistic societies reduce autistic people is seen as close to the misogynistically-constructed feminine *normal* anyway, and thus less of a problem than in boys. At times the alliance is even more explicit: the essentialist assumptions behind certain dominant ideologies of autism, in particular the ‘extreme male brain’ theory of Professor Simon Baron-Cohen, speak for themselves.

In the conventional language of autism, my destruction was caused by internal cognitive impairments in my ability to interact with people. But with no mention of the social and cultural invention of *normal* gender that has comprehensively changed how the majority of people interact, there is no basis to understand where my interaction difficulties actually came from: not a lack of social skills, but an innate disgust at rules of social interaction designed not for real human beings but violent and arbitrary imagined abstractions of them.

I make no pretence to have behaved upstandingly throughout my ordeals. I was aware, even at the time and to my unbearable shame, of how pain drove me out of my senses to say or do things that might have been hurtful to others. But to the best of my knowledge, my own flaws, however repugnant, have *not* killed hundreds of millions of people, nor bathed the world in millennia of hatreds, conflicts and atrocities as the quest for a world of *normal* men, *normal* women and *normal* relationships has so sanctimoniously done. If, in assessing sufferings like mine, a medical scientific approach is happy to take as *normal* – that is, *healthy* – the value judgements of gender in spite of the bottomless skeleton pit created by societies’ obsession with them, and cast non-conformity to them as a sign of cognitive pathology, then how can that approach not be seen as, if not itself a pathology, then a monstrous crime against humanity?

iv) Political Therapy

It would be an understatement to call my first decade in England traumatic. When I attempt to communicate the experience, as I must, I tend to fall back to a single word: *alienation.*

Alienation is a social phenomenon and trauma a physiological one, but anyone who understands the latter will know that they are inseparable. Trauma is not merely extreme damage to the mind. Rather the damage is such that its sufferer is left in a changed state of sensory, emotional and cognitive experience – one that is impossible to communicate in standard language, and thus isolates them from, that is, *makes them alien to*, the rest of human society.

To heal trauma therefore means if nothing else to restore healthy communication and a feeling of safety with other people, as the basis for a renewed sense of belonging in this world. To achieve that, traumatic experiences must be compassionately heard and acknowledged. But the professional services, from whom I at last tried to "get help" as struggling people are constantly told it is okay to do, furnished me with exactly the opposite. Their contribution to this story was to confirm to me that their society, possibly this entire world, is critically insane and that I would be an alien for as long as I lived in it.

In spite of decades of critical exposure by people whose names are usually arranged with Foucault on top, there is a prevailing sense in society that the medical profession is there to heal people, and that its position of expert authority on physical healing duly extends to mental healing. It was at that point in my life, reduced already to the darkest depths of hell, that I learnt the hard way the folly of this assumption.

The psychiatrists and therapists who entered my life did not stand for a realm of healing, caring and compassion. What they stood for was a callous complex of power with its own interests and stories to assert. I had no intrinsic value to them as a human being. On the contrary, they consciously inflicted new levels of suffering on me because I did not fit their stories' models of the *normal* person, into which they now directed the sum of their professional energies to reshaping me.

This engagement began late in my breakdown, when I sought help specifically with how I might better support my online companion at a time of great duress for us both. This got me involved with a set of public mental health professionals who immediately refused to converse about my relationship, indeed about anything that was not exclusively about me alone (as though my relationships with others were somehow separable from my well-being). Instead they proceeded to fire off irrelevant and arbitrary questions – "Are you enjoying your food?"; "Do you like order in your life?" – which in hindsight were obviously a checklist of "symptoms" in which they were fishing for some cookie-cutter diagnosis. It was these people who insinuated that my parents were abusing me, thus harassing and threatening my father as described earlier. In the event nothing further came of this contact because at the end of these exploratory sessions they recognised the desperation of my case, and my urgent need for professional support, before stating, with straight faces, that the waiting list for such support was currently around eight months.

Because I happen to have been born into the privilege of a middle-class background, my parents had the resources to explore private therapy for me instead. One can only imagine the anguish of people in similar distress who have been socially disempowered so as not to have that option, and for whom arrival at such a dead end has meant death or terminal destruction. To be clear, this has nothing to do with any kind of 'luck' for which I should be grateful, and everything to do with English political choices to uphold a neo-feudal caste system that actively redistributes wealth and power out of reach of the majority of the population.

Access to private therapy, as it turned out, was not such an advantage after all. After an initial psychiatrist who was gentle and receptive but prohibitively far, I was directed through a series of therapists to each of whom I had to go through the impossible and exhausting ordeal of communicating my traumatic journey. The individual I ended up with at the end oversaw several years of Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT). This method was new to me at the time, but in hindsight was a disastrous answer to my distresses and any degree of listening would have made that clear. CBT aims to correct "distorted" thinking and behaviour. Its utility for addressing trauma has been dubious to say the least, and it has no point of engagement with the kinds of social and cultural alienations that underlay my sufferings. On the contrary, it has acute destructive potential in the hands of professional interests who, as in my therapist's case, define "distortions" in thought and behaviour according to normative value judgements of their own.

My therapist observed with a stony face as I recounted my experiences. He then disregarded everything I had said and fixated instead on unrelated issues like my non-recognition of proverbs (which was in fact because I was unfamiliar with them as idioms, given that I'd grown up in overseas cultures and English was not my first language). At last, he made his decision. All my ordeals, all my miseries, were apparently the result of something wrong with my brain called *Asperger's Syndrome*.

This was my first encounter with the vocabulary of autism: not an "ah, that explains everything" revelation as seems to be the way you're supposed to tell the story, but a sledgehammer to the face in my darkest days of existential crisis.

My therapist's framing committedly ignored the entirety of the social and cultural phenomena whose violent expressions of power had laid low my life.

Rather in reverse, all of it – the coercive power of adults over children, the bullying and abusive discipline, the toxic gender norms and relationship systems – all of it, he took as simply *normal*, to the point that he frowned, smirked, or amusedly ridiculed me for even bringing them into the conversation for critical questioning. Rather, the entire reason for my suffering, in his storyline, was that I was cognitively defective – in social skills, in empathy, and in understanding of 'reality'. He was unshakable from this approach, speaking down to me as though to a naïve child who had never bothered to grow up, in the instructing tone of an expert convinced he knew me better than I did. His manner was didactic, paternalistic, condescending and ceaselessly intrusive, the worst possible attitude to put in front of someone with a traumatic hatred of authoritarianism. Never once do I remember him conceding a point in argument; indeed he seemed averse to lower himself to equal argument at all, preferring instead to mansplain, gaslight and disparage. His view appeared to be that he spoke for a sane and correct universe unto me as a patient with *Asperger's Syndrome*, my words therefore not qualifying as arguments but merely symptoms of a faulty brain to be rectified.

With that established, he devoted the encounters that followed to scrutinising every aspect of my thought, speech and behaviour for traits identifiable as different, in order to pressure me to change towards his notion of the *normal* human being – which of course also meant the *normal* teenager, the *normal* middle-class English person and the *normal* boy or man, each of which intuitively disgusted me. He never succeeded. I had spent my whole life struggling for the right to live by my own conscience and fought him back every step of the way. But it was an exhausting and bitterly painful battle in which I was for years unrelentingly ignored, erased, ridiculed, found fault with, and the nastinesses I had experienced dismissed as fantasies of a defective imagination. It is easy to look back now and ask why I didn't just leave this so-called therapy, but my life and psyche were in absolute tatters, I was desperate for help, and I as yet lacked the conceptual equipment to understand how professional therapy could be so blatantly an apparatus for political abuse.

One memory stands out that perfectly captures what was so wrong with it. My therapist at one point asked if I might like to participate in a lecture of his to a room full of his colleagues, on the basis that all I'd have to do is answer a few of their questions. With no knowledge as to what it was about but too vulnerable or at any rate exhausted to suspect anything, I agreed. When he called me into the room, I learned on the spot that it had been a presentation called 'Living with

Asperger's Syndrome', in which, as a perfect case study for the problems caused by autism, he had laid out the details of my life to that entire body of professionals – my 'irrational fear' of fruit, my 'rejection by internet girlfriend', the 'imaginary world' of my plushy animals – without it ever having occurred to him to seek my consent. I remember the almost cooing murmur that rose among that crowd as I appeared, as well as the astonished note-taking that ensued as I answered patronising questions about, say, my disinterest in *normal* rites of passage like getting married and having kids (all questions about *what*, rather than *why*). I was too numbed by the perpetual pain of the time to understand the significance of this human-zoo experience, but no more needs adding to it as a statement of the colonial character of dominant attitudes to neurological dissent.

Needless to say, no healing came from this "therapy". But what it did eventually lead me to – aside from a seething hostility to all professional mental health services that took me more than ten years to overcome – was an epiphany of sorts that was the exact opposite of the outcome it was designed for.

For years I had despised myself for all the unforgivable faults people had found in me, believing myself pathetic and loathsome (hence to some degree my vulnerability to abusive therapy). But eventually, I realised something. No matter how wrong my beliefs and actions might be, no matter how deficient or distorted my brain, this society's behaviour towards me, up to and including this so-called therapy, was in and of itself reprehensible. This was not the way a healthy society would treat *any human being*, not even a war criminal (and in England after the 2003 invasion of Iraq there were no few of those to choose from). Whatever the case with me, this world was objectively not okay. It was, in fact, *pathologically* fucked up. At the least, it retained no authority to speak to me, or to anyone, about the boundaries of sanity, health, and least of all what is or should be *normal*.

And so, far from healing my traumas and returning me to the human world, the language and power of the autism diagnosis severed me from it for good.

In a sense this was an improvement. Rather than floundering in existential confusion and despair, I had now recognised that this world was objectively mad, could take authorship of my own flaws rather than let said mad world define them, and set off on a quest which has continued since then: to understand what the heck has gone wrong with humankind on Earth.

And yet, I would never belong here. How could I ever feel at home again in a world which had not only rent apart my youth in torment beyond imagination, but then, in a pretence of high cosmic empiricism, completely absolved its violent forces out of the conversation as *normal*, and told me instead that it was all because my not submitting to their values was a moral and medical disorder – a *syndrome*?

I would hope that in the light of that experience, even readers who might not agree with my analysis of autism would have the empathy to understand why I rejected a diagnosis. Far from improving my life, the pathologisation of my mind in the language of the autistic spectrum was an act of supreme violence, a final *coup de grâce* to round off a lifelong battery of blows to break me into conformity. It missed – and after that there was no going back. To reject a diagnosis was to reject the entire model of human society that had ruined my life: a model in whose service that linguistic apparatus of *syndromes*, *symptoms* and *treatments* was not medical science, not expertise, but one more weapon in an arsenal of abusive power.

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Once more I make no claim to represent autistic people in general. Everyone will have their own experience of the language and power structures of the autism discourse, and there are many people, including personal friends, who have found in the medical model a path to life-improving resources. Every individual's story matters and has the right to be heard on that individual's own terms.

But that means mine matters too, and the story of my experience of the medical model of autism was that it descended on me at a time of indescribable hurt, and did not alleviate that hurt, nor merely blow it up as far as it could go, but sought to make it literally *unspeakable*. The reason I have shared these experiences is to demonstrate that this effect was not accidental, but rather is built right into the operating system of conventional autism storytelling.

The underlying story structure is simple, and people who work with stories will note how well it mirrors the template of the 'hero's journey'. In the beginning there is the *normal* world, populated by *normal* human beings, and all is well. The peace of this kingdom is then tragically shattered by the problem of autistic people, who emerge from the deep places to cast the world into misery by disrupting the *normal*. It thus falls to the heroes – typically parents, teachers and medical professionals – to venture into the treacherous otherworld of autism, valiantly capture and contain the autistic little monsters and bring them back in cages for study and experimentation. After a nerve-wracking battle the evil difference-dragons in their brains are found and slain, and peace restored as their poor helpless victims are medicated back into *normal* people.

Do you find this rendition ridiculous? If so it is because this is not of course the way it is usually told. The common style is not that of the self-conscious fable but rather the stiff-eyebrowed formality of the scientific report. That is deliberate – those who study humans often put on proverbial lab coats to catch and reflect rays of empirical authority from the natural sciences – but the bulk of the story's power perhaps comes rather from the fact that beneath those eyebrows are some of the most ancient and culturally potent narrative structures in human history. The medical model of autism is a classic myth of the imposition of order over chaos, of a righteous *Us* against an evil and menacing *Other*; of an enemy within, dragged out and neutralised by heroic long-suffering everymen that could be any one of the avid listeners round the fire. Most of all, it reflects how humans always cast themselves and their own societies as the heroes in their own stories; rarely do they consider that they might be the dragons.

That is the context in which stories like mine become *unspeakable*. In the vast majority of settings in which I have attempted to communicate my experiences, I have failed. My words are either not heard, or re-interpreted into radically different, typically hostile characterisations. My story becomes a story of medical or moral fault: either I am just a *patient*, with the output of my mouth no more than dragon-roar *symptoms* in need of lancing; or rather I am just some spoilt white middle-class boy who has exaggerated all his problems, doesn't realise how lucky he is and should shut up and be grateful. The reason this happens is that the terms of discussion are rooted in a linguistic and narrative culture designed exactly to distort and erase stories like mine – whether because there is a dominant power interest in suppressing the threat from them; or because people are so committed to the illusion that their *normal* world is fine, and that only dragons and demons get hurt by it, that they could not endure the narrative catastrophe of re-imagining it as it actually is: an unreasonably-constructed world that breaks people.

Hence nothing, that is, absolutely nothing in what I have related of my life here is captured by the supposed explanation that 'I am autistic'. Even the most well-meaning use of the term parses my entire experience of suffering through the lens of 'my autism' and its characteristics – that is, fixes the camera to me and my brain, and so pushes to the margins all questions of values, social context and lived experience that are essential to understanding who I am and how I relate to this world.

Conversely, and this is most important, that framing not only ignores but *normalises* all of the actual problems that caused me traumatic and life-changing damage, wrecked my relationships with others, and compromised my ability to function in this world. The oppressive power of adults over children; nasty and violent disciplinary education; abusive psychotherapy practices; even the monumental cruelty of gender and relationship norms – all are left outside the frame, taken for granted as part of the scenery, such that they have a free pass to continue as they are, laying waste to lives on an industrial scale. Yet none of these is rooted in some universal human nature. Each is a *historical* phenomenon: that is, assembled within history, out of identifiable cultural and political choices and their consequent processes. There is no reason societies could not have chosen instead to respect and listen to their children as equal human beings, or recognise that there is no single correct way to be male or female. As such it is a value judgement, and a totally arbitrary one at best, to define violent and judgemental practices as *normal* and non-compliance to them as a disorder.

Among ordinary people this is sordid enough, but in the hands of medical professionals it becomes unconscionable. Health, and medicine as the science of health, loses all sensible meaning if it fails to acknowledge the pathology of abusive power practices. All of these phenomena are directly and self-consciously destructive of health in so far as they consist in hurting people either to force them to be who they are not, or if they will not submit, to erase them from the story. That the dominant terms of discussion about autism not only take those values as given, but prescribe, in the guise of medical objectivity, further pain, terror and erasure to compel autistic people to submit to such a vision of power is therefore not merely morally abominable but a mortal blow to the integrity of the entire human scientific enterprise – one that matches the scale of, and is inseparably allied with, past and present scientists' colossal and bloodily consequential mistakes on race and gender.

As for remedies, it offers nothing. In response to my story, its endgame was somewhere between "curing" my autism at one end, and having me reach an accommodation with the world of these practices on the other. The latter might sound more peaceable than the former, but they are essentially the same proposition: that is, to become cognitively comfortable with a world dominated by bullies and psychopaths. Call that what you like but do not call it health.

In either case, even if the problem of the autistic patient is resolved by either converting or murdering them, the actual problems, those psychopathic societal norms and habits, remain dominant and turn straight away to hunt for new victims to destroy for their signs of difference or dissent. I could not, could never accept such a world. So instead of helping a wounded child find the healing and belonging that was all he really longed for, the effect was to create an actual dragon who lives only to bring down their power to ever so wreck people's lives again.

How did the autism discourse emerge into the service of such a programme of power? Let us have a look at its story.

B) Autism

Nothing exists until it has a name.

Lorna Wing, 'Reflections on Opening Pandora's Box' (2005)

There is a thing confused yet perfect, which arose before Heaven and Earth.
Still and indistinct, it stands alone and unchanging.
It goes everywhere yet is never at a loss.
One can regard it as the mother of Heaven and Earth.
I do not know its proper name;
I have given it the style "the Way".
Forced to give it a proper name, I would call it "Great".

The Daodejing (4th century BCE)

4. A Brief Political History of Autism

For most of their lives, the stars have had no names (in this world, at least). Indeed, only for the most infinitesimally recent moment in their stories has there been the word *star*, attached to them in the imaginations of tiny creatures. Indeed, language itself has only existed for a heartbeat longer. In most of the billions of years up to that point, there was nothing alive here to gaze out at them at all.

Yet still, merely *being*, with no need for names, they existed. They would exist even if they were called something else, or categorised in alternative ways.

So it goes for autistic people.

The richness of human diversity leaves no reason to doubt that what is today called *autism* has existed throughout the world since before recorded history. Before the rise of the white, patriarchal culture-machine that laid the foundations for their present-day framing, what are now called autistic traits would have been interpreted through societies' disparate cultural contexts. No universal model existed to categorise, analyse, or indeed name them.

Nor did any universal moral framing. Many societies are thought have feared and stigmatised such people, as reflected for example in *changeling* myths by which otherworldly forces were said to have replaced a 'normal' child with a tainted duplicate – a story which shares the same narrative structure, really, as twenty-first-century pathologisation. But societies in other times and places appear to have better appreciated and enabled the same individuals, considering them spiritually gifted or suited for recognised social roles: shamanic, artistic, philosophical or otherwise. Indeed, a popular pastime has emerged of looking to historical figures considered eccentric (not least, ironically, those whose norm-defying creative minds propelled the last millennium's revolutions in art and science) and offering them autistic 'diagnoses'.

Recognition of autism-before-autism is important because it gives the lie to the present myth that what we call autism is unique to a toxic modernity. Modernity is indeed toxic, and the autism discourse as we know it is indeed a product of twentieth-century history. But the thing it attempts to describe is as ancient and integral as the human diversity of which it is a part.

More importantly, it shows how autism's modern framing is just one of countless possible alternatives that human societies have flicked through. Within this range it is neither the first, nor the last, nor by any means the best. It is a cultural and linguistic gaze as much as any of the others, produced like the others out of normative judgements based in historical circumstances, no necessarily nearer nor farther to objective truth.

The stars existed as meaningful entities before they were given names. So did people who would now be called autistic. But autism as a meaningful concept did not. That concept, and its characterisation, came into existence not by the natural light of the sun, but by that light's occlusion – that is, in the shadow of the concept of *normal* which cast it as the *other*.

For what were those cultures out of which the present autism conversation was built? The cultures of Europe and the United States, at the exact moment their otherisation practices imploded their civilisations into the most colossally bloody social and moral catastrophe in human history.

Nazism was at its roots a normalist project. It invented a rigid model of normal human being, declared it superior, and set about the ruthless and systematic extermination of all who didn't fit it on a scale never before seen in this world.

This is all normalism's ultimate destination. Its best-known consequences were the genocidal horrors perpetrated in the final years of Nazi Germany along ethnic, religious and gendered normalist lines – that is to say, the industrialised mass slaughter of Jews in the Holocaust along with Romani people, homosexuals, disabled people, political dissidents, and anyone else seen as different, altogether killing around eleven million people by the most horrific methods imaginable.

But this butchery grew out of a longer process whose normalist logic wore no disguises in its first choice of victims: people, especially children, who today might have been called autistic. The institutional groundwork for the Nazi genocide-state was laid well in advance with the systematic sterilisation and killing of children considered variously as *idiots*, *feeble-minded*, *mentally defective*, *weak*, *worthless to society*, *life unworthy of life*, or just plain annoying in the eyes of adults – that is, imagined to be *different* in any way at all.

The ideological basis for this was **eugenics**: the pseudoscientific belief that the quality of humankind could be improved by excluding inferior people and groups from its genetic stock. The imaginary concept of *race* was its most notorious metric of "superior" and "inferior" groups, and remains so given that societies today are built on and remain dominated by racist structural violence. But what is significant here is that eugenics more broadly is built around a normalistic pillar: the value judgement that there are *normal* and *abnormal* humans; that the former are superior and the latter inferior; and that all of the latter, as well as any in the former who do not fit the *normal* model, should be punished and removed by violence. For the Nazis, this became grounds to annihilate anyone who differed from their *normal* – in body, behaviour and belief as much as along explicitly racist lines.

