



Classic Text No. 139

‘Early childhood autism, Asperger type’, by H. Asperger (1982)

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Introduction and translation by

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Abstract

After his 1944 thesis, Asperger continued to write about autism, but none of these texts have been translated. At a time when autism spectrum disorder faces many challenges (e.g. the nature and measurement of autism), this text tells us more about the particular population that Asperger worked with. He describes sensitive, intelligent, creative and rational children, a far cry from the Wing triad. Moreover, ‘Asperger’s Syndrome’ was introduced after he had died, was included in the DSM-IV in 1994 and was omitted from the DSM-5 in 2013. The question posed by this last text, written before his death, is whether Asperger’s descriptions of autistic children are really part of the autism spectrum disorder or whether they are outside the pathological field.

Keywords

Asperger, autism spectrum disorder, children, neurodiversity, syndrome

Introduction: autistic people ‘are the Salt of the Earth’ – Hans Asperger’s last text about autism before his death

Although Hans Asperger died almost 23 years ago, his publications have still not been fully translated into English. Thus, many researchers and clinicians are only familiar with the English translation of his 1944 thesis by Frith (1991). However, between 1944 and his death in 1980, Hans Asperger wrote a lot about autism and what he called autistic psychopathy, and this work remains unknown to the scientific community.

Furthermore, it is interesting to note that the term ‘Asperger’s Syndrome’ was created after his death, and only entered the *International Classification of Diseases* (ICD-10) and the fourth edition of *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM-IV) 14 years later (American Psychiatric Association [APA], 1994; World Health Organization, 1994); then 19 years later it was omitted from the DSM-5 (APA, 2013). In addition, Lorna Wing, the creator of the autistic triad

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(Wing and Gould, 1979), has written extensively on this topic (Burgoine and Wing, 1983; Wing, 1981, 1986, 1991, 1998), but not without subjectivity. She coined the term ‘Asperger’s Syndrome’ (in contradiction to many of Hans Asperger’s writings, including this new translation) in order to make it correspond to her triad, which was based on her study (Wing and Gould, 1979) of 132 children at special education centres, 97% of whom had intellectual disabilities (and this explains why she said that she had observed only a tiny number of children with the characteristics described by Asperger). She wrote (Wing, 1981) that she disagreed with Asperger’s observations, and reported that these children lacked common sense, were not creative but merely logical, and did not have high intelligence (she described several children with an IQ of less than 70) and would only repeat things by rote.

The Classic Text, which is a translation of a chapter written by Hans Asperger before his death in 1980 and published in 1982,¹ shows that ‘early childhood autism of the Asperger type’ is not really characterized by the autistic triad; on the contrary, he describes children who are intelligent, creative, rational, sensitive and capable of changing the world. He sees the challenges and difficulties that society has in integrating them, which are sometimes only related to simple psychocognitive differences between autistic and non-autistic people, and he describes the conditions for a perfect inclusion: understanding and respecting them for who they are in their specificities.

Thus, an unanswered question remains: has Asperger’s autism, far from being what we might today call a disorder (Baron-Cohen, 2017), really entered the field of autism spectrum disorder or has it simply left the field of psychiatry and psychopathology (thus highlighting the idea that there would be individuals who are different, not disabled or inferior, and for whom society would have the moral responsibility for their social integration)?

A brief biography

Hans Asperger was born in Vienna, Austria, in 1906, where he attended school. He was part of a movement of young Catholics (Bung Neuland), engaging in outdoor hikes and mountain excursions. He studied at the University of Vienna, earning his doctorate in 1931. He began working at the University Children’s Clinic in Vienna, and was appointed as director of therapeutic education in this clinic in 1935. In the same year, he married Hanna Kalmon, and they had five children. During this time, he embarked on his work with autistic children, a term that appeared in a private correspondence from 1934 (which has been preserved by his daughter; see Feinstein, 2010: 10). He also used the term in an early paper (Asperger, 1938), a translated version of which is included in Feinstein’s book, as well as in his 1943 postdoctoral thesis (Asperger, 1944; see Frith, 1991: 37–92; see also Rebecchi, 2023, for a recently translated and annotated version). Asperger then served as a military physician in Croatia and returned to work at the University Children’s Clinic in Vienna in 1945. After spending five years (1957–62) as the director of the paediatric clinic at the University of Innsbruck, he was director of the paediatric clinic at the University of Vienna from 1962 to 1977. He became a member of the National Academy of Sciences in 1967, received an honorary doctorate from the University Clinic of Munich in 1972, and retired from clinical practice in 1977. He continued to give lectures and write articles, until he died in 1980.