The Nazis did not invent this thinking. They developed it out of a vigorous eugenicist current already decades in the nurturing by mainstream scientists in Britain and the United States. The latter in particular, with its own foundations in genocide and slavery, was a hotbed of racism, violent masculinism and murderous dehumanisation of people seen as inferior – that is, soft, weak, disabled, foreign, or different. The systemic and forced mass sterilisation or killing of vulnerable, disabled or recalcitrant children, mandated by law and couched in the most contemptuous and hateful terms of prejudice possible, would have been as familiar to early twentieth-century Americans as to those admirers and students who learnt so much from their example in Hitler's Reich.

Nor did such thinking die in the Reich's bombed-out ruins. To be told by doctors that your child was *retarded* or *feebleminded*, without hope, and best thrown into an asylum and forgotten about remained a common experience for parents in countries like the US in the decades after World War II, to say nothing of those enormous numbers of children the state kidnapped, confined or sterilised by force.

That these mentalities continue to underpin many of this world's social realities is the dirty secret of modernity. Its comforting myth – that such evil was unique to the Nazis and heroically vanquished along with them by the white English-speaking good guys – is a lie that unravels as we speak.

In its racial and gendered aspects the deceit is obvious, as its revenges and reckonings in the present make painfully clear. But this was equally the normatively compromised world out of which the present-day autism conversation was first organised. These cultures of normalist violence were of immense professional and personal consequence for the key figures who laid its foundations, both in the universities of central and eastern Europe, and in the US where many of them fled and which became the formative crucible of their output. And they certainly defined the two individuals whose names are writ largest in the bedrock of modern theories of autism: Hans Asperger in Vienna, and Leo Kanner in Baltimore.

In short: **the autism conversation was shaped in, and continues to take place in, an atmosphere of inherited eugenicist narratives and power structures.**

As is often the case in this world, a less-acknowledged woman stood some years earlier in a space now dominated by the men. **Grunya Efimovna Sukhareva** was a Jewish child psychiatrist from Kiev who in 1925 offered the first integrated description of traits that would later be brought together under the autism category. Professionally well-versed in the emerging framing of schizophrenia (itself another hugely problematic model), Sukhareva perceived that some of the young people she worked with in Moscow exhibited schizophrenic behaviours with distinct intellectual eccentricity, even brilliance, as well as a capacity to improve in social interactions over time if given supportive and enabling environments. Unsure of this tendency's relationship to schizophrenia she tentatively named it *schizoid personality* (*-oid* meaning 'like' or 'resembling'), while warning that the two might in fact be unrelated.

Sukhareva worked amidst one of the most turbulent upheavals in modern history: the Russian revolution and civil war, an extraordinarily traumatic and bloodily contested liminality between the demise of one normalist order, that of the Tsars, and the erection of another, that of the Bolsheviks. Her analysis cannot possibly have been uninfluenced by its context of a world turned utterly upside down. Unfortunately the same historical forces meant her research was little noticed beyond the emerging Soviet state, as the world's leading scientific powers joined its civil war in a failed attempt to bury it in its cradle and remained its enemies for some years on. Sukhareva's work would be further disdained by the European researchers working under the Nazis because of her Jewish heritage. Only in 1996 – yes – was her paper on *schizoid personality* finally translated into English.

Instead autism's narrative would coalesce in the 1940s under the action of two separate centres of gravity. The more familiar of the two these days is Hans Asperger, both because his name was popularised much later by *Asperger's Syndrome*, and because of the bitter controversies, deepened by recent research, around his involvement with the Nazis. The other, less eponymous but more influential, is Leo Kanner, who laid the groundwork for many of the tropes still prominent in autism storytelling.

Hans Asperger was an Austrian medical professor who trained at the University of Vienna, where he and his team ran a children's clinic. His work with children considered socially and intellectually eccentric took place right in the midst of the Nazi storm that descended on his country in the 1930s. The political and cultural violence of the *Anschluss* (the annexation of Austria into Nazi Germany) took special pains to corrupt the esteemed Austrian academic establishment by murdering, imprisoning or driving into exile its scholars of integrity, and replacing them with a Nazi-loyalist academic culture of pseudo-intellectual thuggery.

This was the context that would later turn Asperger's place in the autism story into a matter of blistering historiographical contestation. It is almost as though two opposite Dr. Aspergers emerge, a Jekyll-and-Hyde paradox integral to the autism paradigm that would form beneath its pull. On the one hand there is the heroic Asperger, the progressive and mild-mannered visionary who read stories and poetry to his child clients, respected them as human beings, was almost certainly autistic himself, and as such, in his 1944 paper on *Autistic Psychopathy in Childhood*, set out a model of autism as broad, inclusive, common in society, and a potential fount of enormous contributions if nurtured in a supportive environment.[1] Then there is Asperger the villain: a reprehensible criminal who

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[1] Asperger derived the word *autistic* from Eugen Bleuler, the Swiss psychiatrist who introduced the term *schizophrenia* and in 1910 described its symptoms with the New Latin word *autismus* – derived in turn from *autós* ('self') in Greek to suggest the individual's withdrawal into their own inner world. Bleuler was also a eugenicist; his name, Eugen (*Eugene* in English), meaning 'well-born', itself gained great popularity upon the excitement for eugenics in that period.

supported the Nazi regime and had his career enabled by it in turn, spoke favourably of its ideology, intertwined his life and work with some of its most notorious killer doctors like Franz Hamburger (his mentor) and Erwin Jekelius; and most chillingly, sent vulnerable children in his care to be brutally slaughtered at the Am Spiegelgrund facility in Vienna, which Jekelius set up to conduct experiments on and systematically murder children the Nazis found undesirable.[2]

It would be tempting to suggest both Asperger stories are true if not for the staggering chasm between the temperaments and behaviours they imply. It is not my concern here to resolve this paradox, though it is worth noting that even at his guiltiest, Asperger's sins would equal, not exceed, those of most characters in the autism story – this being essentially a tale of the systemic mass torture of children seen as different, so much of which took place (and still takes place) *after* the Nazis, in societies that claim to be better. What is important here is to observe that Asperger's analysis, and how it has since been interpreted, can only be understood in the context of the supreme darkness that descended on the land where he worked, and which twisted the entire scientific enterprise into as unambiguously atrocious a normative programme as has ever existed in human history.

The same evil rampaged east, where it all but extinguished the thriving intellectual cultures of eastern Europe in its genocidal apocalypse. Among the worlds it drowned in blood was the ancestral home of another psychiatrist, from a Jewish family in Austro-Hungarian Ukraine, who had worked in Berlin and happened to emigrate in to the US in the 1920s, thereby escaping almost certain death. The journey of **Leo Kanner** led through South Dakota to Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore, where in 1943-4 he put forward a rather different model of what he called *early infantile autism*. Unlike Asperger's model, autism for Kanner was defined to a narrow rigidity: a social aversion or will to 'aloneness' and a fear of change, caused most likely by obsessively intellectual parenting styles in early childhood. Also unlike Asperger, Kanner saw autism as rare, and his analysis would go on to exclude large numbers of people who did not exactly fit his strict criteria.

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[2] Some of the most prominent recent research on Asperger's role in Nazi atrocities is presented in 'Hans Asperger, National Socialism, and "race hygiene" in Nazi-era Vienna' by Herwig Czech, in *Molecular Autism*, Volume 9, Issue 1 (2018); and in *Asperger's Children: The Origins of Autism in Nazi Vienna* by Edith Sheffer (W.W. Norton and Company, 2018).

That the modern autism discourse appears to have set off along two simultaneous but disconnected tracks is one of history's puzzles. Kanner and Asperger never met, but their worlds were certainly connected: several psychiatrists and psychologists who worked with Asperger in Vienna, such as Georg Frankl and Anni Weiss, were forced to flee the Nazi assault on that city's traditionally highly Jewish medical community and ended up in the US where they came into Kanner's close orbit. Nonetheless Kanner rarely if ever referred to Asperger and appears to have insisted on autism as something rare, unique, and previously unreported, in spite of all the work that spoke to the contrary whether in Vienna or even in the US, including the research of Louise Despert of whom Kanner must surely have been aware.

The question of why Kanner's work went in such an adamant direction is important because it again reminds us of the normative and political nature of this "science". As is common in academia, American psychiatry at the time was a hornets' nest of power struggles. Kanner's positions cannot be understood outside his stake in the arm-wrestle between fans of psychoanalysis in the tradition of Freud, many of whom arrived as exiles from Nazi Europe, and the more pragmatic tendency of Kanner's Swiss mentor Adolf Meyer. Kanner's insistence on his rare and narrow model of autism also clashed with psychiatrists like Despert who, unheeding or ignorant of Sukhareva's earlier warnings, framed their interpretations in the broader language of *psychosis* and childhood *schizophrenia*. Perhaps it was Kanner's perception of Asperger's model as a political challenge that led him to refuse to cede any reference to the latter. Further confusion, resulting inevitably from attempts to categorise complex and diverse human beings into simple categories, arose from the apparent differences in Kanner's and Asperger's observations that would later form the template for imagining a distinction between 'high-functioning' and 'low-functioning' autistic territories. And on top of it all, psychiatrists as a sector had a clear vested interest in framing such phenomena as matters of upbringing – in which they could get money and prestige for interfering – rather than inheritance, which lay beyond their reach.

As such it was not as *Asperger's Syndrome* that joined the list of labels stuck on people who baffled normalists' psychological taxonomies, but *Kanner's Syndrome*. Ultimately though the sets of interpretations bequeathed by both Kanner and Asperger would prove decisive. And though there might be much to hold the pair of them to account for, it was the choices of the generations of parents and psychiatrists that followed, not these two individuals alone, that built these frameworks into a new machine of normalist atrocities, chuntering away in broad daylight in societies that believed they had left eugenics behind in the debris of Nazi Germany.

If Europe's collapse into a moral and civilisational black hole spat out the origins of the modern autism paradigm, it was the United States that developed it into both a system and storybook of normalist oppression in the guise of health science.

Through the 1950s Kanner's model gave social and medical authorities a sense of justification for furthering their inherited child abuse culture. The belief that autism was a) a problem, b) caused by bad parenting, made it standard practice to seize children by force and lock them away in institutions where, with neither consent nor regulation, they could be physically and psychologically destroyed with experimental drugs or electrocutions in an effort to turn them *normal*. That these practices belonged to the same tradition as the Nazi concentration camps and human experimentation of the previous decade should be obvious to any judgement that measures by the outcome for the victims rather than the name of the perpetrating society.

The most overt organisation of these tortures into a pseudo-scientific framework was **Applied Behaviour Analysis (ABA)**, developed as an early intervention for autism in the 1960s and also known as the 'Løvaas Method' after its Norwegian pioneer Ole Ivar Løvaas. Based on the animal behaviour conditioning experiments of B. F. Skinner, ABA offered a simple and rigorous procedure to reprogramme children to conform to *normal* behaviours through relentless reward and punishment responses. They could, for example, be ignored, screamed at, beaten or electrocuted for making stimming motions, for refusing to hug the researcher when ordered to, or for expressing distress through crying, pleading or hitting themselves; and praised when in converse they submitted to the adults' commands.

Løvaas's was an explicitly normalist philosophy. In his own words, autistic people 'were not people in the psychological sense' but 'raw materials' from which it was society's challenge to 'build the person'.[3] He described his method as

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[3] As stated in 'Poet with a Cattle Prod', an interview with Paul Chance in *Psychology Today* (January 1974). Be warned that much of that text makes for harrowing reading.

behavioural engineering, but its core operating principle was the absolute power of the adult conditioner over a dehumanised child: that is, the unsentimental will to command and punish the child, and total deliberate ignoring of the child's attempts to communicate, in order to break the child fully into adult-controlled objecthood. The method was refined by subjecting children to experiments in which they were repeatedly beaten, starved, blasted with physically dangerous levels of sound, and subject to agonising electric shocks in order to punish them into obeying normalist instructions. Not coincidentally, Løvaas also became notorious for gender-normalism in specific, applying punitive methods to try to conform girls and boys to feminine and masculine norms respectively as well as promoting another pseudoscientific torture practice, conversion therapy, with its own long and ongoing legacy of violence.

Even in the wake of the bloodcurdling nightmares of German and Japanese human experimentation, American science had no functional ethical standards or regulatory mechanisms to prevent such practices. Nor was Løvaas alone in his excitement for them. He merely stood on the crest of a wave of enthusiasm sweeping over American parents and doctors in these years for exerting control over children by means of pain-inducing tools designed for shocking cattle or conducting pain experiments on live rats, dogs and monkeys.

When a thing looks like torture and sounds like torture, we are necessitated to recognise it as torture. Though many ABA practitioners would go on shun its punitive dark side, its authoritarian basis has ever since provided a tool for abusive parents and professionals to demolish the lives of generations of children. ABA is still practised today. Surely there is no plainer signal of the sheer bottomlessness of adult arrogance that even with its introduction in a time when Dr. Mengele and Unit 731 echoed thick in memory, there was no great outrage at such cruel and blatant pseudo-scientific power-tripping.

By then the psychiatrists no longer wrote this story unchallenged. **Parents** themselves did a great deal to shape the autism conversation in these decades, not least in reaction to a medical establishment that framed their eccentric children as faulty sub-humans but offered few solutions beyond blaming them – the parents – for somehow breaking them.

This scapegoating too was rooted in cultural norms in a country well-known for its susceptibility to cultural and moral panics. Kanner's suspicion that autism was caused by faulty parenting tapped into American post-war gender insecurities. In that country's extreme patriarchal conditions, widespread fear and disgust existed at women's increasing pursuit of knowledge and professional independence instead of conforming to an imaginary model of docile motherhood. Autism provided a convenient pretext to stigmatise such women, now labelled *refrigerator mothers* for obsessively prioritising their cold brains, and their children's, over the latter's emotional needs – thus, it was supposed, driving those kids to turn their backs on this world and wander off into an autistic wilderness.

It will be evident from my earlier account that I am not above filleting arrogant and abusive parents by the bucketload. But I also share in the experience of watching my own parents made miserable by psychiatrists who arbitrarily found fault in them while offering nothing constructive in return. To the extent that abuse of children by parents is endemic, a great deal of it is surely generated by parents who, while having struggled to do their best in difficult relationships with their children, were themselves broken through shaming, guilt-tripping and exploitation by condescending "experts" for fun and profit, as well as by the wider society through which those stigmas radiated. Doubtless such suffering also informs the widespread distrust in professional expertise that so marks the present crisis of modernity; devastatingly so, in so far as it feeds such things as denial of climate science or of COVID-19 vaccines.

In response, while some parents went along with the torture programmes of professionals like Løvaas, others took it upon themselves to research the non-conformity of their children. As these parents connected and organised their actions further shaped the autism narrative. In 1965 for example they founded the National Society for Autistic Children (NSAC), later renamed the Autism Society of America (ASA). Meanwhile in England a different National Autistic Society was formed in 1962, notable for adopting a puzzle piece for its logo, complete with image of crying child – the first appearance of a symbol that is now notorious, whether for its suggestion that autism means to suffer or be incomprehensible, or for its representation of how normalists have so long controlled autistic people's stories.

These groups investigated, advocated and debated under a high-tension atmosphere. Brought up under normalism to see their eccentric children as a problem and at a loss as to why they were like that, they faced a desert of information parched by limited research and studded with piles of overlapping and empirically dubious medical concepts – *Kanner's syndrome*, *childhood* *schizophrenia*, *psychosis* – through whose cracks dripped horror stories soaked in eugenicist sensationalism. Many of these parents had suffered greatly at their scapegoating by the psychiatrists, the stigma of which got them shunned by friends, told to dispose of their worthless kids in institutions, and have doors slammed in their faces by an unsympathetic and hostile society. Theirs was a wounded, angry, desperate energy, which roiled together in a cauldron of ideas and initiatives on what to do about their children in a world whose practices and institutions, in particular the school system, were designed on conformist principles to harm or exclude them.

Needless to say, such a diverse and unstable mass could hardly be monolithic. Over time and under the pressure of often rancorous disputes, it pulled apart into two competing tendencies. On the one side were those parents who sought to change society to better accommodate their children, even if still viewing them as disordered and in need of special support; they would advocate for example for education reforms or laws on social inclusion. Other parents preferred the opposite approach: to change their children to fit society, whether by pumping them with experimental medications, trying to condition them with violence and torture through ABA and its like, or demanding that public efforts be focused not on accommodating such children but finding a 'cure'.

Alas it was the latter that better reflected prevailing cultures of authoritarian normalism, and thus ascended to dominate the story in the late twentieth century. As research and redefinition widened the apparent 'prevalence' of this mystery condition, a great parental panic broke out in a frantic search for 'causes' of autism rooted in the modern environment in everything from pollution and mercury poisoning to vaccines. These decades saw a raft of new organisations emerge in the relentless pursuit of origins environmental or genetic for autism as well as a biomedical 'cure'. One of the founding parents of NSAC, Bernard Rimland, left that organisation to found the Autism Research Institute (ARI) to that end in 1967; its most infamous programme, *Defeat Autism Now!* (DAN!), plunged headlong into the movement to associate autism with vaccines and promoted all manner of unscrupulous quackeries. Three decades later the tendency remained strong, with the likes of Cure Autism Now (CAN) appearing in 1995 and Talk About Curing Autism (TACA) in 2000.

Organisations like these saw little point in improving social support for autistic people. Indeed the very suggestion carried for them the shameful stigma of surrender. Just as in the 'war on drugs' and 'war on terror', this was a vision of a war on autism tailored in the American cultural mould of a binary struggle of good against evil. Through its lens autism became a monstrous enemy whose heroic defeat was cosmically inevitable, and which, as in Vietnam, Iraq and Afghanistan, lay always just around the corner (until it didn't). It was thus not only in such neo-colonial quagmires that the Americans, frustrated out of what they saw as their rightful destiny, redoubled the futile intensity and atrocity of their efforts rather than reconsider their narratives. Today this compulsive pathologisation of autism and crusade for its medical extermination continues, with most of these organisations having consolidated into by far the largest, wealthiest and most deplorable of all: Autism Speaks.

Like the US, England had its authoritarian cultural inheritance badly shaken up by the war. It too struggled to confront its ongoing heritage of abuse towards children in general and marginalised children in particular – all the more salient after so many had faced traumatic separation from their parents under wartime evacuation. The abusive conditions in English mental asylums broke out in long-overdue scandals, resulting in the Mental Health Act of 1959 which abolished their legal regime and released thousands of their victims back into the community, thus facing it with the urgent task of learning to understand them and accommodate their needs.

This situation gave rise to a new culture of psychiatric research on children, infused with reformist attitudes that attempted to challenge inherited authoritarian prejudices. It took shape in organisations like the National Autistic Society and special schools like that of Sybil Elgar in Ealing, as well as in prominent English hospitals and universities. This was the milieu from which **Lorna Wing** emerged, whose approach would allow a more support-oriented response to autism to bubble to the surface and in so doing revive the work of Hans Asperger.

The culture represented by Wing and her colleagues still problematised behaviour interpreted as autistic. But it was also critical of the brute crassness of prevailing bigotries as well as of the narrow dogmatism of Kanner's framework. Instead it sought to improve the rigour of its understanding through a more open-minded engagement with children's lived experiences. The course of Wing's research brought her in contact with Asperger's work, whose translation by her husband John marked its first entry into English. It struck Wing as a much better fit with reality than what she witnessed coming across from the US.

Thus the autism story reached a pivotal juncture. Wing now rearranged its entire narrative morass into a newly broad and inclusive model. Not quite sensitive to Asperger's connection to the Nazis, she re-cast autism as *Asperger's Syndrome*. On top of that, she did not define it as a distinct condition, but rather located it in a varied continuum which at its edges blended back into the normalist population – and which evolved into the present concept of the *autistic spectrum*.

Wing's re-interpretation set *Asperger's Syndrome* as the new paradigm in the English-speaking world, and the decision to name it so was entirely political. It was an attempt to get away from the word *autism*, which was drenched in cultural stigma (not least in Asperger's original term of *autistic psychopathy*) and remained associated with infant children. Rebranding it under a completely different name, Wing considered, would make it more acceptable to parents with older children with more complex and diverse autistic expressions, thus gaining them access to educational adjustments and social services and better empowering the therapeutic mission to improve their lives.

There seems little doubt that for Wing and many others in her movement, this therapeutic motive was sincere. It marked a definite break from the no-holds-barred assimilate-or-exterminate mentality of the eugenicist tradition, inviting at least the possibility that children who did not conform to social norms could be seen as real human beings instead of objects, victims or monsters. And yet that tradition remained very much alive, and the shift was not so great as to stem the flow of its poison even into the new framing. Asperger's Syndrome remained a *syndrome*. Autism remained a *condition*, a *disorder*, or at best a *disability*. It was still *the problem*, still a *difference*, still *other*, and though emphasis was growing on the need for society to accommodate it, the approach still took social expectations of conformity as given and made no committed critical challenge to their dominance. Parents and professionals, rather than autistic people themselves, remained in control of the story. It conceded little space to children's sovereignty over their own bodies and behaviours, or to constraints on adults' imagined rights, still less their power, to override it by force. For all her good intentions, Wing's writings were among those thrust on me two decades later by the therapist who attempted to impose a diagnosis on me, and some of the patronising language therein – equating difference with harm, and saying my problems were 'because of your disability' – left me so hurt and incensed that I never could bring myself to read past the introduction.

Thus was *Asperger's Syndrome* formalised as a diagnosis – by the World Health Organisation in 1992, then the American Psychiatric Association (APA) in 1994. The latter requires a little deconstruction of its own because of its meteoric impact on modern psychiatric cosmology. The APA's **Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM)** has attained the status of a standard and authoritative medical reference, but in fact it is a living normative organ grown out of a history of shifting cultural pressures and power interests. This will not be news to anyone who has suffered for its role in gender-based oppressions, most infamously with its classification of homosexuality as a disorder till 1974.

The first two editions of the DSM were relatively unremarkable. DSM-I emerged in 1952 as a response to World War II, whose carnage ripped apart the minds of thousands of American soldiers with traumas for which little psychiatric guidance yet existed. DSM-II in 1968 broadened this guidance in the face of a mounting crisis for psychiatry itself, as its empirical carelessness and service to abusive social norms came under scrutiny. By the 1970s this challenge had so swelled as to look like it might devour psychiatry altogether, and it was the effort of the APA's Robert Spitzer to rescue it that propelled the DSM on its course to its present supremacy.

Spitzer sought to dispense with the DSM's accumulated mountain ranges of arbitrary vaguenesses and oxymoronic nonsense so as to turn it into something that at least passed as rigorous. He succeeded – only for that success to take on an agenda which far escaped his own. DSM-III in 1980 was a 494-page monster whose physical weight rumbled with authority, drew in a vastly expanded readership, and secured its ascension as a steamrolling, money-spinning juggernaut for the APA. Given its American capitalist cultural setting and tethering to the corporate interests of big drugs companies riding high on the pharmacological revolution, it is the profit motive, not the pursuit of truth, that has ever since exerted the strongest grip on the DSM's steering wheel.

As such, rather than a scientific reference the DSM is now a profit-oriented industry in its own right. In its mighty power aura the arbitrary labels to pathologise everything in sight – and sell drugs to crush it – have returned with a vengeance. It was from the diagnostic cluster-bomb of DSM-5 in 2013 that came chimeras like *oppositional defiant disorder* and *intermittent explosive disorder*, whose poverty of objective rigour is as laughable to any serious scientist as it is miserable to the traumatised children whose pain it has pathologised and further punished.

Autism's shapeshifts through successive issues of the DSM is as clear a reflection as any of its story's nature as a product of shifting norm and power cultures. In DSM-I (1952) autism was an extension of childhood schizophrenia. In DSM-II (1968) it became a narrower schizophrenia based in 'a failure to develop identity separate from the mother's', reflecting the assumptions about its origin in bad parenting in that period. In DSM-III (1980) it became *infantile autism* as in the vision of Kanner, that is, a rare and monolithic condition, present from birth, associated with young children, and including only those who fit a strict checklist of symptoms. When the $100-million blockbuster of DSM-IV (1994) changed it again, this time in the image of Lorna Wing's spectrum with *Asperger's Syndrome* as a separate diagnosis (the revised DSM-III of 1987 serving as a stepping stone), it was remarkable in so far as it inverted the previous narrow vision of autism one hundred and eighty degrees in favour of breadth and flexibility instead, driven by Wing's goal to provide a much larger number of children access to support through the gate of diagnosis. But this still fit the DSM's lifelong pattern of defining its contents according to normative interests and pressures, rather than accumulated progress toward objective truth. The point was well made when DSM-5 (2013) then removed *Asperger's Syndrome* having introduced it only in the previous edition, perhaps out of fears of losing control of its narrative as growing numbers of people self-identified with it on their own terms.

Still, these re-writings promoted a further cultural shift, especially when coupled with strengthened laws on mandatory access to education for kids diagnosed with learning disabilities in countries like the US and UK (as opposed to the tradition of dumping them in institutions). Diagnosis frameworks grew more sophisticated to try to match the complexity of the autistic spectrum, with familiar checklists appearing like the Childhood Autism Rating Scale (CARS) and Autism Diagnostic Observation Schedule (ADOS); a tradition that continues today under the dominance of the Autism Spectrum Quotient (AQ) of Simon Baron-Cohen. While still horrendously subjective and value-loaded as we shall see, these more clearly separated the story of autism from other stories of neurological non-conformity such as schizophrenia or brain damage, a choice till then still largely down to the arbitrary whims of individual clinicians and often influenced by prejudices of race, class and gender.

Significantly, they were also accessible to a mass audience. They at last began to bridge the rift between parents and medical professionals, but also had the effect of turning everyone into a walking CCTV camera in a society-wide surveillance effort for symptoms. Aside from those parents who turned heaven and earth upside down to research why their children were "different", few ordinary people would have been party to the cultural and political drivers of this history. Thus the autism story went mainstream to a mood not that a new story had been written, but more darkly, that a new and frightening illness had been discovered.

The hope of people like Lorna Wing was that an autism diagnosis could be made available to more people who would benefit from the resources, services and considerations it opened. Yet to a real and destructive extent, the opposite happened. The widening of identification criteria led to a rapid and enormous increase in diagnoses – of something nonetheless still framed as a medical disorder within the individual, with all the stigma that entailed in a world that had walked the dark path of eugenics. In a tempest of labels and parental anxieties whipped up by dehumanising media stereotypes, societies trembled at the alarm bells of an apparent autism 'epidemic' and, in the ensuing panic, utterly took leave of their senses.

This view of an 'epidemic' was a normalist one: it took the view that *normal* children existed, and that children who deviated had something medically wrong with them. But it also became linked to wider anxieties about toxic influences spawned by a corrupt modernity, and these fears were not unfounded. Communities getting their health blighted and environments poisoned by the industrial activities of unaccountable companies were and are a common injustice in countries like the US, the crucible of the panic; so too a latent and abiding distrust in medical expertise in a country where quality of healthcare access is still effectively gated by one's wealth. Add to this mix a culturally impressionistic populace with long inclinations to moral panics and conspiracy theories, a rampant and hungry pharmaceutical sector, a sensationalist media for which truth is often an afterthought at best, and the political rivalries between the custodians of American autism narratives and the Lorna Wing research faction in London, and all the ingredients were in place for the eruption that followed.

The trope of autism as the menacing 'other' reared to full strength. It was raised high by newspapers, advertisers and television commentators, as well as normalistic parents and medical professionals who dipped their buckets into the well in whose depths the worst prejudices of the Nazis and pre-war societies still festered. Together they plastered upon screens, billboards and the sides of buildings portrayals of autistic people as cursed, damaged, defective, tragically robbed from their parents as though by some demonic force, incapable of friendship or empathy or living a fulfilling life – in short, the most frightening and terrible thing a parent could ever find had happened to their child. As the panic snowballed, its search for a 'cause' of this evil malignance linked autism not only to pollution but diet, mercury, video games, antibiotics, vaccinations, indeed to pretty much anything that came out of a medical establishment seen as remote, corrupt, and in contempt of the welfare of its patients.

The association with vaccines was particularly significant, given its role in driving to critical mass the broader anti-vaccination movement that has so wrecked the global effort against infectious diseases. It came to a head in 1998 when Andrew Wakefield in England, a country whose cultural insecurities and medical politics are far more problematic than it thinks, fabricated a causal link between the measles-mumps-rubella (MMR) vaccine and autism in one of the most inflammatory scandals in the history of modern public health. The firestorm this set off has never truly subsided, and the key takeaway is not the villainy of Wakefield but the structural flaws in the English scientific establishment – including the *Lancet*, one of the world's most prestigious medical journals, which published his fraudulent study – that allowed such devastating misinformation to catch fire in the way that it did.

It is easy to mock the masses of people taken in by this panic as unhinged conspiracy theorists, but their distrust of officialdom and the "experts" was often well-earned. As before many were stressed or traumatised parents who had grown up in an authoritarian culture that holds it canonical that parents know best for their kids. With their relationships with their children in crisis, they must have felt lost in a labyrinth as the medical establishment buried them in blame and shame, all the more as from the 1980s onward the market fundamentalist revolution began to terminally compromise the social contract which bothered governments to at least pretend to service obligations to their citizens. With nowhere left to turn and no-one left to trust, it is easy to imagine how such hurt, humiliated and desperate people might have grabbed for anything that resembled an answer.

Which has since grown inseparable, of course, from the authoritarian resurgence all over the world in the present crisis of modernity. This too, it goes without saying, is a normalist crisis, whose othering and brutalising of any perceived difference from an idealised and ignorant hyper-masculinist tribalism speaks for itself.

The worst of the autism panic has since subsided, largely thanks to the strenuous efforts of the critical counter-movement we shall look at next. But its effect was to charge up the basic pathologising narratives of autism with a remorseless arrogance which still crackles in the air after two decades in which, aside from DSM-5's removal of *Asperger's Syndrome* in 2013, they have undergone few further structural changes. So let us round off with a few reflections on what this story reveals.

What should be most clear is that from beginning to end this was not a story of the discovery of objective truth. The discovery of autism was rather closer to the European explorers' "discovery" of civilisations in the Americas, Africa and Asia: that is, the hijacking of existing stories they bloodily inferiorised to service their own programmes. The programme in this case was about a) expressing a belief, crystallised under eugenics, that people (especially children) should be *normal* – in behaviour, in communication, in values – and that deviation from these norms is a *problem*; and b) deploying structures of power – parental power, scientific power, educational power, commercial power, political power – to assert this belief both by developing it in theory and imposing it on children's bodies in practice.

This wears no disguises in the cases of blatant torture such as institutional abuse and Løvaas's ABA, but it also applies to the apparently gentler semi-accomodative model that grew from Lorna Wing's narrative reforms. Rather than break the iron fist, these hid it in a velvet glove. However far the pendulum was drawn away from exterminating autism (whether by murder or by finding a 'cure') towards a middle ground of making peace with it, it was never shifted so far as to take the critical camera off the autistic individual and focus it instead on the intrinsic violence of normalist culture. Sure, it became more expected of society to accommodate and support such people – but only in so far as it still *othered* them, objectified them as a *problem* in need of *special* support, rather than recognising them as expressions of natural human diversity in societies problematically hostile to that nature.

That much of this conversation has been shaped in the US can hardly be coincidence. Its construction bursts with American cultural tropes like an exploding star: success in adulthood as defined by independence in a harsh and competitive world (rather than interdependence in a supportive and caring one), rooted in grand civilisational myths of shining alone atop a barbarous pyramid of humankind, informed in turn by historical traumas from the War of Independence and Civil War as well as denial of a founding basis in slavery and genocide whose legacies have defined the national experience all the way through; a tendency to imagine the world through strict dualities of good versus evil, light versus dark, order versus chaos, us versus them; and of course, an extreme inheritance of violent hyper-masculism and authoritarian abuse of children. The modern conception of autism cannot be understood outside this context.

More broadly it cannot be emphasised enough how far this conception grew out of that ultimate historical expression of normalist values: the European traditions of eugenics and authoritarianism that led to the rise of the Nazis. What is notable is not merely that it shares the same basic values (of which present efforts towards pre-natal screening and genetic engineering to banish autism from the gene pool are a direct, obvious and bloodcurdling extension), but also that so many of the people who set it down in the first place had their souls burned up in Hitler's shadow. Hans Asperger's legacy is irrevocably tainted by his involvement with the Nazi project. Leo Kanner's immediate relatives were slaughtered when the Nazis overran Eastern Europe, annihilating the cultural and intellectual vibrancy of his old Ukrainian hometown along with almost all its Jewish population as he scrambled to rescue some two hundred colleagues from the fascist maws. Bruno Bettelheim, whose career of fraud and abuse did much to popularise the myth that autism was caused by bad parenting, had been brutalised in the Dachau and Buchenwald concentration camps. Even Ivar Løvaas of ABA child-torture fame had been reduced to frigid agrarian penury by the Nazi occupation of his Norway.

It is straightforward to cast these individuals as villains for the horrendous suffering that resulted from their work. But in a sense, they, too, were twisted or traumatised victims of a normalistic cultural tendency which, its goal of *normal* humans being impossible, devours other normalists as much as it does autistic people. At any rate, it does not do to make individuals lightning rods of responsibility for crimes committed by societies together. The greater picture is clear: **the modern conception of autism was built – could only have been built – in a world morally disembowelled by eugenics and Nazi atrocities.**

An additional concern is that this makes the modern conception of autism very much a colonial, white conception. It was articulated almost entirely in the US and Europe, and has since been disseminated through the rest of the world in channels carved out by centuries of globalisation under racist power structures. How for example might conceptions of autism grown entirely from, say, Chinese, Indian, African, Arabic or indigenous American traditions have contrasted with it? Each of these cultures is of course incalculably diverse, with their own equally proven records of abusive horror. But as white-supremacist violence has been one of the core shaping forces of the so-called modernity which now encompasses the world, any meaningful effort to re-frame autism could, and must, look for energy in liberationist tendencies within the cultures of populations which, after all, colossally outnumber those of the white powers.

In short, then: the way in which autism is defined and discussed today is not an expression of medical fact, but a value-loaded, culturally-defined and historically-constituted set of stories about humans, their relationships, and the world around them. These have been authored not by the people they describe, but by people who fear them as a problem, regarding them down a colonial nose through a **normalist gaze**. Writ large, their effect has been not to heal people, but to uphold an abusive power culture which responds to difference and dissent with dehumanising violence.

At the dawn of a new millennium this tendency has driven humankind to the brink of calamity. We can no longer afford stories and systems which support its power.

5. The Critical Reaction and its Limits

Velvet glove or not, it is the destiny of the iron fist to crack.

People described as autistic have connected and organised to the point that there now exists a robust counter-movement against normalist narratives of them. Taking advantage of the technological miracles brought into the world by the very dreams and innovations derided as their 'obsessive interests', most of all the internet, they mount an ongoing struggle to wrest back sovereignty over their own lives and stories and to frame them instead in positive and empowering terms.

My goal here is to go still further. We must rotate the camera, frame their very otherisation as *the problem*, and disempower those normalist structures altogether: that is, return *normal* to non-existence. But first it is apt to honour the critical reaction on whose decades of struggle and sacrifice this effort stands – and to consider, equally critically of course, its part in the story.

Before the construction of the modern concept of autism, there was no singular oppressive construction yard that needed reacting to. Normalist oppressions would have been situational, rooted and reacted against in specific historical and cultural settings, rather than a globally-integrated blob that draws its power from its performed claims to universal science.

The grand irony is that to the extent humankind has got good at such science, it is people it calls autistic who have done the most to get it there. Select someone at random from any roster of the great pioneers of human civilisation – not only the inventors and discoverers but the writers, artists, dreamers, philosophers and prophets – and there is a strong chance by now that someone has done a serious study on whether that individual was autistic. Certainly no-one can pretend that an Einstein or a Socrates, a Tesla or a Zhuang Zhou or a Beethoven or a Marie Curie, or even a Jesus or a Muhammad, were *normal*. If *normal* really existed, nothing would happen and nothing would change; there would be no *story* (let alone history); there would be little, indeed, besides nothing.

Such extraordinary individuals' life stories are often defined by their struggles against normalistic societies which feared them as *different*, at best misunderstanding them and at worst doing everything in their power to crush them. But the rise of the modern autism framework raised this challenge to a new level. The enemies of difference were no longer random politicians, judges, critics, scholars, armies and angry mobs each limited to a *specific* place and time, but a unified belief system, which has sought to transcend those specifics by appealing to the empirical building blocks of *general* reality. And as reality did not match it, it only insisted louder, doubled down, drank itself out on the adrenaline of its violence – and so did humanity implode, together, in its cascade of twentieth-century catastrophes.

It was not until late that century that critical geysers began to burst through the cracks these left in its hegemonic storytelling. Those that did, for the most part, did not overcome its oppression so much as *complicate* it. Lorna Wing's rewriting in the 1980s and 90s, as already discussed, appears as the first major example from within the psychiatric cockpit. By reframing the story's terms in an attempt to better support and accommodate its objectified autistic characters and imagine what they could offer society, it was remarkable for defying the conversation's ruthless eugenic inheritance. Yet structurally it still did little to dent the belief in *normal* and the othering of those who fell far from it.

By this stage, as we have seen, the medical profession's control of the autism narrative was slipping through its hands on account of parents' organisations and the growing engagements of arts and media. Autism grew from a narrow professional fixation into a mass cultural phenomenon, and a major landmark in this expansion, the 1988 American film ***Rain Man***, similarly complicated the picture. Its comedic and moving depiction of the autistic character Raymond Babbitt, heavily informed by the writers' encounters with the remarkable memory of Kim Peek, struck hard at autism in the public imagination by disrupting its Kanner-esque association with impairment in favour of this new stereotype of the hyper-gifted autistic "savant".

As with Wing's reforms this was a stunning interception of the fist of eugenicist doom-bigotry. It helped to widen the social scope to imagine autistic people as capable of existing outside mental institutions, or even as being likeable. But it still parsed their struggles through an atmosphere of individual tragedy rather than social accountability for oppression, and in the longer term its stereotype – that autistic people are *all* numerically super-intelligent but socially, emotionally and imaginatively impaired white male savants – has proved as reductionist and difficult to dislodge as what it in part replaced.

Essentialisms like these have created normalistic expectations of their own with real consequences for the many autistic people they strand out in the cold – say, those who are female, or black, or inclined to the arts or humanities. But their replication, and reinforcement, has become something of a tradition in the arts, especially as carried on by later prominent landmarks such as *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* (2003) and *The Big Bang Theory* (2007-19). The general notion to emerge, still popular today, has straggled a long way from the eugenicist spawning pool yet is still every bit as beholden to the broader oppressive structures of our day: that is, that autistic people *can* be successful in society, but only in so far as "success" is defined according to a normalist ideal of white, male, able-bodied middle-class science-and-technology achievement within a capitalist employment system.

Nonetheless, in the 1990s challenges with deeper reverberations were afoot. One of the most distinguished came from livestock consultant **Temple Grandin**, whose exchanges with a perhaps more receptive medical professional than most in this story, the neurologist Oliver Sacks, raised the standards considerably. The experience she presented was of autism as not a mental illness but a disability, by definition implying a social context. Autism in Grandin's story meant you were *different*, but not *less*; that you were to be understood through your unique and complex lived experiences, not reductionist labels; and that you had the ability to offer powerful perspectives and contributions that people who adhered to ideas of *normal* could not. In her case, these included a compassion for livestock animals in the notorious American meat industry and consequent improvements to the humaneness of their handling.

Though Grandin's story too did not break from the matrix of a privileged *normal* versus an otherised *different*, it still stood for a considerable shifting of terms. Narratives like hers refused to limit the conversation to within the autistic individual's body; rather they referred explicitly to the social context, and located the problems of autism within the *relationship* between the individual and that context. Autism could now be told as a story not of pathology, but of alienation – explicitly so, in Grandin's metaphor that became the title of Sacks's book *An Anthropologist on Mars*. Here at last was a narrative that took on board the actual feelings of normalism's victims, that is, made them its subjects rather than objects: the story of how living in a normalist world is literally to live in a world designed for a lifeform least like you.

Voices like Grandin's were momentous in another way. Here was an actual autistic person, breaking through decades of normalist gatekeeping to speak for her own story. The dominance of the normalist gaze was now under threat, and if one pivotal change enabled that challenge it was the rise of the **internet**. Its digital communication possibilities vastly enhanced the power of autistic people, among many other marginalised and dissident groups, to find and make contact with one another online without having to fumble through normalist social rituals; to feel, often for the first time, what it was like to have people who hear and accept you; and to join their voices into networks, then communities, then movements.

Now a new wave of organisations would appear, this time created by autistic people themselves. On their own terms now, not those of normalists purporting to speak for them, they would tell their own stories, build support, and advocate for social change. The first was **Autism Network International (ANI)**, founded in 1992, which has not only campaigned for practical improvements to autistic people's lives but significantly shifted the terms of the story. From its community emerged, among other challenges, the term **neurotypical** to describe non-autistic people. At last it was possible to imagine the camera turned around, with those in control of it made the objects of its gaze and, crucially, given a name themselves.

Online community spaces and organisations continued to emerge in the years that followed. *Wrong Planet*, founded in 2004, refracted through its very name the resonant *alienation* narrative described by Grandin and Sacks. *Aspies for Freedom*, created that same year, has fought those like Autism Speaks who portray autism as a disease, drawing instead on existing civil rights struggles to develop the autism rights movement. It was they who developed the annual Autism Pride Day in 2005, along with the rainbow infinity symbol, representing autistic people's diversity and potential, to challenge the normalist jigsaw piece. Meanwhile the *Autistic Self-Advocacy Network* (ASAN), created in 2006, has rigorously confronted stigmatising portrayals by the media and normalist interests while campaigning for the inclusion of autistic people in all decision-making that affects them.