The controversy

The accusations

In the article by Czech (2018) entitled ‘Hans Asperger, National Socialism, and “race hygiene” in Nazi-era Vienna’, the author argues that Hans Asperger was not a staunch opponent of National Socialism, contrary to long-standing beliefs. Drawing on contemporary publications and archival

documents, Czech suggests that Asperger accepted the Nazi regime and was affiliated with organizations linked to the German National Socialist Workers' Party (but not the Nazi Party itself); he also publicly supported policies promoting 'racial purity', including forced sterilizations, and actively participated in the child euthanasia programme. Czech contends that the image of Asperger as a courageous advocate for his patients against Nazi euthanasia measures and other racial purity policies does not withstand historical evidence.

Edith Sheffer (2018), in her book *Asperger's Children: The Origins of Autism in Nazi Vienna*, analyses the relationship between autism and the Nazi regime. According to her, Hans Asperger, apart from being involved in Hitler's Third Reich racial policies, might also have been implicated in crimes against children. She argues that Asperger and his collaborators sought to transform certain 'autistic' children into productive citizens, while others were sent to Am Spiegelgrund, one of the Reich's deadliest child euthanasia centres. She suggests that Asperger's work was rooted in the racial purity ideologies of National Socialism, and she makes connections with the present day, when atypical behaviours are still seen as pathological, and 'social skills' are considered essential in the psychiatric treatment of children.

However, Dean Falk (2020), in her article 'Non-complicit: revisiting Hans Asperger's career in Nazi-era Vienna', refutes the allegations against Asperger, asserting that it is highly improbable that he was aware of the 'T4 programme' (a Nazi euthanasia programme for physically and mentally disabled individuals) when he referred patients to Am Spiegelgrund. Falk suggests that from 1938 to 1943, Asperger vigorously campaigned for his specialization – therapeutic education – to take precedence in diagnosing and treating disabled children over other areas promoting Nazi racial hygiene policies. Falk also states that Asperger did not belittle his patients, was not sexist, and his research and discoveries positioned him as a pioneer in the field of autism.

Moreover, Tatzer, Maleczek and Waldhauser (2022) examined accusations against Asperger regarding his involvement in the Nazi child-euthanasia initiative. They analysed primary documents and transcripts related to Asperger's recommendations to the Am Spiegelgrund children's home in Vienna, which was notorious for killing disabled children, and their research indicated that Asperger recommended 13 children to Am Spiegelgrund; although two girls died, his recommendations were made before the euthanasia programme was widely known. Tatzer and co-authors indicate that their investigation does not provide evidence that Asperger was aware of the euthanasia programme when making his recommendations, except in the case of one death probably due to euthanasia. Therefore, their study concludes that there is no indication that Asperger deliberately participated in the euthanasia programme when recommending those patients to Am Spiegelgrund.

Furthermore, Heijder (2021) notes that Sheffer's claims in her book are controversial and their accuracy is debated. He points out, for example, that Sheffer highlights that the term '*Intelligenzautomaten*' can be translated as 'intelligent automatons' and would suggest a dehumanizing view of autism, where autistic individuals would lack social value and the capacity to learn. Heijder argues that Sheffer has decontextualized Asperger's statements and his analysis reveals that Asperger's use of the term '*Intelligenzautomaten*' does not exclusively refer to intellectually efficient children, but encompasses all autistic children. He also notes that Asperger mainly focused on the difficulties autistic children faced in acquiring social habits and learning from adults, rather than on their social value. Heijder suggests that Sheffer made an irrelevant association between Asperger's discussions of children who were unable to learn from adults and followed only their own ideas and methods, and the Nazi label of 'uneducable'. Furthermore, in Heijder's view, Sheffer made another irrelevant association between what Asperger referred to as the 'least favourable cases' (intellectually deficient autistic individuals) and the most disabled children in general. Heijder states that descriptions of different cases in Asperger's works illustrate these points. He therefore questions Sheffer's interpretations, indicating that she distorts Asperger's statements and takes phrases out of context to support her claims.