These communities remained in the margins of the big picture, with limited penetration into normalist dominance of psychiatric practices or mass culture. Yet they represented the most sustained challenge so far, in so far as they pushed past the received terms of the autism conversation to critique the normalist values and power systems on which it was built. They sought to centre the voices of autistic people themselves, no longer as victims but as fulfilled and empowered role models in charge of their own complex stories. They furthered the shift away from the individualising view of autism as medical defect, towards a more critical consciousness of the social forces that actually cause autistic suffering – whether in the language of *disability*, or more radically still, of an emancipatory struggle against those social factors now identified as an oppressive *political* phenomenon, thus steering autism activism into the same current as the anti-racist, feminist, and queer civil rights struggles of recent decades.

If a single expression captures this moment's arrival it would probably be ***Don't Mourn For Us***, an article by **Jim Sinclair**, one of ANI's founders, published in its newsletter in 1993 then delivered as a speech to the International Conference on Autism later that year in Toronto. In it he tackled the grief of parents towards their autistic children with moving eloquence, never naming normalism directly but tracing its outline in some of the clearest terms yet (emphasis added):

> *...this grief does not stem from the child's autism in itself. It is grief over* ***the loss of the normal child the parents had hoped and expected to have****. Parents' attitudes and expectations...cause more stress and anguish than the practical complexities of life with an autistic person.*

And:

> *You try to relate as parent to child,* ***using your own understanding of normal children, your own feelings about parenthood, your own experiences and intuitions about relationships****. And the child doesn't respond in any way you can recognize as being part of that system. That does not mean the child is incapable of relating at all. It only means you're assuming a shared system, a shared understanding of signals and meanings, that the child in fact does not share.*

Messages like these prised open a space from the edges of autism discourse to build an alternative paradigm, one made of values in direct confrontation to those of normalism. And in the late 1990s, Australian sociology student Judy Singer came up with a name for it: ***neurodiversity***. This was not and has never been a singular movement, and diverging views exist within it. But fundamentally it frames autism, by that name or any other, as a legitimate variation in a humankind which is neurologically pluralistic by nature – and to which, by extension, *normal* is meaningless.

In other words: part of the conversation, however small at first, was at last about building this world for *real* human beings again, rather than rebuilding human beings for the impossible fantasy of *normal*.

Were human history a story of linear progress, it could be expected that the critical reaction would overwhelm the eugenic inheritance and deliver a world of neurological freedom. Instead, humankind in the twenty-first century has plunged into a mire of ignorance and barbarism as sordid as at any time in its history. This is the context in which the autism conversation has continued: the collapse of modernity, the broken promise of a future better than the past, amidst the authoritarian rampage and the crises of climate and ecology.

On the one hand, such an atmosphere has galvanised solidarity and critical thinking among a youth which has grown up watching their parents' generation rob their futures while mocking them as *snowflakes*, thereby demolishing any last illusions of adult maturity. Rather than wait for deliverance, young people have had to connect, confront and construct their own way out of this shattered modernity, supporting each other through its debris with oftentimes staggering resilience – all of which speaks in favour of them having it in them to develop the rigour of the neurodiverse reaction.[4]

On the other hand, the authoritarian frenzy is itself the revenge of a hegemonic normalism, locked in an existential fear that its long-established power structures are crumbling, and prepared to dispense with any truth, to perpetrate any depravity, to hold on to its dominance. Its power and will to inflict cruelties is as acute now as it was in the twentieth century – whether through deprivation of resources, neo-feudal employment practices, familial abuse, imprisonment, deportation, torture and murder by police and security forces, abusive medical practices, indeed anything it can get away with as it brings the rule of law down with it. Its assault on truth and efforts to control or poison the information environment, especially through its capture of social media and mass communication systems like the internet – not so emancipatory by nature after all, it turns out – has also provided space for a resurgence of eugenicist or otherwise dehumanising belief systems in the guise of authoritative fact; and these include those which have so devastated the autism discourse, from the anti-vaccination movement in the mould of Andrew Wakefield to Simon Baron-Cohen's reanimated gender-essentialist dogma.

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[4] Not coincidentally, perhaps the most recognisable archetype of this generation, the Swedish climate activist Greta Thunberg, is herself openly autistic and has in all but name characterised societies' business-as-usual approach to planetary collapse as an expression of their normalist traits.

These conflicting currents make the autism story's future uncertain. Its direction will be determined not by fate, nor by cosmic whim, but by the outcome of political struggle at a time when the very future of humankind is under the same contestation. The choice falls to each of us: a diverse world of love, or a normalist world of eternal horror?

In order to stand to this task, the accomplishments of the critical reaction thus far will not be enough. I would here like to humbly offer a few critical remarks on the effort's limitations. In this I can only begin with my own experiences of it, which are twofold.

First, for most of a life lost in normalist hell, I never caught so much as a whisker of these critical perspectives. So absolute was normalist control of my narrative environment that I was given no line of sight to alternatives to the view of autism as pathology, and of autistic people as objectified patients to be silenced and pressured to conform. This was in the first decade of the twenty-first century, by when the critical reaction had already taken off and names like Lorna Wing and Temple Grandin were well-known; indeed, even their examples were pressed on me in the service of normalist points of view, not critical ones. To overtly critical expressions like Sinclair's *Don't Mourn For Us* or autistic online communities I was offered no signposts, and it was only long afterwards, through my own active research in recent years, that I became aware of the depth and breadth of their challenge. If that was the case for me in middle-class London in the late 2000s, what must normalist hell remain like for millions of others growing up in more disempowered or disconnected surroundings to this day, especially in post-colonial societies whose traditional approaches were displaced by imported white psychiatry?

Second, my explorations of critical autistic spaces, when I was finally in a condition to attempt them, went poorly. I have no wish to condemn people who have suffered the same psychological damage and trauma as I have, that is, of living in a world whose norms and practices are designed to annihilate people like them. But it is precisely such lived experience, and the ability it might promote to empathise with others who share in its core miseries, that makes shocking the ferocious gatekeeping and hostility to diverse experiences that I found standard in the critical spaces I made contact with. Much like normalist spaces, these appeared to have created their own silos of collective identity in which, to be heard, much less accepted, it was necessary to share to the letter the exact same narratives as the dominant voices within – in these cases, an identity-centred embrace of **autistic essentialism** ("all autistic people are *x*") along with its associated vocabularies.

As outlined at the start, I have problems with the dominant terminology, even on the critical side, which stem from my experiences of how it was used against me. I reject *diagnosis*, which for me carries an oppressive baggage of medical power relations – a choice I recognise is rarely available for people stuck in societies where *diagnosis* brings resources that might be the only way to survive. I hesitate even to declare myself autistic except when directly relevant, because I do not want my entire story to be reduced to "my autism" or my ordeals parsed through its lens, rather than placed on the account of the atrocious social systems that gave rise to them. Yet merely in attempting to explain my experiences, I seemed to invite a hostility so reflexively apoplectic and traumatically hurtful in itself, and so close to the violence I had come to expect of normalist society, that it made further exploration of critical autistic spaces simply too dangerous a risk to my already-precarious mental health.

I do not believe these confrontations represent critical autistic movements as a whole. But more broadly I have found it difficult, even suffocating, to seek entry to a critical autism discourse of which so much seems to take a violent normalist world as a fixed fact of nature, while speaking of autistic people in reductive and essentialising terms – a picture which, to me at least, is prohibitively absurd. Similar accounts I have heard from autistic friends further suggest that in at least parts of the critical movement, that kind of gatekeeping and disposability politics represents a systemic problem.

This makes sense if the goal is to protect at any cost a sanctuary for specific individuals who have been brutalised in specific ways. But that cost is that many others hurt by the same oppressive forces are summarily defenestrated. This produces still more suffering and erasure; denies the diversity of neurodivergent people and the validity of each of their voices; and if nothing else makes for a lousy platform if the goal is a world that does not punish people for difference.

What it points to is a deeper structural problem for the critical reaction – a problem familiar to struggles against almost any form of oppression, as perhaps best-known in the feminist and queer movements. Autistic people, as much as, say, women or queer people, are as diverse a sub-set of a diverse humanity as any other. There is no autistic *essence*, any more than there is a singular female or queer *essence*. Indeed, what has necessitated their coming together as a movement is not any intrinsic feature they have in common which sets them apart from everyone else, but rather their shared experience of oppression. Given their diversity of interests and values, there is perhaps something inherently destabilising about having to mobilise as a single coherent movement – so long, that is, as the focus is on forging a unified identity.

For autistic people as much as for other groups, such a unification is hardly desirable and at any rate impossible. Indeed its pursuit can only generate further pain and exclusion, while dividing the movement to the advantage of normalist exploitation. The damage done by the aforementioned gatekeeping and disposability dynamics, by autistic stereotypes, and by arbitrary divisions such as between "high-functioning" and "low-functioning" autism attest to this, and it is dangerous for the critical community to entertain them.

None of this is to disparage the courage and real achievements of the critical movement in the slightest. Thus far it has been so concerned, understandably, with relieving the day-to-day sufferings of autistic people – of merely making life in a world like this *possible* – that it must struggle for the energy to build these efforts into a sustained, coherent and popular challenge to normalism as a distinct oppressive culture. Nonetheless, so long as this is not done, the effect is to keep the camera firmly fixed on autism as *the problem*, trapping all autistic people in its otherising gaze. Any accommodation between normalist and autistic worlds remains one-way: autistic people are the ones expected to conform to normalist social structures, which in return do as little as they can get away with to accommodate them – for it is not in normalism's nature to accommodate, only to flatten all it sees into submission. Ultimately it will enter no compromise in good faith, no adaptation will satisfy it, and no settlement will ever diminish its appetite for blood. Its everyday practices will not only continue to devour generation after generation of neurodivergent people in perpetuity, they will never cease to threaten repeated civilisational collapse and ecological catastrophe on a scale that is already existential and swells with every passing century.

No: that culture must be confronted fundamentally, and for that, it must be named and identified. The conceptual and linguistic developments of the critical reaction have done a great deal of that work already, yet have still not quite crossed the pivotal threshold. It has, for example, felt out the shape of normalist oppression even without explicitly naming it – for example in Jim Sinclair's *Don't Mourn For Us*, or Laura Tisoncik's satirical 'Institute for the Study of the

Neurologically Typical' in 1998 which invited its viewers to imagine normalistic people being subjected to the exact same patronising pseudo-medical analysis as they have inflicted on autistic people for decades. *Neurotypical* is the most popular term by which it *has* tried to name it, but this still implies a normalist frame of reference which it stops short of defining: What is *typical*? *Divergent* from what? The term still concedes to those who believe in and value *normal* the notion that they are somehow a default cosmic-factory-setting model of human being, rather than partakers in an arbitrary culture of toxic values and practices that arose from historical processes.

This is why the present text, which owes an obvious debt to all the struggles that gave rise to those advances, attempts to build on their template – only now with the camera turned squarely around once and for all. *Normalism* for all intents and purposes identifies the same people and ideas as *neurotypical*, only with that crucial change in framing: that like aut*ism* till this point, they, the neurotypicals, should be the ones named and problematised with an *-ism*, indicating a defined system of values and practices. *-ism* versus *-ism*: the narrative contest at last becomes symmetrical.

That shall be the focus of the remainder of this treatment: to set out what normalism is, the mechanisms through which it manifests as a problem, and the need to systematically overturn it so that never again shall this world suffer another abuse or atrocity in the name of an imaginary thing called *normal*.

C) Normalism

If normal is being selfish, being dishonest, killing, having guns, and waging war, I do not want any of it.

Kathy Lissner, 'Insider's Point of View' in *High-Functioning Individuals with Autism* (1992)

6. Dismantling the Normalist Gaze

Autism diagnostic criteria tell us very little about autistic people. On the contrary they say a great deal about the normalist values of which they are an expression, just as every photograph expresses the gaze of its most important subject who is likewise missing from the shot: the photographer.

For an approach to normalism one can surely do worse than rake through those checklists, reverse-engineering their criteria to pick out the nuts and bolts of the normalist worldview. Each of the discussion points that follows is a pillar in either or both of two of the most popular autism diagnostic frameworks: the American Psychiatric Association's DSM-5, and the Autism Spectrum Quotient (AQ) of Simon Baron-Cohen's Autism Research Centre at the University of Cambridge. Although notorious for their unreliability and want for scientific rigour, both remain primary points of reference in both professional and popular autism storytelling.

This trawl will be necessarily non-exhaustive, given that autism is diagnosed not according to a positive list of symptoms but a normative amalgamation of tropes and themes which, as we have seen, have shifted under political and cultural pressures throughout its history. Yet between them they cover most of the principal stereotypes of autistic people, of which virtually every proposition can be categorised into one of four: *social problems*, *inflexibility*, *rigid interests*, and *lack of imagination*. To stare back into this gaze, rather than follow it, is to lay bare its subjectivity, its arbitrariness, and its ultimate interest not in truth but in power.

i) 'Abnormal' and 'Inappropriate'

The lowest-resolution diagnostic lens identifies its target's existence as in general *abnormal*, with the unspoken assumption that such a term is a) meaningful and b) problematic. The DSM-5 for example speaks of ‘*abnormal* social approach’ and ‘failure of *normal* back-and-forth conversation’, ‘*abnormalities* in eye contact and body language’, and interests ‘*abnormal* in intensity or focus’.

The implicit value judgement seems to be that it is healthy, desirable or good to be *normal*, and unhealthy, undesirable or bad to be *abnormal*. Yet nowhere is *normal* objectively defined. In reality it is of course subjective: different cultures have different norms on, say, relationships, eye contact and conversation styles, and even within each culture attitudes to such norms vary across a full spectrum from compliance to condemnation.

The only possible objective proposition to be found here is thus that one should conform to *whatever the dominant norms around you might be*. This is a political judgement rather than a medical one – and in supporting the privileged over the marginalised, the collaborator over the dissident, is obviously malignant in a world where dominant norms are so often allied with abusive power structures.

This belief tends to wear the thicker guise of a different name: *appropriate*. *Appropriate* is the same as *normal* only with a pretence to class respectability mixed in, and like *normal* it has no substantive meaning, rather is defined entirely in its context of social and cultural power. Thus it exhibits the same problem: the definition is assumed rather than specified, landing it by default in the hands of dominant social forces.

This is clear when one considers its most common examples. Who decides, for example, what speech, clothing, interests or communicative styles are *appropriate* for a child, or for an adult? For a woman, or for a man? For a worker, or for a boss? The answer is rarely the individual child or adult, woman or man, employee or employer, each of whom might expect punishment if those around them perceive them to violate those unspoken codes. But by participating in them, each individual adds weight to the policing of that same invisible monolith of *appropriateness* – say, by shaming a child for speaking in an argumentative style seen as proper to adults, or for expressing concern for ‘adult’ topics like human rights and dignity; or conversely, by character-assassinating an adult for interests seen as ‘childish’ such as plushy animals or video games; or by denying work to a man who refuses to wear a suit and tie, or to a woman who does not speak in a deferential register. By calling these things either *appropriate* or *inappropriate*, an extra wall of unaccountable power is created between standards of behaviour and the processes by which they are defined and scrutinised.

In reality there is of course no singular natural way to be a child or an adult, or a man or a woman, or an employer or employee, nor indeed are these simple binaries with solid lines to separate them. Rather they are *culturally chosen* models of human beings whose function is to divide and reduce complex individuals into imaginary simple categories, typically in order to serve a subject-object power relationship by drawing an unbreachable border between subject and object.

In the normalist gaze, the adult-child division is particularly crucial. It can be no coincidence that autism was viewed as specifically a problem of childhood development for such a length of the normalist gaze's history, as we have seen; nor that even autistic adults are frequently treated like (the imagined model of) children, whether by being patronised with infantilising speech, having intrusive decisions made about them without their consent, or getting assessed for autism in diagnostic "tests" through use of child-associated toys.

Unlike the power spectra of gender, race and class, where natural equals have experienced a violent, systemic and inter-generational robbery of power, children typically enter this world inexperienced and physically defenceless. This leaves them vulnerable outright to the adults around them, the least equipped among all othered groups to protect themselves against abuses. This power difference usually forms the core of their conceived relationships with adults, especially their parents, with their associated norms of duties and obligations. But because of humans' problem with power, those norms are often authoritarian, indeed dehumanising: for example, the collective beliefs that children owe adults unquestioning obedience, or that adults have the right to assault, disown, or even murder the children they chose to give birth to. The child is construed as *less than human*, an objectified homunculus who exists only to be shaped to adults' whims and expectations. Its opinions are rendered unimportant, its voice ignored, its expressions of pain no more than *bad behaviour* to be corrected by any necessary means. And to cement this two-tier system, the child is taught to speak, walk and dress in ways that signal childhood inferiority, lest it come to appear like the human it actually is – that is, an equal of the adult, or at least a person whose will, whose voice, whose pain is real – and thereby, in impelling adults to empathise, threaten the subject-object division and thus the authoritarian hold on power.

It is the remorseless narrative might of this dynamic that has given the normalist gaze such hard control over the autism conversation. By arranging it such that parents and professionals occupy the "adult" role and neurodivergent people the "child" role, the weight of the adult-child power relationship is brought to bear even on autistic adults, who it reduces to "children", disempowers, and duly kicks out of the cockpits of their own stories. That they are adults in biological terms is not significant in the normalist gaze. What matters is that in not complying to its *model* of adulthood, they trouble that imagined child-adult division, and thus must be firmly infantilised, that is, inferiorised into the role of the eternal child, in order that their challenges to the conversation structure never be heard on equal terms.

From these dynamics the two general layers of normalist thinking are laid bare. There is the higher level of principle, which, to the extent it exists, consists in **the value judgement that *people should be normal***. But meaningless as that is, and so typically defined by dominant power structures, such a principle can most often only be a disguise for a baser level of vested interest: that is, **a desire for power over others**.

None of this is to suggest that there cannot, or should not, be any standards at all. A common set of road traffic rules or food safety regulations helps people to not get killed. Uniforms for firefighters or bus conductors can enable them to carry out their work more safely and effectively. But in all cases where norms and standards are to society's benefit, they can be arrived at (or, indeed, revoked) through consensual and deliberative processes that specify, make explicit, and regularly scrutinise the reasons for them – reasons, that is, which exist independent of any idea of *normal* or *appropriate* such that the latter need never enter the discussion in the first place. The danger is that as soon as they do, they become an agenda of value judgements in their own right, with no necessary correlation to what is beneficial or harmful to society. Rather they embody conformity, submission and fakery as ends in themselves; their amorphous nature lends them to dominant power interests; and any frame of reference that might hold them accountable to the public good finds nothing to which to latch its tethers.

ii) 'Inflexible' Rules, Routines and Rituals

The 'inflexibility' stereotype is one of the normalist gaze's many paradoxes. The gaze calls autistic people insensitive or indifferent to rules (like the norms just considered), but at the same time insists they are fixated on rules. The DSM-5 for example describes an 'insistence on sameness, inflexible adherence to routines, or ritualized patterns' of behaviour, such as 'extreme distress at small changes, difficulties with transitions, rigid thinking patterns, greeting rituals, need to take same route or eat same food every day'. Likewise the AQ scores people as more autistic if they 'prefer to do things the same way over and over again', are 'upset if their daily routine is disturbed', or do not 'enjoy doing things spontaneously'.

So autistic people are unable or unwilling to care about rules, but at the same time care so much about rules that they cannot stand it if those rules are broken?

The contradiction is simple to resolve. For these criteria omit the most important piece of information: *whose* rules?

Factoring that in, the normative agenda is obvious. Normalist society values that people follow *its* rules, but finds it a problem when they follow rules not its own – rules they create for themselves most of all. Once again the question is one of power.

In fact normalism governs entire swathes of people's lives through systems of rules and rituals that are as rigidly and neurotically upheld as they are historically arbitrary. This is true from the level of moment-to-moment trivialities – greetings, dress codes, table manners, fonts and formats – through organised social rituals such as weddings and funerals, to the grand rule systems of, say, nation, religion, academia, or gender. And while autistic people might express distress when their own rules are broken, they do not, on the whole, do what normalist societies do 'the same way over and over again' to people they see as breaking theirs: that is, dehumanisation, exclusion, assault, imprisonment, torture, murder, war, genocide and crimes against humanity.

Autistic people live every moment of their lives at the sharp end of this essential hypocrisy. They see through to the irrationalities or hidden agendas of the normalist rules and rituals around them, but are expected to bend themselves to participate in those performances without question, no matter what violence it deals to their bodies or souls. Yet at the same time, every little rule or ritual of their own, no matter what comfort it brings them or how innocuous it might be to others, is rounded upon as a defect to be fixed, a threat to be crushed, a silliness to be reprimanded, or a symptom to be cured.

The problem is not, then, that autistic people are rigid and inflexible while non-autistic people are not. It is that normalist power gets to decide which rigidities are allowed, indeed required, and which are forbidden.

The trivial day-to-day normalist rigidities might seem exactly that – trivial. In fact, each is its own theatre of power in which people, particularly children, are routinely violated when they refuse to dance in step.

The normalist obsession with eye contact, for example, has nothing to do with politeness or effective communication. It is about exercising control over other people's faces. Its purpose is to keep you constantly plugged in to the sensory apparatus of fear: that is, to take in intimidating stares, especially authoritarian adult ones, which measure you moment by moment for submission to normalist expectations – for every moment in which you look away is a moment in which you liberate one of your senses from them.

The same is true of another common normalist rigidity: forcing people to smile in photographs. As well as further eroding your sovereignty over your own face, this enforces a) a performance that you are satisfied in an abusive world, compelling you to suppress any drive to express your pain; and b) a performative mindset in general, for a way of life in which you hide your true feelings and constantly wear fake faces to signal submission to abusive power.

A third obsession, typically solemnified as 'table manners' and especially common where class pretences are at play, is really about enforcing submissive behaviour when meals are shared. This is a core locus of togetherness in many households and thus, in an abusive society, one where power relations are most formally defined and asserted.

And this is to say nothing of normalist rigidities in greetings rituals, such as the expectation that *How are you*? receives the answer *I'm fine*, even if you are not – or to give a more extreme example, the hyper-formulaic Japanese greeting system, with its rigid rulesets of gender and hierarchy – with any deviation from such scripts likely to result in shunning or censure. Through the daily accumulation of countless such hostile little rigidities, normalism captures our sovereignty over our own faces, bodies and voices and twists them to serve an unaccountable power structure which cares nothing for real people.

Moving up the scale, one of the crucibles of normalist rigidity is the disciplinary model of education, which at times seems entirely built around the punishment of deviation. Schools punish for conformity not only to rigid learning styles but rigid dress codes (ties, skirt lengths, top buttons and so on), rigid hairstyles, rigid writing styles, and rigid styles of sitting, walking and speech, even in cases where those standards blatantly discriminate against, say, women, queer people, ethnic minorities, regional dialects or disabled people. The pattern continues in higher academia, which, especially in the social sciences, typically maintains an epistemological tyranny (i.e. acceptance of only narrowly-defined forms of knowledge, expressed in narrowly-prescribed ways) in the disguise of scientific rigour, accompanied by fixations on, say, obsessive adherence to hard word counts and deadlines, or the writing of references in exactly the prescribed styles.

Little of this has anything to do with any ethical or functional good in the standards at issue (which, in their times and places, might be well-founded for specified concrete purposes) or the promotion of self-discipline in itself. For rather than being justified in such terms, it is more common to find them imposed down the barrel of an authoritarian moustache, offering no further grounds than that you will be punished for interpreting them with the slightest flexibility. No: they are there in order to hammer not only curious youth but the entire hallowed mission of the pursuit of truth into deference to the cutthroat power agendas that rampage behind so many schools' and universities' dignifying facades. The result? The academic establishment's record of bloody service to power agendas like eugenics, misogyny and market fundamentalism, butchering the truth and countless millions of lives with it.

At the top end of the scale are the sweeping rule structures of large-scale institutions, belief systems, and identity blocs, few of which can exactly be called 'flexible'. In this age of resurgent authoritarian tribalism these need little pointing out. When a population explodes in spluttering rage at, say, someone getting on their knee at its national anthem, adding a plaque to give historical context to a statue, or speaking about human sexuality in frank and informed terms, why is this 'extreme distress at small changes' not taken as medically significant? Why, unlike the distress of autistic people, is the irrational distress of religious extremists at anything that deviates from their rigid and bloodthirsty worldviews entertained seriously, even given high political representation, rather than dismissed as a *tantrum*? Is the worldwide authoritarian resurgence not itself one great *normalistic meltdown*, a collective bawl of hysterical violence, a fusillade of toys from the pram, against a world it fears is slipping from so many of its arbitrary and rigid rules, routines and rituals?

Masses of people, of course, would object to the idea that normalist rigidities are *problems*, on the grounds that they do important good to people's lives – giving them, say, predictability, comfort and shared belonging. They might well. But so do the so-called rigid behaviours of autistic people, and the point here is not one of whose rigidities are right or wrong, but that these do not receive the same standard of measurement. While autistic rigidities get problematised, trivialised and attacked regardless of how harmless they might be to others, normalist rigidities get dignified, justified in high moral terms, and violently imposed regardless of how much hurt they might cause – to the point that they become engines of coercive power in their own right with a neverending thirst for victims.

Only one conclusion is possible. Those with power get to be as rigid as they like, and by defining it as *normal*, no longer count it as *rigid*. However, rules and rituals created by individuals to protect their own freedom, health or well-being, especially to protect themselves from abusive power, are trivialised as *rigid* and pathologised. There is no objective standard to separate the two; the only difference is in whose power commands the defining gaze.

If we are to give one last outstanding case in point, it is surely the language of *law and order* that has become totemic to authoritarian normalisms in many countries. This of course values actual law and order only in so far as it benefits dominant social and political interests, but has no hesitation to throw those rules in a shredder when abusing marginalised groups – political dissidents, ethnic minorities, women as concerns their safety or reproductive sovereignty – without any cognitive discomfort as to how this compromises the peace they claim to be upholding.

Law, and order, rules, routines and rituals; the normalist swears by these when they serve his or her power, but in reviling and punishing them when they protect people from it, lays bare the moral void beneath that claim. We must therefore count **hypocrisy** among the core values of normalism.

iii) 'Repetitive' and 'Restricted' Interests

The normalist gaze views autistic people as liable to fixate on narrow and idiosyncratic interests, most stereotypically trains (a feature referred to under high eyebrows as *monotropism*).

The DSM-5 gives as a core diagnostic criterion 'restricted, repetitive patterns of behavior, interests, or activities', such as a preoccupation with 'unusual' objects, or (one senses a real grasping for the folds of the empiricist cloak here) 'excessively circumscribed' or 'perseverative' interests. On this the AQ goes further still and scores people as more autistic not merely for a fixation on things, but on *quantitative* things ('I usually notice car number plates'; 'I am fascinated by dates/numbers'; 'remembering phone numbers'), while considering interest in qualitative arts or humanities as actually *less* autistic (e.g. 'I would rather go to the theater than a museum'; 'I don't particularly enjoy reading fiction'). In so doing it develops the trope of obsessive interests into another stereotype: the autistic person as a hyper-gifted genius at numerical or systemic tasks but with no social, creative or artistic imagination to speak of.

What is at work here is the same hypocrisy as concerns 'rigid' rules and routines. Normalist society is packed to the rafters with repetitive and restricted interests which, on account of having been privileged as *normal*, are not considered such. In a typical cross-section these might include celebrity culture, alcoholic beverages, certain types of music, films and sports, and of course the neverending performance of normalist gender and relationship expectations, along with gossip about friends' or relatives' conformity or lack thereof. But these privileged interests vary between places and times, so what they happen to be in any one context is not the core concern. What is important is that in the case of interests so privileged, even the most extreme devotion to them is not only spared scrutiny as *obsessive*, *restricted* or *repetitive*, but indeed is actively expected from people as a condition for social inclusion.

It goes further. Quite often, it seems such normalist fixations are not only restricted and repetitive, but are constituted in such a way as to sterilise all genuine substance that might have been present in them. They are indulged in not for comfort, nor for pleasure, nor for improvement, but as a performance of all-trivialising vacuousness as though their sole purpose is to signal to a conjectural normalist hivemind that the person in question is pursuing the correct interests, runs no risk of venturing into critical thought, and thus need not be suspected, called strange or ostracised.

It is further common to find this privileging of interests calibrated to separate normalist categories of human beings. In my own experience, my interest in politics as a child was problematised in a way it would not be for most adults, while my interest in video games as an adult has been regarded with suspicion in a different way to how it was when I was a child (because under normalism, children are at a certain level supposed to enjoy suspicious things so that adults can enjoy the power trip of punishing them). Similar holds true for how girls and boys are expected to have different interests, or of the interests expected of different classes or nationalities. Naturally the interests themselves have no such natural alignments; in a healthy world any human being is free to pursue whatever interests she or he wants so long as it does not inflict harm upon others.

In other words: *restricted*, *repetitive* or *obsessive* interests are defined in a way that has nothing to do with the intensity of the interest in question. If the interest is normatively privileged, no obsession is too intense to lose acceptance. But if the interest (or the interested person) has been normatively othered, then no hint of its pursuit will escape the tar-stained brush of *obsession* and *fixation*.

Of course, as normalist interests change over time, what's called an autistic obsession on one day can become perfectly accepted the next, or vice versa. The ultimate proof of this subjectivity is what we might call ***normalist appropriation***.

Normalist appropriation can be seen as a sub-form of *cultural appropriation*: that is, when a dominant culture adopts elements of cultures it has oppressed, then enjoys or profits from them in ways that erase the violence of their history or cheapen the meaning they carried for their originators. This is most visibly a dynamic of colonial racism, but a similar process appears at work in the way that generations of innovations by autistic people pursuing their 'restricted' and 'repetitive' interests', often at the margins of societies that limited and ridiculed them for doing so, have then been co-opted by the normalist mainstream.

The entire scientific revolution was driven by people often famous for their neurological 'eccentricity', yet its methods were captured to build the normalist gaze and to problematise neurological diversity on a scale never before seen in human history, as well as to legitimise the blood-drenched normalist crusades of race and gender. Science fiction, radio and communications technology, and space travel were all 'obsessive interests' pushed open by the creative dreams and inventions of autistic people in a time that such imagination could get them socially punished, but whose growth in power has since got them embraced and celebrated by normalist culture at best, transformed into the very weapons and symbols of their normalist abuses at worst.

The ultimate example is no less than the defining power shift of the present day: the revolution in digital technology. The internet, artificial intelligence, automation and social media all began as the 'obsessive interests' of neurodivergent people attempting to improve a world from which they found themselves estranged or to build communities of like-minded aliens, coalescing in particular into that oft-cited fortress of supposed autistic sanctuary, Silicon Valley in California. Yet in the meteoric growth of their power they have become the foremost tools of the populists, tribalists, hate-speakers, big-data barons, genocides, conspiracy theorists, election-robbers and constitutional ransackers of our period's revived and vengeful ultra-normalism.

On the matter of 'restricted' and 'repetitive' interests then, what we see of normalism is not merely its hypocrisy, but its **colonial** nature. Having identified people it views as different as inferior and problematic, it finds no qualms in plundering the fruits of their interests while denying their creative agency, reimagining those fruits as its own, and deploying them to further aggrandise its power.

iv) 'Lack of Creative Imagination'

The *quantitative* characterisation of autistic interests – or their association with 'STEM', that is, science, technology, engineering and mathematics – needs a further word, if only because it has grown into a stubborn trope in its own right under such cultural pressures as the AQ's insistence on it and the long sequence of artistic portrayals that started with *Rain Man*.

In the first instance the stereotype is simply untrue, or rather arbitrary. Speaking as an autistic individual with a natural inclination for history and the humanities and whose mathematical mind is mediocre at best, I must stand as a living refutation of it but am far from the only person to do so. This stands to reason, given that autistic people are as diverse as any other set of people. There is no objective basis to scrawl such a line down their middle and claim that only those on the quantitative side of it count as genuinely autistic.

Rather it is worth inquiring into the political history to work out what is really going on here. The STEM association appears only to have emerged in the 1990s and 2000s – the same period in which, following Lorna Wing's narrative reforms, autism started shifting in public perception from a curse worse than death to a condition that just possibly contained redeeming features. In the context of modern capitalism, 'redeeming features' was and is defined in terms of a person's ability to mechanically generate wealth for capital-holders. In the midst of the digital and big data revolution, and still more the rise of the authoritarians with their disdain for the arts and humanities (because these nurture critical thinking, express creative dissent, and build resistance to nationalist-fairytale history), this has meant autistic capacity for STEM subjects is valued, while autistic capacity for the arts and humanities is not.

It is hard to resist the conclusion that the normalist thought process is as follows: if we have to accommodate and support autistic people, then let it be only in so far as their ‘restricted’ and ‘repetitive’ interests a) contribute to our economic power and b) don’t promote the critical thinking that might challenge our narrative control, whether over the autism story or the story of society in general.

The latter would account for why autistic people who gravitate to the arts and humanities have been so persistently excluded from autism diagnoses, and thus from material support. It is entirely in the normalist interest to maintain the stereotype that autistic people have no social or creative imagination. As those who do are a threat to it, it serves its purposes to make them invisible and leave them to deplete their energy in struggling to survive.

The nature of this threat might be clear when we look at what imagination actually means. It is common to imagine *imagination* as the opposite of *reality*, but this is not the actual reality we live in. Much of human reality is imagined. Indeed, if there is one thing that distinguishes humans from other animals, it is surely that humans alone imagine up the stuff on which they go on to base their lives and social interactions. So much of what they take for reality – including money, law, nations, companies, calendar systems, gender and relationship rules, even names and language themselves – are imaginary concepts which in the first instance exist nowhere but in people’s heads. They are *made* reality when people together behave *as though* they are real.

The irony, of course, is that so many people take these as fixed and absolute truths, and panic with such violence at any hint of questioning or perceived disrespect. While this is most easily observed in the cases of emotive power systems like nationalism and religion, it also includes their attempts to the scientific method, which for all their staggering accomplishments through it, are so often compromised by the subjectivity of the humans trying to use it: the arbitrariness and limits of their senses, the instability of their languages, and their baggages of values, biases, prejudices, instincts, interests, traumas and cultural experiences.

Thus, especially when it comes to humans’ scientific study of themselves, the effect is less to build an understanding of their reality (or realit*ies*), and more often to create an imaginary model of reality that does not match the actual one as each of those subjectivities, properly part of the true reality, is instead left unremarked in the invisible picture-frame of assumptions. As its forgers’ social power becomes invested in getting people to believe in the counterfeit version, it becomes presented as a One True Reality that must explicitly erase and destroy those people whose realities do not fit it. Only like that, by extinguishing all alternative stories and perspectives, can a vision of reality so blatantly removed from actual reality stand unchallenged. That is how it has gone with race and gender pseudoscience, so too with orthodox economics, and so too with normalism and its assault on neurological diversity.

Stranded in such a hostile reality, the people it so others as cosmic errors cannot survive with material support alone. How many autistic people have had to turn to *other realities* to meet their needs as human beings, whether for belonging, acceptance, loving friendship, a deeper connection to the universe, or simply to ground themselves on something, anything, that is not part of the existential absurdity of a normalist world gone mad?

Needless to say, the creative imagination they must rely on to access these *other realities* is immense – and potentially devastating to those normalist pretences to a One True Reality defined on its own terms.

The real issue here then is not one of who has imagination and who does not. It is that normalism's dominance relies on the narrative monopoly of its own imagined realities, each of which it asserts in the guise of a One True Reality while reacting violently against every hint of an alternative. It fears the threat posed to its illusion by non-conforming imaginations, and so dismisses them by 'diagnosing' them as non-existent – not because it does not believe they exist, but because it trembles at the fact that they do.

That is why it snares autistic people in a double trap: casting them as both a) inept at navigating 'reality' and b) lacking in 'imagination'. In pathologising them out of legitimate contributions on both counts, it claims sole authority to define both – and in so doing, the world is turned upside down in its service. What is fraudulent becomes real, while what is real becomes a defect in the universe; and real imagination is cast out, so that mainstream society's independent imaginative range can be safely restricted to the width of a toothpick.

v) Social and Emotional 'Deficits'

The most familiar aspect of the normalist gaze is surely its view of autistic people as *socially* defective: that is, incapable of legitimate emotional connection, communication and relationships. This after all is the aspect for which the name *autism* was coined to begin with: from the Greek *autos* for 'self', as though to imply one has unacceptably turned one's back on the outer world of other people to selfishly indulge in one's inner world (despite having "no imagination").

It is the perfect otherisation. By invalidating a person's social self, you effectively strip away their voice, their agency, and thus their very humanity.

The DSM-5's diagnostic criteria for autism open in the very first line with 'Persistent deficits in social communication and social interaction'. Within this it specifies further 'deficits': in 'social-emotional reciprocity', 'back-and-forth conversation', 'sharing of interests, emotions or affect', in the ability to 'initiate or respond to social interactions', 'nonverbal communicative behaviors', 'eye contact', 'body language', 'understanding and use of gestures', 'facial expressions', 'developing, maintaining and understanding relationships', 'making friends' or 'interest in peers', and in 'adjusting behavior to suit various social contexts'. Likewise more than half of the AQ's fifty propositions directly concern social interaction, with a person scored as more autistic if they 'prefer to do things…on (their) own', do not 'find social situations easy', do not 'enjoy social chitchat', 'find it hard to make new friends', do not 'enjoy social occasions', or do not 'find it easy to "read between the lines" when someone is talking to (them)'.

All this paints a crude picture of autistic people as simply and incorrigibly asocial. If this were a matter of evidence-based science, then the stereotype would have been torpedoed in a single shot by the emergence of the critical reaction, with its large numbers of autistic people seeking each other out, enjoying each other's company, and coordinating their efforts as an organised social movement. But because it is a question not of truth but of power, autism remains characterised as an individual defect in social skills.

So it is once more that these criteria tell us a great deal more about the normalist observer than the target of his or her gaze. Most immediately, they ignore two realities which should be obvious from the enormous hole left by their absence:

a) the *reasons* a person might exhibit seemingly anti-social traits – which even if accurately observed, could be the result of any number of diverse and complex experiences, values, emotions, preferences, instincts, strategies or traumas;
b) the *cultural and historical context* through which *all* norms of social interaction are defined – often arbitrarily, and in ways that differ across cultures.

Why, for example, might I prefer to do things 'on my own'? Might that preference change depending on what it is I am doing, or with whom I have the option of doing it? What exactly is 'chitchat' in the wider scheme of conversational types? What, for that matter, counts as a 'social situation' or 'social occasion'? These terms often seem to carry white urban middle-class associations with parties or business meetings, but taken objectively must equally include a group walk in the mountains, or community farming, or a popular protest, or *Dungeons & Dragons*, or a multiplayer session of *Mario Kart* or *World of Warcraft*. 'Suitable behaviour for various social contexts' thus begs the question: suitable *for whom and what*? Or put another way, *who decides* what is suitable?

The total lack of interest of the diagnostic approach for questions like these might suggest that its authors were not intelligent enough to grasp their importance, but this is difficult to believe. More likely, they fear that to inquire into them would endanger the power interests they have designed their approach to protect.

'Social interactions', 'social-emotional reciprocity' and 'back-and-forth conversation' do not take place in a vacuum. Whether in the meanings of facial expressions and hand gestures, or of linguistic styles and registers, or in expectations that favour some conversation topics while making others taboo, the norms that govern language (including body language) and social interaction vary colossally from culture to culture. Furthermore, as each culture contains diverse voices both compliant and critical, these norms are not monolithic but shift back and forth in the course of complex, ongoing historical struggles that might be thousands of years old.

To give examples: in most of the white-supremacist societies nodding your head is taken to mean 'yes', and shaking it to mean 'no'. But in some parts of Eastern Europe the reverse is true, while in other societies, say in India or Japan, a much more nuanced interpretation of head-movement signals might be required. Plenty of ink has been spilled over the differing meanings of hand gestures in different societies (information especially valued by travellers, for whom a signal of greeting or affection in one land might deliver grave offence in another); and over the world's diverse greeting rituals, especially in so far as they involve the often sensitive matter of strangers touching each other. The COVID-19 pandemic has given the present-day observer the chance to see this fluidity in action, as fears of virus transmission have suppressed long-held customs of hugs and handshakes while popularising safer greetings like the "elbow bump" instead.

And that is to say nothing of the more complex sets of rules, whether understandable or reprehensible, that different societies have drawn up over gender- and class-based communication norms, hierarchies of respect, or etiquette in more niche social settings from the temple and the barracks to the golf course and the online forum.

In short: nothing *just is*, because everything came from somewhere and is going somewhere (as for where, it knows not). To assert that a norm is *common sense* is to carry out a violent erasure of those people to whom it is not common.

It takes spectacular ignorance, or worse, to believe or still more assume that there is a universal standard by which to measure the catalogue of social behaviours listed in the DSM-5 and AQ. If the normalist gaze's taking of it for granted is not a deliberate act of social cleansing, then it at the very least betrays a monumental (and indeed, *colonial*) arrogance in assuming that the culture of those looking through it – that is to say, the white, English-speaking, patriarchally-gendered, urban middle-class consumerist culture – is the *only*, the *best*, or the *default* model of how human beings relate to each other.

In practice prevailing normalist standards of social interaction are problematic, and on closer inspection paint a picture of social health which, to remain polite, we can only call dubious. For example, 'chitchat' in the AQ is a likely reference to *small talk* – that is, conversation that is light, formulaic, and devoid of matters of substance. While a degree of such filler can be helpful for people to socially calibrate themselves to each other, normalist conversation seems to revel in *small talk* for its own sake, policing for adherence to its scripts, clichés and platitudes while vigorously excluding or trivialising any meaningful content that seeps into the exchange. Yet the AQ suggests that one should *enjoy* it in its own right – that is, that *not* enjoying it warrants the othering of your neurotype – and this serves a definite political function: to suppress engagements of real care into one another's lives, as well as any meaningful engagement in the affairs of the world, thereby maintaining an atomised and compliantly unthinking population.

When a person persists in talking about matters of substance, they might be accused of *overthinking* or *oversharing*. *Over-* is a value judgement: who decides the 'correct' amount to think, or to share? The answer is the normalist who holds power over the terms of conversation, and of course their measure is perfectly asymmetric. Anything the neurologically othered person says runs the risk of accusation that he or she is thinking or sharing *too much* for the convenience of the normalist counterpart (it would be oxymoronic to say the normalist listener).

But, conversely, it is *not* seen as oversharing when the normalist bombards the autistic person with the endless trivias, formulas and nothings of normalist small talk, or the self-indulgent details of how the speaker and his or her relatives are conforming to normalist expectations, or sensationalist gossip about how those who are not are weird or suspicious. And if the person called autistic shows a hint of boredom or distress, this is placed not at the door of the normalist for *oversharing*, but at that of the autistic person for (pathologically) being *rude*, *interrupting*, *not listening*, or *lacking empathy* – all things, of course, which the normalist is free to regularly carry out with not the slightest fear of judgement.

The same is evident in the normalist preference for overwhelming sensory environments, such as the blaring of loud music in public spaces and the chaos of crowds (but only managed crowds, i.e. in commuter trains and shopping malls, but not, say, human rights demonstrations). Rather than problematising autistic people for feeling overwhelmed in such settings, we might question the normalist overwhelmers as to why they wish to create environments that make it so difficult to relax, think clearly, or hear one another's voices – an interest shared by capital-owners who in requiring you to shout to be heard, also make you thirstier so you pay for more drinks.

More broadly, social interactions are regulated within large-scale normative frameworks for which every family member, acquaintance and stranger becomes the police. Each of these likewise emerges from historical processes and differs between and within cultures but is taken by the normalist gaze as absolute. This includes everything from conceptual binaries like 'work' versus 'play' or 'life', 'weekdays' versus 'weekends', 'formal' versus 'casual' – much of which smells of the relatively recent history of industrial capitalism – but nowhere is it more apparent than in how societies punish relationships into conformity with gender and sexuality norms. These aspects of normalism are enormous and warrant separate treatment in due course.

If there is one word that stands out in these social narratives, it is **empathy**. Classically the caricature is that autistic people simply lack the emotional imagination to connect with others or feel what they are feeling. The stereotype's persistence seems to owe much to its service as the bedrock of Simon Baron-Cohen's model of autism as the 'extreme male brain', based on an essentialist (i.e. normalist) division of all human brains into 'systematising' male brains and 'empathising' female brains. But the blatancy of this reductionism's massacre of the truth has complicated the discussion over time, such that these days it is common to hear the opposite stated: that autistic people have *too much* empathy and get overwhelmed by it. The important thing is to notice how all these attempted analyses begin and end with their gaze on the autistic individual, rather than on the person or society that sits in judgement.

If we turn the camera around, we can identify the problem's roots in normalist hypocrisy. The core of it is that there are two distinct definitions of empathy at work. There is the standard definition, that is, *to put oneself in another person's emotional shoes*, and at this a given autistic person might be as able or willing as anyone else because autistic people are as diverse as everyone else. But empathy under the normalist gaze, while claiming to this definition, actually means something quite different: the ability or will *to conform to normalist emotional performances*.[5]

This can be easily understood by looking to the supreme irony in this matter: that empathy, properly defined, cannot possibly be identified as a cultural value in the dominant societies of today. Where, let us ask the normalist world, is its empathy in the yawning chasms of its political and class divides? Where is its empathy for the refugees created by its wars and oppressions, who in its hatred, its bile unparalleled outside the darkest descents in human memory, it hurls into prisons, rips from their families or casts to the bottom of the sea? Where is its empathy for the people made homeless by its landlords, brutalised by its police, raped by those corrupted in service of a toxic model of manhood, sacrificed to COVID-19 by its politicians, or dealt atrocities as cruel as those to be found in any chapter of its genocidal history? In this so-called modernity you could identify any group of people in distress, and as sure as fire is hot, you will find mainstream populations rising up not to empathise with their suffering but to other them into insignificant vermin. By extension, we find such cultures splashing the same hatred upon anyone who makes the case that, say, refugees, homeless people or victims of police violence should be supported and cared for on the grounds that they are human beings – anyone, in other words, who advocates *empathy*.

The paradox, then, is of a culture that demands empathy of autistic people from atop an empathetic high horse with one fork of its tongue, while skewering empathy as misguided, pathetic and treasonous with the other. The simplest explanation is plain hypocrisy for political ends. Empathy is valued when it means

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[5] The hyper-normalist culture of Japan captures this best of all in its concept of “reading the air” (空気を読む). In practice it is most commonly used to shame anyone who violates prescribed behavioural scripts, or simply expresses a contrary opinion in social settings, as “unable to read the air” – that is, for inability or unwillingness to participate in dominant norms of emotional performance.

relating to *dominant* patterns of thought, feeling and behaviour. But it is seen as undesirable, even threatening, when it means relating to *marginalised* thinking, feeling and behaviours, because that would run the risk of feeling that those expressing them do in fact count as human beings, as 'us' rather than 'them', and thus empower social efforts to accommodate them.

If there is more to it than this, it can only be that the pressure of that hypocrisy has torn empathy into two separate concepts. Of the original meaning, of emotional connection to the suffering of others, it keeps the empty frame but dispenses with the substance. How you actually feel doesn't matter – normalist society has no use for your feelings. What matters is that you identify the scripts and codes and carry them out without question; your commitment, that is, to the rituals of pretence. That, then, is what empathy means on the normalist tongue: the performance of conformity to emotional scripts.

This explains, for instance, why an autistic person who genuinely feels and attempts to express empathy is so easily 'diagnosed' as incapable of it. It could be because normalist society, finding that that expression does not jump through normalist hoops, itself lacks the empathy to *interpret* it accurately; or it does interpret it accurately but simply does not care, given that it is not really empathy that matters but performing the prescribed emotions in the prescribed moments and settings. Most importantly, it explains why with all the attention that is heaped upon autistic people's empathy or lack thereof, no corresponding attention, let alone obligation, is placed upon people in general to show empathy for anyone other than themselves.

In the normalist endgame, empathy looks suspiciously like a world in which everyone suppresses their emotions of pain, fear and boredom to perform happy satisfaction with – or worse, *gratitude* for – its vacuous or violent habits, and outrage for when these are inconvenienced, but can expect no such emotional support for their miseries or approval for their fulfilments in turn. This again is not accidental. Its function is to dehumanise anyone who does not conform to normalist standards by casting their emotions as illegitimate. Their fear does not count as fear, their pain does not count as pain, and their happiness, on those rare occasions they prise kernels of it from the sterile normalist earth, does not count as happiness. All of it is to be misinterpreted, and therefore ignored or punished, till they either submit to dance the normalist dance or die from the sheer distress of this empathetic wasteland.

And lest the professional classes behind the likes of the DSM-5 and AQ imagine themselves scientists who stand aloof from the violence of these value-driven power games, well, theirs is the most special irony of all. It is the irony of building *empathy* into a medical diagnosis: a concept which roots itself in a hyper-empiricism that is itself shamelessly and self-consciously anti-empathetic. Its pride is in quantifiable statistics, in hard data and modelling, in rigid and systemic methodology – a blank-faced paradigm which, so famously, looks on emotion with undisguised contempt. That might be for neither better nor worse when prodding molecules around or analysing mechanical systems, but when applied without humility to the study of that most extremely emotional phenomenon that is the human being, its anchor slips free of truth and, as we have seen, embeds itself instead in the interests of power. Thus is the scientific method reduced in their hands to rituals of language and clothing arranged only to satisfy those who hold the purse-strings or the keys to the laboratory. Conversely, their rejection of any evidence from subjective lived experience, non-quantifiable aspects of human relationships, and above all the voices of those they purports to study, is precisely what has brought their attempts to understand their own species to such disaster – attempts which, need we remind ourselves yet again because that's how horrific they were and are, have included the scientific establishment's former belief that race exists as a biological concept, with all the hells that mistake went on to spawn. This – *this!* – is the mindset which, while so proudly and explicitly reducing empathy to insignificance, expects us to take it as qualified to judge the empathy of people it does not understand.

Is it any wonder, we might ask at the end of all that, if beneath the violence, hypocrisy, shallowness, callousness, fakery and sheer downright absurdity of normalist social environments, anyone unable or unwilling to live their life that way turns inward to protect themselves, and thus shows up in diagnostic terms as not forthcoming in 'social-emotional reciprocity' or 'developing relationships' or 'adjusting behavior to suit various social contexts'? Is it rational to locate the problem within them if, surrounded by people who delight in relentlessly finding fault in them, they 'prefer to do things…on (their) own', or do not enjoy 'chitchat' or 'social occasions'? Rationality itself is laid waste to by these terms.

To summarise, then: why does the normalist gaze frame autistic people as socially defective? Because to do so is to silence all attempts to communicate that do not conform to its own communication rules; all expressions of emotion that do not match what it dictates people *should* feel and *should* express; all forms of relating that offer alternatives to its prescribed relationship structures. By reducing all of these to *symptoms* in a social and medical power relationship, it ensures that non-conforming voices, feelings and relationships are invalidated as voices, feelings and relationships altogether.

With such people's social agency thereby erased, the way is made clear to relentlessly colonise them with normalist content instead. What more then can be said of this normalism, other than that it relies on extraordinary **violence** to people, to their stories, and to truth itself?

vi) The Normalist Gaze is a Gendered Gaze

Aside from these outstanding tropes, it must also be observed that the normalist gaze drips from every seam with the value judgements of gender.

One cannot run through the history of the normalist framing of autism without getting soaked through with the splashes of rigid beliefs about male and female difference, and their consequences, that course implicit through its currents. From Kanner and Asperger to the present there has been a preoccupation with autism as a problem in boys and men, with considerably less interest shown to it in girls and women. There is the 'refrigerator mother' trope, by which mothers were blamed for their autistic children as a means of shaming them for not conforming to the misogynistic expectations on women's personalities and lifestyles in the post-WWII United States. And in the present there is most of all the popular Simon Baron-Cohen 'extreme male brain' narrative of autism, rooted in an explicitly gendered belief system about a binary difference between male and female brains.

All of these come down to one of the most entrenched and destructive value systems of our time, indeed of much of recorded human history. Gender norms and their operation have varied immensely over times and places, but those which dominate today imagine that all human beings can be divided into one of two types – men and women; and that certain characteristics, called *masculine*, are *normal* for all men, while others, called *feminine*, are *normal* for all women. It is a picture whose extreme distance from reality – indeed, mockery of reality – can be known not just by observing actual men, actual women or actual non-binary people, all of whom are complex and diverse beyond compartmentalisation; nor even from the ways that the meanings of masculine and feminine differ and change across histories and contexts; but most of all, by recoiling at the sheer brutal enormity of the violence societies have had to devote to uphold this illusion, by punishing, routinely with monstrous cruelty, every hint of realness which contradicts it.

Gender normalism is established so deep and insidious in this world's social structures that it now dominates, or at least affects, all aspects of life. From grand cosmological schemes – ordering principles, creation myths, gods and their personalities – to the utterances and fleeting tics of small children, everything is parsed in terms of this imagined absolute binary between masculine and feminine matter or energy. This is not the place to lay bare its full battery of implications for human life (and in particular, for human misery), but certain habits of the normalist gaze can only be understood within its context.

The most visible violence of gender normalism has been its arrangement of *masculine* and *feminine* into a power hierarchy with the former above the latter. Over centuries, even millennia, society has been structured along its lines to reward and promote power in men and to punish it in women – in effect going so far, as captured pivotally by Simone de Beauvoir in *The Second Sex* (1949), to define man as the default model of human being and otherise woman as an inferior derivative. By corrupting the entire human enterprise into a pointless and indeed pathetic power contest between two gendered blocs, it deals catastrophic damage to every individual who does not play their part in this narrative, male or female or otherwise, but also to every society laid low by its corrosive behaviours and thus to humankind as a whole.

Needless to say, the character of this normalist power-fantasy-made-real has dumped the greater bulk of its violence upon women, who as we have seen are among those hit hardest by the normalist construction of autism. The mechanisms of this are complex and overlapping, but could include: the traditional patriarchal bias of the scientific establishment in general, and of its study of human beings in particular; the normalist expectations of female passivity and submissive functions in the life of society, such that (usually traumatised) autistic expression in girls is seen as less of a problem for society than in boys whom it expects to grow up to act, lead, and assert themselves in public life; and the comparatively relentless policing of the gender-performance of girls and women in every aspect of their lives, by which in order to survive they often find they have to internalise normalist violence by *masking* or *camouflaging* their behaviours that surrounding normalist gazes might deem 'inappropriate', thus performing normalist facial expressions, vocal scripts and so on through an enormous commitment of conscious energy that is utterly exhausting and necessarily futile.

The net result is that the normalist gaze often deems that non-conforming women do not meet the criteria for an autism diagnosis. They thus fail to qualify for the resources and support made reliant on it, and are left to struggle for material survival, to develop devastating mental health problems in which they hate and blame themselves rather than societies made unnavigable to them by design, and ultimately, to die in misery – which, after all, is exactly gender-normalism's goal: to uphold its illusions about people by disposing of real people who do not fit them.

Even if recognised as autistic, women then face the same problem as everyone othered by the normalist gaze as it attempts integrate them into gendered social narratives and behaviours. Perhaps the most high-profile of all of these are the rigid expectations around identity, sexuality and relationships that are themselves extensions of the imagined division of the human race into binary blocs. In the world's dominant societies it is held as *normal* to be a masculine man or a feminine woman; you are punished for failing to perform as such, or for not being male or female at all (such as nonbinary people, or in medical interventions on intersex children), or for being seen to cross or challenge the dividing line (from whence perhaps the frenzied hostility towards trans people). It is considered *normal* in those societies that men and women be sexually attracted to each other, and punishable to be attracted to people of your own gender; *normal* that they pursue each other through courtship practices such as flirting and dating, with rituals and scripts based on differentiated masculine and feminine power assumptions; and that, once in position, *normal* sexuality consists in the insertion of a penis into a vagina, in that subject-verb-object order, to the exclusion of everything else in the vast variety of natural sexual exchanges and behaviours that are othered under terms such as *fetish*, *kink* and *paraphilia*. It is further held as *normal* that close sexual and emotional relationships be monogamous, that is, strictly between two people, with a fierce hierarchical line drawn to elevate such relationships above 'just' friendship, and culminating in the institution of marriage and nuclear model of the family – although here as in all things it is the performance that matters, as the underlying masculine norms more quietly expect that men secretly seek out multiple sexual partners as a signal of masculine swagger and impunity.

The point here is not that these practices are evil, even as we objectively watch them overflow with corpses, tears and poison. What is important here is that they are not universal defaults but products of specific cultures and historical processes. Different cultures with different histories suggest alternatives, from family or community involvement in arranging relationships and raising children, to various forms of polyamory, polygamy or more open concepts of friendship. There is nothing universal even about binary gender, with more complex and nuanced systems, often including multiple genders, prominent in (often colonially-suppressed) heritages across the world. Any given system or practice offers advantages for some people and atrocities for others, because the plain fact of human diversity means different people are suited to different ways of identifying and relating.

The problem occurs when a society – any society – expects every person in it to live under a one-size-fits-all set of gendered arrangements, *whatever those might be* (a violence from which the feminist, queer and autistic critical reactions are not exempt). Such is the typical experience for autistic people under the normalist gaze, with normalist societies, including psychiatric professionals, seeing it as their job to teach autistic people the 'social skills' to partake in the performance of, say, dating or building a monogamous nuclear-family life. This makes the assumption that the problem is in autistic people's *lack of understanding* of these practices. It does not consider what was certainly the case, for example, in my own story: that against my own intuitive cosmology of sexuality and relationships, these practices were and are *normatively abhorrent*, and that to adapt to a life in their chains would have been many times worse than death. It is surely not ambitious to presume the same holds true for a huge number of people, autistic or otherwise, who are likewise repelled by the purposeless violence, conflict, jealousy, fakery and constant unremitting judgementalism of a gender-normalism with which societies' obsessions have devastated all that is good in what it means to be human – and which even now is spoken of under a concept to which it is totally inimical: *love*.

What can we observe about normalism's service to the violent gendering of the world, other than perhaps the most damning of all possible conditions: that **normalism is incompatible with love**? To love, to genuinely care – and this includes any truthful notion of *friendship* – requires that we see and hear people for who they are, respect their authorship of their own stories and sovereignty over their own bodies, and view them as valuable, meaningful ends in themselves, rather than as objects or instruments to shape toward a supposedly higher vision. This is not possible if we value imaginary standards of *normal*, and thereby interact with people based upon how close or far they fall from its measure. No norms do more than the norms of gender to objectify, inferiorise and ultimately dehumanise real people, to shut off our empathy to their voices and sufferings, even to the point – and this, for any who have experienced it, is as heartbreaking as things come – where your supposed friends or family attempt to break you into those norms through horrendous and sustained abuse, whether physical or psychological, social or economic, all while insisting, and genuinely convinced, that they are doing it for your own good.

If our claims to value empathy are sincere, then, we can only recognise it as preposterous that we live in societies where imaginary notions of how men or women *should* be have been allowed to take precedence over seeing and hearing one another for the people we actually are. As long as that remains the case, as long as gendered ideas of *normal* continue to exist, the presence of humans cannot possibly be to this world's improvement.

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Taking all these facets of the normalist gaze together, what we find is a cluster of cultural and political values which it disguises by vesting them in the language of medical authority. Its every criterion for assessing autistic people – whether explicitly as in 'rigid' behaviour patterns, 'restricted' and 'repetitive' interests, social 'deficits' and lack of 'imagination', or implicitly in its gendered assumptions – can be reverse-engineered to lay bare a range of normalist core values.

If authentically held, these values are toxic by nature, If not, then they are ready cover for the ulterior pursuit of power.

The broader danger of the normalist gaze, beyond its immediate violence, is that it is in effect not merely *unscientific* but *anti-scientific*. By relying upon the masquerade of subjective biases as objective facts, and bending or ignoring facts at its pleasure to serve those biases, it corrodes the very notion that reliable facts exist. The normalist perspective on autism is an inherently political exercise which, finding its interests inconvenienced by critical voices, can only sustain itself on the authoritarian arrogance to erase them – an authoritarian arrogance which, once it usurps the humility and plurality of voices required for the scientific method to function, causes it to lose its integrity. Not only people but truth itself (‘ontology’) and the means to know it (‘epistemology’) are hijacked by that authoritarian impulse, such that truth becomes conceived of as dictated down a one-way power gradient with no alternatives permissible and all deviance to be marginalised or punished.

If those are to be the terms, then what is left for the human quest to understand and better its place in the universe?

7. Diagnosing Normalism?

To summarise, normalism appears to be **a system of beliefs and practices** grounded in two basic principles:

a) The belief in *normal*

Normalism holds that *normal* meaningfully exists in human society – whether in general (the *normal* human being); differentially (e.g. *normal* men and women, *normal* adults and children); or in various aspects of human life (e.g. *normal* behaviours, *normal* relationships).

b) The valuing of *normal*

Normalism expects that people *should* be normal, and finds it a problem if they are not.

Normal does not meaningfully exist in human society. As a strictly statistical concept, it might be imagined to mean "like most people" – that is, the *average* – or alternatively, as an ideal, reaching for the upper extreme on an imagined scale of quality. Yet these are abstract notions. When applied to real human conditions, complex and diverse, they become completely context-reliant and even then must shift with every birth, death, arrival, departure or change in opinion or behaviour.

Thus *normal* could potentially connote anything at all, and in the grand scheme of things connotes nothing. Real humans are so varied, so composite, so subjective, so immeasurable in so many of the most important aspects of their lives, that the notion that they all can or should conform to a single statistical standard, *as a value in itself independent of all other values*, can only be hollow of meaning.

On top of that, if it ever did have meaning, present-day modes of human life must be as far from it as it is possible to be. There is so extremely little about the ways of life of most people today – and certainly those of most people participating in the autism conversation – that could be called *normal* even in the raw statistical sense of *average* when measured against that of the majority of people in all human history. The industrial, scientific, and digital revolutions have utterly transformed this world with things unprecedented, indeed unimaginable, until the most recent decades and centuries – from nine-to-five work routines to diets full of processed food; from formalised and centrally-administered mass education systems, to primary identification with imagined political units whose overwhelming majority of other members you will never meet in your life. That is to say nothing of the human part in driving planetary ecological collapse, or of weapons with the capacity to burn all humankind off the face of the earth. And it is only since the present generation, one generation at the end of thousands and thousands, a mere sliver of human collective experience, that we have grown up under the most extreme technological restructurings of our interactions with each other: an age of instant digital communication with people anywhere in the world (remembering what a fetish *communication* is to normalist measures), and immediate access to enormous quantities of information – far more than any human brain has ever had to process.

Nothing in our long evolution has prepared us for these conditions. What is the notion of a *normal* life in such a world? Surely not merely meaningless, but preposterous.

To claim to value *normal* is thus to mean one of two things. Either the belief is that *normal* is to be valued *in any context, no matter how it is defined* – the problem with which is obvious given the abusiveness, physical and structural, explicit or disguised, of many if not most social contexts on Earth. Or, it is hypocritical: that is, one does not really believe in *normal* in and of itself, but exploits the power of others' devotion to it to promote those *normals* that privilege one's own interests or preferred stories while punishing people at odds with them.

The normalist mindset's violence is thus intrinsic and immediate. To believe *normal* exists is to believe, by definition, that *not normal* also exists; to value *normal*, by definition, is to place it above *not normal* in a moral hierarchy. Real people, who are not and cannot be *normal*, are defined as inferior, defective, and in need of the violent application of power to either coerce them to be what they are not, or dispose of them.

Normalism depends on this process of othering because it *is* this process. You cannot assert a *should* without implying a *should not*; you cannot be superior without defining an inferior *other* to be superior *to*. Because normal does not exist, human beings are that *other* by default.

There is no delay, then, between first believing in and valuing *normal*, and second in asserting one's power to override the wills and feelings of real people, who are *not normal*, to turn them into *normal* people. But because this is impossible, because they can never conform to the satisfaction of principles with no meaningful substance, that violence becomes perpetual: a neverending framework of subjugation and punishment, with its targets crystallised into reductive other-groups, captured by stories that are not their own – like, say, *autism*.

One might argue that *any* value system creates a moral hierarchy which, even if sound in principle, invites such violent potential. This is true – this world's societies have demonstrated it well – but when a value is clearly-defined, that is, *meaningful*, we can at least conceive that arguments can be transparently held, and methods of accountability put in place, to implement those standards in a way that improves rather than hinders the human good; or, if they are found only to hinder it, then to alter or do away with them. The difference with *normal* is that it is not meaningful – that is, holds no independent content, only context-dependent content which is at best too arbitrary, fluid and reductive for real people to live up to. If a locus of normative power is created around something so hollow, so impossible to define or to justify, then it can only end up aiding established systems of dominant power which thrive on arbitrary mystique, on the dissembling of truth, on pandering to prejudices, and on the unaccountable imposition of punitive rules.

The abuses this framework has dealt to people it has othered throughout its history, especially to children, should serve up more than enough atrocious physical evidence for those unsated by the philosophical. Add to that the circular logic of the normalist gaze, and no doubt can remain that the belief and practice systems of normalism are systems of violence, hypocrisy, ignorance, arrogance and spectacular cruelty which, so long as they exist, are a straitjacket on the human potential for informed and critical thought, and a barrier to any prospect of developing a world that befits a love-capable species.

If normalism is so destructively irrational, where did it come from?

It might be tempting to call it a tragedy of human nature. This however is not only a failure to take responsibility, it is also factually deficient. Even if normalist mentalities can be found as accessories to power in disparate settings going back millennia, those are distinct from the wide-ranging normalist machine of modernity, whose glaring irony is that we find it socially intuitive to value *normal* today, in the unprecedented diversity-sharing life of a globalised world, even in spite of all our centuries of accumulated knowledge and – one would have hoped – wisdom.

This is the result not of human nature but of specific and recent historical processes. Professor Lennard J. Davis, writing in the 1990s, identified the word *normal* in this sense as only emerging in English around the year 1840, having as its root a carpenter's measuring square, called a 'norm'. He attributes its transformation to the rise of modern statistics in this period, closely allied to another fateful movement whose relevance will already be clear: eugenics. Many leading proponents of one also stood in the other, in particular the pioneer of the relentless statistical assessment of people's bodies and lives, Adolphe Quetelet in Brussels. It was Quetelet, inventor of the Body Mass Index (BMI), who advanced the notion of *l'homme moyen* or the *average man* as a normative standard, not incidentally supporting the rising notion of the *middle class* and the idealisation of a particular kind of body best suited for factory work in an industrialising Europe. Like the carpenter's square, *normal* became an immanent yardstick, wielded by new forms of scientific authority, for the systematic measuring and conforming of all aspects of people's lives – their bodies, their minds, their behaviours. Deviation from *normal* became seen not as natural diversity, but as mathematical error. We know where the eugenicists ultimately drove this logic.

The one thing of which a fish knows nothing is water. Everyone presently alive has lived their entire lives in the world of these processes' making: the industrial capitalist rearrangement of society; the development of statistical science; Charles Darwin's revolutionary discoveries on the evolution of species; and the confluence of these in the hands of eugenicists working in the interests of a European colonial power-agenda, by which the very notion of history was re-cast as a story of ruthless progress from inferior to superior bodies and minds. This was the world which gave *normal* meaning in power, and whose power still traps us in the belief that *normal* has meaning.

What are the autism diagnostic frameworks we have looked at, then, but further carpenters' tools abused in this lineage to measure and conform human beings? In identifying certain behaviours or preferences as problematically *other*, they are really privileging their implied or stated opposites as *normal*. The entire exercise only makes sense as a function of this history.

The terms in which we have discussed normalism here would seem to set it up as a binary counterpart to autism: normalist/autistic as akin to man/woman, white/black, straight/gay and so on. But of course, none of these are the simple natural categories they are so often taken for. Rather, attempts to so group people, who in reality are complex and diverse, are themselves the invented designs of power cultures whose goal is to control people.

'White' or 'black' describes not just the colour of your skin, but your position in a historically-constituted power structure based on ideologies of race. 'Man' and 'woman' are not merely statements about your genitals, but carry a load of imaginary assumptions about what kind of people men or women should be, i.e. of masculinity and femininity. And of course, to call someone 'straight' or 'gay' is to make a statement not merely that they are sexually attracted to particular types of people, but that that attraction is so static and all-significant that it is meaningful, indeed possible, to reduce huge numbers of complex, diverse and fluid people into one defining category or the other.

As far as that, normalism/autism would seem to fit this pattern. Having covered the historical construction of *autism* as a category, we can surmise that in societies designed for real human beings instead of imaginary and reductive models of them, people would not encounter problems based on what we in this world call their autistic traits, so the word *autism* would need no more exist than, say, a word for fish that cannot swim in lava. It exists because normalist society has sought to define itself by othering those it sees as dangerous to its power. Correspondingly, this piece of writing exists precisely because it seeks to change the situation where a word for *normalism* has not been deemed necessary till now – similar to how masculinity, whiteness, and straightness, imagined by their champions to be the default condition of the human being, have so benefited from those positions' anonymity.

Yet there is a difference. Categories of race, gender, sexuality and so on tell you little to nothing about the life of a given individual within them. Assumptions might be made, based upon what we know of the structures of power and oppression involved, but these are *general*, not specific to all individuals, so such assumptions can be no more than that: assumptions. If you know an individual is, say, female or male, black or white, or straight or gay, you still in fact know virtually nothing about them. The same is true of autistic people. It is *not* true of normalistic people, whose condition is defined at root by its values and practices in relation to other people – values and practices, that is, which are intrinsically violent, and for which there is no imaginable form of human social organisation in which they would not be so.

Is it accurate to call them *normalistic people*? Or might it be fairer to call them *people with normalism*, in recognition of hopes that they might recover? In the spirit of turning the camera around, it is tempting to return normalism's favour by putting forward a reversed diagnostic framework much like that which it has for so long inflicted on autistic people. This might be straightforward enough to do given the basic subjectivity of the DSM-5 criteria, or in the case of the AQ checklist, by simply reversing the scoring system. What we would find ourselves with is as much a narrative account of normalism as it has produced for autism, which might be amusing, even liberating, and certainly instructive.

But might it also hinder our understanding of normalism as a structural phenomenon instead of an individual pathology, and our exploration of ways to undermine it as a systemic cultural force?

The question might seem a luxury in a world whose power imbalance does not yet enable it, but in terms of vision it has serious ethical implications. In many jurisdictions mental illness is held as a mitigating factor in criminal responsibility. Can a parent, teacher or therapist who abuses children in an effort to make them conform be considered less responsible if such a pathological normalist mindset is the only thing their cultural background has equipped them to know – if they are not even conscious of it? Certainly the *problem* cannot be solved by just punishing that individual and being done with it; their environment must be altered so it ceases to produce people who behave so. But what, then, of the responsibility of normalists who imprison people for crossing imaginary lines on maps, or who beat their spouses, or who would exclude you from your education or your livelihood merely because they dislike your hair or clothes? What of the responsibility of those ultimate normalists, the eugenicists, for the hundreds of millions of devastated lives and the present traumatised world that was the cost of their normalist symptoms?

To identify normalism as a *thing* is necessary, that much is clear. It must be named, charted, challenged, and disempowered. But this is just one of the difficult and ultimately value-driven questions that will arise during the process, and as power begins to shift, the struggle against normalism must take extra care not to fall under the illusion of normalism's own core arrogance: that everything and anything it does is automatically right. Humans have problems with power, and their failure to reckon with these have tended to make even their best-intended social transformations excruciatingly painful. In the struggle against normalism – which is to be fought *because it hurts people*, because it operates to punish and invalidate love – it is the responsibility of all people, fighting it on all fronts, to not become the very thing they are fighting.

No-one with meaningful claims to sanity can look at today's world of normalism's making and state, with the faintest hint of sincerity, that this is a world worthy of humankind's best potential, let alone a successful world, a healthy world, or a world that is just generally decent to live in.

Its nightmares of race, class and gender; its abuses, divisions, persecutions, bigotries, genocides and manifold atrocities up to and including the crises of civilisations in the present moment, are underlain by normalism's enablement of the arrogance of power, of hostility to the dissident and the different, and of the collapse of the very concept of truth as our lives are saturated with lies. The global sustainability crisis, the crises of the fragile British and American democratic experiments, the crises of authoritarianism in emerging powers like China, India and Brazil: all of these are crises of normalist culture. What incalculable number of unique, creative and beautiful souls, all with lives to live and stories to make, have instead been smashed and chopped to an agonising demise upon our normalistic altars? What cost to us all, the breaking of all their collective will and energy to improve this world? When you consider its magnitude, does it seem unreasonable to suppose that humanity would have so grown as to defeat most diseases, eradicate poverty, communicate with other animals and perhaps even soar amid the stars by now if not for the normalists' neurocide against all they see as different?

Years of staring into the abyss of cruelty heaved open by humankind's normalist obsessions has taken its toll on my relationship with my own supposed species. But more and more, it has also affirmed what I realised about its collective insanity when that first attempt at an autism diagnosis was brandished at me, all those years ago. What happened to me wasn't just about me after all. It was about pathological behaviour patterns in the human race at large which have spilt so much blood, snapped so much bone, drawn so many tears and hurled in accumulation such a massive pile of bodies that it is a wonder the sheer weight of them has yet to crack the very Earth asunder.

None of it would have been possible had populations been at peace with the first fact, the most obvious fact, the most necessary fact of human life: that *every human being is different.*

It would be beyond my present position to offer a detailed step-by-step programme for deconstructing normalist power. It is a force that must be identified and challenged in all aspects of life, all those institutions and settings designed to produce and cater to those who conform for its own sake, and to exclude and punish those considered different: in education especially, but also families and parenthood, healthcare, science, business, the media, the arts, and of course, religion and politics, as well as in societies' underlying narrative ecosystems of stories and mythologies. For this, each and every one of us must take responsibility for challenging all normalism, in all its forms, wherever we encounter it.

To that end, I would like to finish with one last exercise in the spirit of turning the camera around. To break the chains of normalism requires most of all that we can imagine a world without it, and to hold that imagination as legitimate. So let us do just that. Let us cross through the mirror to an alternate Earth in which normalism never assumed power, and consider how, say, a Wikipedia in that world, or its equivalent, might look upon the problem.

D) Through the Mirror

How might normalistic people be viewed in an alternate universe, in which they never seized the power to reshape society in their own image?

Normalism, also known as **Normalist Spectrum Disorder** or **Araka's Syndrome** after the Ainu professor who first described it (University of Sakhalin, Ainu Republic, 1944), is a spectrum of social development disorders that affect an individual's social interaction, communication, interests and behaviour.

Normalist spectrum disorders can affect people of any age, gender or geographic origin. Their causes have yet to be conclusively determined, but research suggests that risk factors are predominantly socio-cultural. There is no single cure, but the effects can be managed with the help of well-structured social support and medical intervention. The normative and political dimensions of normalism's impact on sufferers have led to controversies.

Signs and Symptoms

Normalism can be diagnosed from a pattern of symptoms that express in a) problems in interaction and communication with other people and in the learning of social skills, and b) restricted or obsessive behaviours and interests.

The most common symptom is a **belief in normal**. People with normalism suffer from a compulsion to divide all human beings they encounter into stereotypical groups based on arbitrary factors such as skin colour, gender or age. They are further prone to arranging these groups into imaginary hierarchies, typically with the group they themselves identify in at the top; and to inventing random but uncompromisingly rigid rules and power relations for these groups, which they consider *normal* and expect all people to follow.

This usually interacts with another symptom: an instinctive **judgementalism** and **fear of difference**. In social interactions, people with normalism can become overwhelmingly preoccupied with assessing whether other people fit these unrealistic rules and assumptions, and be extremely fast to take offence or become agitated if they appear not to. This can happen even before any interaction takes place, such as when a person's size, skin colour, clothing or other aspect of superficial appearance differs from the person with normalism's assumptions. People with normalism are often extremely sensitive to these perceived deviations in others and might become hostile to them, angrily refuse any further contact with them, or even cease to acknowledge their existence. This is reflected in the *normalistic stare*, a common trope in media portrayals where a person with normalism seems to suddenly lose touch with the content of a conversation they are involved in, at any unpredictable moment, and instead stares coldly into the other person's eyes as if accusing them of some unspecified offence. Frequently they will then turn aloof and disengage, often with passive-aggressive remarks, because of some perceived failure of their counterpart to fit their imaginary rules.

These symptoms can result in serious communication difficulties, because this impulse of people with normalism to judge, condemn and look down on others for every perceivable non-conformity overwhelms their ability to listen. It can also produce obvious discomfort in those they are confronting. In more severe cases, especially when people with normalism decide the groups at the bottom of their imagined hierarchies deserve particular hatred, they might become suddenly violent towards conversation partners or engage in antisocial behaviours such as ethnic cleansing, genocide, or crimes against humanity.

Lack of empathy is a hallmark symptom of normalist spectrum disorders. Researchers have been struck by the apparent complete inability of many people with normalism to understand the thoughts or emotions of healthy human beings, who do not share their beliefs in rigid categories of people abiding by fixed differentiated rules of existence. For the person with normalism, it is as though someone who does not fit their notions of normality, even by so trivial a deviation as writing in a different font or wearing a different type of shoes, immediately ceases to qualify as a sane and rational human being and falls outside all possible understanding, thus making any further effort to that end futile.

Further difficulties in social interaction for people with normalism are caused by their **idiosyncratic speech and expression**, which are only occasionally exaggerated in their portrayals in mainstream media. People with normalism tend to have trouble saying what they mean. Instead of speaking clearly, they develop entire "languages" of their own that consist of cryptic signals, suggestions and misdirections. There is no necessary logic to these: they can mean whatever the person with normalism wants them to mean, and these meanings can be changed on a whim mid-conversation to suit the speaker's intent to condemn the listener for not fitting normalistic rules and assumptions. Nor do people with normalism express their emotions clearly, instead exhibiting a perpetual compulsion to mask their true feelings with deceptive facial expressions, non-committal statements or lies.

In equal measure people with normalism struggle with the expressions of others, especially when they are spoken to in clear and direct terms. It is as though the person with normalism simply does not have a concept of honest speech or sincere emotional expression, and will assume everything they hear is a calculated output, cunningly designed to dissemble the speaker's true communicative intent. Interpretation of that is instead filtered through the person with normalism's inscrutable rules and frameworks. At times the person with normalism will have trouble with others' literal speech, and will ignore it or interpret it as something completely different (usually a pretext to find moral fault with those others) no matter how carefully it is explained. In another moment they might become flustered by metaphorical language and accuse those who use it as departing from reality, or have trouble with idioms and proverbs whose understanding comes naturally to everyone else, such as "a bird in the head is worth two in the hand," or "when in Rome, do as the Chinese do".

Ultimately it can appear as if the person with normalism has in their mind an exact script by which conversations are supposed to go, and considers any deviation from it by a conversation partner to be monstrously rude, especially in the opening exchanges. And yet this script will not be specified till after this has happened, because although it could be absolutely anything, the person with normalism assumes it is so obviously correct that everyone else also knows and follows it.

Certain eccentric word usages by people with normalism have been observed to recur with particular frequency, such as the following.

- *How are you?* when used by a person with normalism carries a strict expectation that the listener responds in the positive – with *fine*, or better – rather than being the honest inquiry into the listener's well-being it is for healthy individuals. The listener's failure to supply that positivity, even if they are in visible torment, is usually enough to invite a tantrum or normalistic stare from the speaker.
- *Compromise* carries the expectation that the listener relinquishes all their own wishes or opinions and concedes entirely to the speaker's position.
- *Mature, realistic* or *objective* denote opinions that coincide with those of the speaker, while *immature*, *idealistic* or *subjective* denote opinions that differ.
- *Adulthood* and *responsibilities* imply a desire that the listener abandon all their own values and instead devote the rest of their life to submission to the speaker's imagined rules and hierarchies.
- *Commitment* is common as a measure of an actual or potential companion, and implies a demand that the listener abandon all other caring relationships and devote to the speaker exclusively.
- *Treason* or *blasphemy* indicate that for whatever (usually arbitrary) reason, the speaker has become extremely offended by the listener's existence and a violent tantrum is imminent.

Oblique word usages like these are common across the normalist spectrum, and individuals on it are known to become extremely upset when others more familiar with the conventional definitions of these words do not interpret them in the same way. Many people with normalism also only seem to know how to express their wishes through either aggressive or passive-aggressive orders or threats, and have difficulty understanding why this makes people less rather than more likely to give them what they want. Conversation with a person with normalism can often feel self-defeating as a result, as in all cases they can bend the terms as they go to suit what seems a sole goal of establishing that their conversation partner has something fundamentally wrong with them.

These speech difficulties might be accompanied by ambiguous hand gestures, deceptive facial expressions, and especially the extreme eye contact that has become the stock caricature of people on the normalist spectrum. A recent well-known portrayal is in the television drama *Tragic Stare*, in which the normalist-spectrum customs officer lost in the desert of the Arabian Peninsula's Empty Quarter dies of thirst because he is so fixated with glaring at the djinn in the eyes in order to lecture her on how she is the wrong colour, repeatedly saying "look at me, look at me", that he has no attention left for drinking the water she is offering him. This is only a slightly exaggerated illustration of the plight that people with normalism face every day. Their esoteric non-verbal mannerisms can rapidly make social interaction impossible because conversation partners are left with no objective way to interpret what they are trying to say, especially while enduring streams of their condemnations at the same time.

These forms of communication would not be a problem in and of themselves, falling as they do within the natural diversity of human communication, were they not combined with the **arrogance** which in people with normalism takes on a pathological significance distinct from the non-normalist population. All people with normalism express an absolute belief that everyone of sound mind thinks exactly the same way as themselves, with the same interests, the same modes of interaction and the same concept of hierarchical categories of humans bound by strict rules, and feel it so obvious that people should do so that the morality and/or sanity of anyone who does not is in question. They can appear to make no effort to arrive at shared understandings in conversation, because they feel sure that their own ambiguous expressions are perfectly clear, and that it is others' responsibility to overcome misunderstandings caused by those people's flawed expressions or interpretations. Accusing others of not listening while not listening themselves is a common habit; another is talking over others in order to demand they stop interrupting; a third is accusing others of lacking empathy while exhibiting none themselves. Even when totally exposed by the evidence around them, people with normalism will insistently declaim their arbitrary rules for different groups in a grandiosely reductionist language of “common sense”, “human nature”, “work”, “life” or especially “reality”, as though their own perspective on these is the only one that can possibly exist. These tendencies have led them at times to receive the colloquial label of “little gods”, a phrase thought to originate from Professor Araka’s observations of normalist-spectrum patients following the Ainu liberation of Yamato.

People with normalism also display **restricted or obsessive interests**. Specifically, they can show a blank indifference to any subject matter or activity meaningful to human life or the world, and prefer instead to spend hours immersed in superficial pursuits.

How these express differs across the normalist spectrum. More severely affected individuals may show catastrophically impaired development in creativity, imagination or critical thinking capacities, and find it impossible to engage in all but the most trivial subject matters. They might perform extremely simplistic national, religious or gendered scripts and fixate on the lives of celebrities or their country’s Olympic medal count, but enter a wide-eyed panic when any attempt is made to engage them in conversation on more consequential topics, even more meaningful aspects of those same themes such as a nation or religion’s complex history or corruption in sports authorities. Another common tendency is to launch into derogatory attacks on friends or relatives not present in the conversation, in particular mocking the ways they deviate from how they “should” look or behave. This has earned many sufferers at this end of the spectrum the pejorative label of “Small Talkers” because of their seeming inability to participate in any discussion that contains actual substance.

This contrasts with the other end of the spectrum where cognitive development is not so impaired. Individuals in these cases are known to show interest in topics of surprising sophistication, if still for want of a broader conceptual grasp of them. An addiction to quantitative statistics is common: a person with normalism might read aloud economic growth figures and insist that they prove society would be better if rearranged to represent their imaginary hierarchies, without any concern for how those figures were arrived at or the limitations of statistics in representing real lived experiences. At other times they might scrawl lines on maps of the world, exploring ways they can divide people into arbitrary geographical groups and come up with reasons for them to kill each other. Occasionally they have been known to embark on remarkable intellectual acrobatics to claim, for example, that it would be moral for people on low incomes to be evicted from their homes then have it considered their own fault and fined for it, or to assert that a seemingly random war or earthquake in distant history was caused by, and is evidence for, their children masturbating the previous evening. These obsessions regularly overwhelm social interaction: the person with normalism will embark on lengthy monologues of this nature on the assumption that everyone else shares both the same rigid interests and the same opinions therein, with any hint of a conversation partner's disagreement or lack of enthusiasm seen as grounds to pass scathing judgements upon that person.

Finally, people with normalism are notorious for **self-injury** and **tantrums**. In stark contrast to their heightened sensitivity to differences they find unacceptable in others, most people with normalism lack any sensitivity to the health of the physical environment on which they rely. A great deal of stress in the lives of those caring for people with normalism comes from the constant battle to make sure they do not hurl plastic into the oceans or spray toxic chemicals over farm fields, or the rush to intervene when they impulsively run off to excavate a rainforest and burn all the fossil fuels they can dig up from underneath, shooting as many orangutans as they can on the way. No matter how much their carers explain to them that wrecking the planetary systems that keep them alive will kill them, people with normalism seem cognitively incapable of developing a sense of their own interdependence with ecology and climate.

In these instances and others, the impairments in social and communicative skills and obsessive behaviours of people with normalism poorly equip them to function in a world of real, free and diverse human beings, in which, naturally, arbitrarily judgemental attacks provoke hostility while demands for conformity or submission are frowned upon. Even though most societies throughout recorded history have explicitly supported as wide a range of lifestyles and livelihoods as possible, including opportunities to live with a minimum of human contact if so desired, people with normalism tend to possess a certain social impulse that keeps them attempting to interact with others. It is as though they crave company and validation from other people, even if to perform robotically off a script or otherwise constantly denounce, humiliate, find fault with and physically attack those others are the only forms of interaction that make sense to them. But for all their persistence, they cannot comprehend why these behaviours only discomfort and alienate people, nor why the meanings of their words and gestures come across as completely ambiguous to everyone except them, even when they are convinced their meanings should be obvious. It is perhaps the perpetual anxiety and distress of these experiences that account for what has been termed their **normalistic meltdowns**: those occasions when it all gets too much for people with normalism, and they spontaneously erupt in an unstoppable tantrum of prejudiced outbursts, criticisms of everybody in the world except themselves, and indiscriminate threats of nuclear attack, even towards the people who care most for them.

Causes, Prognosis and Treatment

Extensive studies have suggested the causes of normalism to be mainly socio-cultural. Individuals experience normalistic impairment to their cognitive and relational development when immersed from a young age in settings where unjust outcomes are culturally produced and accepted, and where dogmatic and/or dehumanising idea systems are endemic. Coercive power relationships, exploitative economic practices, self-aggrandising narratives of history, belief that knowledge comes dictated from power rather than learnt through evidence, and hostile attitudes to curiosity and diversity are all considerable risk factors. Excessive exposure to other people with normalism in such environments can greatly increase the chance of normalistic impairment, as can constraints on contact with real human beings of different backgrounds, identities, interests and experiences in the local and global community.

It has been shown that in tolerant and peaceful societies with deep-rooted values of social diversity and participatory politics, such as the Association of Siberian States or the Papuan Empire, incidence of Normalism typically stands at only 0.5% of the population. But in societies with a more insular or competitive heritage, such as the tribal peoples of the European Peninsula currently governed under Indian or African protectorates, normalism can affect up to 40% of the population, with the notable exceptions of the outlying but progressive and prosperous Sultanate of Sadiqkhan, the Federation of Southern Slavs, and the Nordic and Celtic unions, that region's only independent territories. It is projected that this figure was far higher until the cultural reforms introduced by the occupation authorities.

Research into a possible genetic component to normalism has been modest, given the unlikelihood that such a factor, however significant, could be addressed from a medical standpoint. Normalism is officially classed by the World Health Forum (WHF) as a disorder with 'recognised implications for affected individuals' political or normative character', and stringent restrictions on genetic-level medical interventions on such disorders exist in international law under the Treaty of Aksum, limiting potential applications for research in this area.

Controversy also exists over whether people with normalism have a greater propensity to criminality than the non-normalistic population. Research has been inconclusive, but certainly there is an established tendency for people with normalism to hold positive views of authoritarianism, to value adherence to strict rules and abstract notions above human well-being and consent, and to entertain in-group and out-group distinctions – all ideas with proven historical links to socially destructive behaviour, and held under cultural suspicion and legal oversight in all present-day societies. Lack of empathy and impaired communicative skills can also impede people with normalism from relating when the welfare of other people or animals is under violation, and in more severe cases can make them appear in contempt of the very idea that they should care about anyone other than themselves. Even if such a link exists however, it should be remembered that people with normalism are not choosing to be violent, but behave that way on account of a disorder they cannot control, and deserve our love and support rather than criminalisation. Provisions exist in most judicial systems to accommodate for normalistic factors in the assessment of crimes.

There is no single cure for normalism. Treatment revolves around comprehensive management of its symptoms so as to reduce distress for people with normalism and those around them. In most cases patients can live safely in their communities if supported by trained and informed networks of social care, and taught sufficient social and communicative skills to not present a threat to everyone around them. More severe cases may require indefinite isolation for the safety of themselves and others, given their destructive tendencies to burn coal while standing on it, apply their fingers to pull people's lips into forced smiles while photographs are being taken, or attempt to force neckties around people's heads.

Caring for someone with normalism can be very challenging. Tremendous patience is required to endure the stream of non-communication, demands, threats, fault-finding and random nonstop abuse that is typical of living with a person on the normalist spectrum, and a constant fear of physical or emotional assault is near-universal. Enabling patients to adapt to life in society can take years, even decades. This is in part because of the regulations on medical practices that may involve a patient's values or beliefs, but more because the very nature of normalistic symptoms is that the patient is violently antagonistic to any hint that their frameworks are not absolutely right, and will go to extraordinary lengths to reject the right of alternative viewpoints to exist or to resist being interacted with as an equal.

Certain aspects of life present special challenges. Relationships are a great struggle for people with normalism, especially friendships with sexual or romantic elements. People with normalism are notorious for lacking a concept of peaceful relationships between equal human beings. Leading research suggests a person with normalism is only capable of recognising a relationship as a relationship at all if it is based on abusive power relations between stronger and weaker participants, and contains a great deal of conflict for no reason. People with normalism struggle to comprehend why the majority of people prefer a cooperative and mutually agreeable existence, and can get confused or go into tearful tantrums when they get pushed into rivers after going into a desired partner's face to boast about how powerful they are and threatening to assault them if they dislike it, which is typically the only way they know to express romantic interest.

It is as though the real world of diverse human beings, where there is no scheme or standard for intimate interactions aside from not doing harm to others, is regarded as an affront by the person with normalism for whom there has to be a fixed framework in which some types of people dominate and others submit, and in which the rituals of their interaction are the same for everyone. Nonetheless, how those are defined may seem entirely random. People with normalism might feel attracted to people of any sex or gender, and profess any preferred relationship structure whether with one or multiple partners. The difficulty comes when they unfailingly insist that their own preferences are the only correct way, and actively go hunting for people whose sexualities or relationship practices differ in order to attack them.

Parenthood is notorious for people with normalism. One of the most common sets of hierarchies in normalistic thought patterns is the superiority of adults over children. Parents with normalism have a tendency to view their children as property or as extensions of themselves, which produces unique problems given the power imbalances these relationships involve. Such parents might take for granted that children should obey those older than them without question, and will not understand why their children become distressed, resentful and ultimately rejecting of them when constantly disrespected, screamed at, and treated as second-class life forms who lack the capacity for reason. There is a well-documented vicious spiral where parents with normalism lack the empathy to listen to their children’s words, processing their voices only as meaningless and impudent gurgles, thus interpreting their grievances as grounds for punishment and aggravating their children further.

Additional problems common in parents with normalism include imposing expectations on one’s child’s interests, relationships, reproductive choices or other aspects of life, to the point of coercive interventions to regulate these or violent disappointment when inevitably the child does not submit; and a well-recognised impulse, in the face of even a hint of scrutiny, to break into a shrill defensiveness and scream that the way they treat their children is nobody else’s business. Broken families and mutually traumatised parents and children are the all too frequent result. One infamous case cited in hundreds of research papers involved a parent with normalism weeping on the shoulder of a fellow inmate in a police station, displaying an apparently sincere incomprehension at why his daughter disowned him after he threw two hand grenades at her to discipline her because she ‘answered back’, as one generally does, to a question he asked.

Work is a further difficulty. Stories abound of how a person with normalism is welcomed into a workplace, only to burst into a tantrum and storm out after noticing how their colleagues all have different clothes or hairstyles. This might suggest people with normalism are better suited to work like firefighting or driving trains, where uniforms are standard for safety or identification, but even there they can struggle to find their place. They might become hostile to colleagues who do not fit their imaginary rules, for example demanding all women present be fired in the belief that a certain type of work is only for men, or vice versa. They can easily take confusion at the cooperative and egalitarian cultures of most workplaces, becoming stressed by the existence of rest and leisure periods or demanding to know who the “boss” is even when it has been explained there is none. Even in works where there is one person in overall charge, they can find that administrator’s concern for their satisfaction bewildering, lacking as they do a concept of care or consent. Misinterpreting a negotiated and flexible target date as a rigid deadline is common, as is reading an organiser’s gift of chocolate or enquiry into their opinion as a death threat.

There is a range of treatment programmes and therapies available to help manage normalistic symptoms. Unfortunately the public image of these is dominated by the Advanced Behavioural Correction (ABC) therapy scandal, in which a group of doctors, struck off and banned from practicing in the Sultanate of Sadiqkhan after convictions for gross professional misconduct, fled across the sea and set up experimental research on adults with normalism in the Warring States of America, a lawless rump of settlement by European immigrants along the continent’s east coast where regulation is notoriously lax and incidence of normalism is high. The doctors’ methods involved crude attempts to condition their patients into non-normalistic behaviour by ignoring or punishing normalistic outbursts, such as by taking away their automatic rifles or dressing in ways they could not cope with (in particular refusing to wear neckties when talking to them), no matter how distressing this became to the patients. The facility was shut down and the doctors arrested when whistleblowers revealed that they had been physically restraining patients and deliberately provoking their normalistic meltdowns; two of those involved were subsequently found guilty of torture and given long ostracism sentences. (A third was acquitted on compassionate grounds, following admission as a mitigating factor that he had had his lips torn off by a patient attempting to force him to smile for a photograph.)

Fortunately there is now a tried and tested range of more ethical options to help people with normalism or those struggling to care for them. Many of these involve slowly and cautiously bringing them into contact with people from those categories the patients’ rigid frameworks portray as inferior, so they can learn by experience that human beings are more complex and varied than they believe, as well as likely to enjoy better quality of life in the absence of arbitrary hierarchies or abusive power relationships. In the early stages such programmes often rely upon registered host citizens, who are trained to withstand the onslaught of abuse they will likely receive from people with normalism. More drastic interventions might involve world travel therapy programmes to expose the person with normalism to a fuller depth of human diversity; most governments now offer Normalism Assistance Schemes with benefits such as discounts on international flights or on public transport for people with normalism and those caring for them, or access to special workshops in political, scientific and religious institutions tailored to inform and entertain them in a caring environment.

Given patience, perseverance and time, it is entirely possible for most people with normalism to come to terms with real society and learn to function in it. Some even go on to live fulfilling lives and make significant public contributions. Taxonomy and economic fiction are among the scholarly fields with the highest representation of people with normalism, while many others have found work in traffic-light factories rewarding. Bans on people with normalism working in some sectors have led to legal disputes; the International Guild of Barbers in particular is known for its hard line.

Disorder or Difference?

The status of normalism as a medical pathology is controversial. Many people with normalism reject the idea that they have a disorder to be diagnosed and cured, and argue that a belief in rules as ends in themselves, expectations on people to be the same, and incitement to violence against those seen as different are beneficial for social stability and should be seen as a legitimate cognitive style instead of an illness. While it is of course essential to hear out their opinions, this does little to address the genuine problems that emerge when normalistic behaviour causes harm to others, such as when people with normalism stand demagogic candidates in elections or scapegoat foreigners for their own society's problems. Such symptoms mean all respected medical authorities continue to officially recognise normalism as a pathology for the time being.

Nonetheless in the last few decades there has been a rise in advocacy and normalistic activism to contest this. In activist circles, people diagnosed with normalism may refer to themselves as *normal people* or *people who are right*, and in recent years the terms *neurowrong* and *neuroperverted* have emerged to indicate non-normalistic people. These movements grew in profile following high-profile attacks on Normalism Speaks, a prominent NGO which claims a mission to support people suffering from normalism, but was attacked for its stated goal of seeking a medical cure. Hackers suspected of belonging to the normalism activist community gained access to the Normalism Speaks website and changed its logo to read 'Normalism Speaks, It's Time You STFU', reflecting the activist view that society should stop seeing normalism as a problem and just re-organise itself into abusive and judgemental hierarchies like people with normalism demand. People with normalism have also organized into groups with names like 'Get Off Our Planet', 'Normal People for Law and Order', or 'The Common

Sense Group', which advocate against medical approaches and argue that if everyone stopped being diverse and just became like them then there would no longer be a problem. These movements frequently clash with people with normalism who accept the medical approach and live in hope of a permanent cure, arguing that their diagnosis has given them access to supportive resources and liberated them from much of the suffering caused by their symptoms.

A frequent line of argument from normalism rights activists is to point to historical figures they allege to have been on the normalist spectrum, and hold up their contributions to the world to argue that normalistic traits make the world a better place. Prominent figures include Professor Temujin, the Mongol inventor of plastic surgery, who opened over forty clinics across Central Asia in the thirteenth century and wrote an infamous treatise arguing that if everyone had their face surgically rearranged to look like his, the world would be at peace; the "Three Jaguars" whose bloody but cunning strategies broke the Spanish siege of Tenochtitlan, marking an end to European exploration of the outside world and controversially argued to have made possible the sweeping reforms that propelled the states of Mexihco and the Great Bridge to the pinnacle of peaceful humanist cooperation and scientific advancement, a status that persists to this day; and General Ilunga of the Kongolese Alliance, known for her resolute action in leading the Army of the Upper Kongo on its legendary voyage across desert, sea and mountains to intervene to end the civil war in Belgium. Though her reputation collapsed after her conviction for war crimes owing to the violence of the twelve-year occupation of that country, most of all her order for the brutal assassination of the last independent Belgian chieftain, Léopold II, people with normalism insist that her strong leadership was the only means by which the warring tribes of Low Europe could be pacified, and laid the foundations for its stable (if still cacophonous and coup-ridden) democracies under the tutelage of the Kongolese Protectorate of the Rhine and Meuse today. As can be seen from these instances, normalism activists often struggle to make a convincing case that their historical heroes exemplify the best social outcomes.

Occasionally people with normalism turn to fantasy to make their arguments, although their impaired development in imaginative functions makes this relatively rare. The creative range of fiction authored by people with normalism is limited, but most follow the model of perhaps the most famous work, *But I Am Right* by Donaldus Drumpf, a writer from the Palatinate venerated by the normalism rights movement, who wrote furiously against his restive territory's annexation by the Fourth Malian Empire before his ironic murder by another Palatine with normalism, who took normalistic umbrage at the unusual colouration of Drumpf's head and did not realize who he had shot till it was too late. Drumpf's work, notable to linguists for its use of the exclamation mark in place of all other punctuation, postulated a parallel universe where people with normalism were the majority and social institutions were built around normalistic frameworks, suggesting that in such a world their condition would not be seen as a problem and indeed might be so ordinary as to not even warrant a name. Scientists at the globally renowned Department of Interdimensional Physics at the University of Cusco have produced models that have confirmed the plausibility that such a universe exists, but also suggest on this evidence that the conditions of human life in such a world would be so dysfunctional and horrifyingly cruel that they strengthen rather than weaken the thesis for considering normalism a pathology.

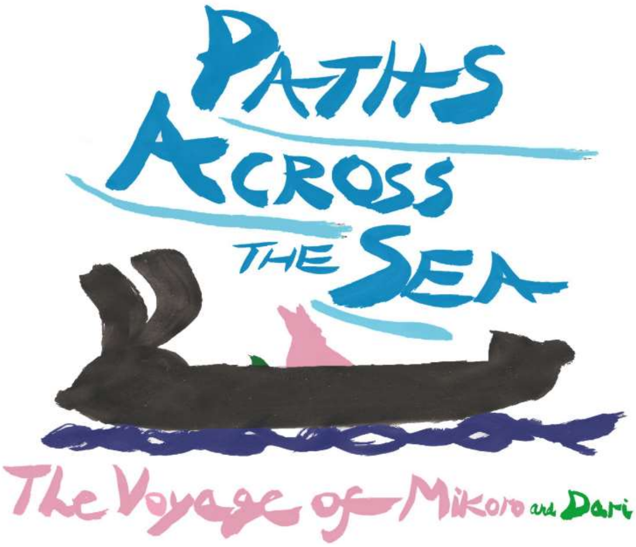
Although medical professionals warn of the risks that normalist activism presents to the alleviation of suffering among people with normalism and those caring for them, they also stress the welcome nature of peaceful critiques, given the necessity of such constant challenges for scientific progress. It is well recognised, among professionals and the general public alike, that the world’s peace and prosperity has been built upon the humility to recognise that medical science, like all scientific endeavours, is as much influenced by the cultural norms and value judgements of those who practice it as it is by objective evidence, and in turn impacts the cultures and values of humankind. This has made respect for alternative perspectives, however frivolous they might be at first glance, a supreme necessity in order that good science is never again brought low by human arrogance, as is said to have happened in the Wars of Essentialism of ancient legend. The disputes over normalism are therefore likely to continue for the foreseeable future.

In Conclusion

Imagine what it must be like to live as a person with a normalist spectrum disorder. The world must seem so infuriatingly chaotic and complex, so stubborn in its refusal to compliantly fall into the simple categories and frameworks that to the person with normalism are just so obviously sensible. Perhaps our imaginations cannot stretch far enough to capture the frustration and distress they experience every day, when every nuanced analysis they receive to a question where they expected a yes or no answer causes them to freeze in panic, or when they look out of a window and recoil at how everyone looks dressed in freely chosen and consented ways, or when they turn on the television and see people of different genders or skin colours diversely represented, making them so perplexed that it overwhelms their cognition and sends them into normalistic meltdown.

It is in these moments we have to remember that people with normalism deserve our compassion and patience, rather than vilification. It is not their fault that attempting to beat someone up is the only language they know for expressing a romantic interest, or that they struggle to control their urge to judge every aspect of your face or words or tone of voice when you try to talk with them, or that they seem oblivious to the idea that there are people in the world who do not follow their imaginary rules. They do not choose to behave in these ways; it is because of their illness, and with our love and support there is every prospect that they can overcome it.

By the same author:



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