Lastly, Heiner Fangerau (2020) explored the debates between historical reconstruction and personal memory regarding National Socialism, emphasizing the importance of a culture of discussion that recognizes the differences between personal testimonies and historical reconstructions without pitting them against each other. According to Fangerau, determining who was a Nazi or involved in the Nazi regime is extremely complex; categorizing individuals as active or passive participants is challenging, and thus establishing responsibilities is difficult. Fangerau underscores the need to broaden the perspective beyond a few identifiable key authors and to consider all those who supported or contributed to the dictatorship in various ways in order to understand how individuals, who were described as educated, respected and humane by their contemporaries before or after the Nazi era, could participate in regime policies and reinforce them. This would lead to a better understanding of unexplained and persistent biographical tensions. Fangerau points out that the tensions surrounding Asperger concern evaluating sources regarding his involvement or non-involvement in the selection and euthanasia of children by the Nazis and evaluating his ideological stance toward Nazi positions. According to Fangerau, the distinction between evidence and indications leads to divergent interpretations, resulting in opposing views on his guilt. He emphasizes that moral questions arise from a contemporary perspective, and cautions against projecting current values onto historical figures, emphasizing the need to focus on understanding the historical context and factors that influenced Asperger's thoughts and actions within the framework of medical history during the Nazi era.

What do those who knew him have to say?

Gillberg (2023) reports a conversation he had with Hans Asperger's daughter, when she allegedly mentioned that their family had been visited multiple times by the Gestapo because her father was not a member of the Nazi Party. She described her father as reserved, clumsy, and having a strong interest in language – all traits associated with the autistic personality that he himself described (for a discussion on this matter, see Lyons and Fitzgerald, 2007).

Professor Heinz Rothbutcher (1981) noted that Professor Asperger emphasized the need to constantly find the right balance, conditioned by internal and external developments, and quoted him in this regard: 'He who knows himself, who positions himself critically and responsibly, will also do what is right; and he who keeps the measure, who does not exceed it, lives in peace with himself and with the community' (p. 3). Franz Wurst (1982), an Austrian paediatrician who studied under Asperger, said of him that he did not merely repeat dogmatic opinions or use ready-made formulas and solutions, but instead endeavoured to account seriously and creatively for changing facts. Wurst reported that Asperger had a deep respect for each individual, possessed an excellent memory, and had an innate interest in literature, enabling him to use a differentiated vocabulary with precision. Wurst noted that engaging in discussions with him was both an intellectual and emotional pleasure, and that Asperger considered the pedagogical approach as fundamental and complementary to the medical approach. Asperger stated that he believed a 'solely medical approach to treating children . . . can only be effective to a certain extent' and that:

Only pedagogical methods in the broadest sense of the term can really improve people, or more precisely, can identify the best development alternatives available to a child and enable him or her to develop in that direction. (Asperger, 1950: 105; quoted by Asperger Felder, 2000: xiii)

Finally, Asperger's daughter notes that in his post-doctoral thesis, unlike other publications of that time, there were few references to the spirit of the era, racial hygiene and eugenic concepts, and she reports statements made by her father in a 1974 interview:

The Nazi era arrived, and it was clear to me, based on my previous life, that I could align with many 'national' things, in quotes, but not with inhumanity. In therapeutic education, we deal extensively with disturbed children, those with mental disabilities. There is no other way but to recognize their value and to love them. What is their value? What is the value? They are part of a population, indispensable for certain tasks, but also for a country's ethics, as they teach us how a human depends on others. It is entirely inhumane, as manifested in dreadful consequences, to define the concept of 'life without value' and draw conclusions from it. And as I have never been inclined to draw those conclusions, that is to report individuals with mental disabilities to health authorities, as we were tasked to do, it posed a rather dangerous situation for me. I must pay special tribute to my professor, Hamburger, who, although a committed National Socialist, saved me twice from the hands of the Gestapo with strong personal commitment. He knew what my convictions were. He protected me with all his might, and I am very grateful to him. (Asperger [1974]; quoted by Asperger Felder, 2008: 99–100)

Conclusions re debate

In line with Fangerau's perspective, it is deemed precarious, illogical and irrelevant to assess historical events, particularly subjective interpretations, in the context of contemporary values. The focus on scrutinizing an individual's actions within the context of socially charged issues, as opposed to evaluating the entire population of a specific historical period, raises questions. It is worth noting that Hans Asperger, who was not affiliated with the German National Socialist Workers' Party, is singled out, while numerous other scientists, intellectuals and artisans with ties to the party remain unexamined. Similarly, the discrepancy in attitudes towards others, such as Hugo Boss, Volkswagen and Maria Montessori who clearly collaborated with the Nazis, warrants attention. Additionally, the absence of an analogous approach towards the customs and practices of ancient Greece should be considered.

Extensive research on this subject has been conducted over the course of several years, involving the review of many books and articles in various languages, although not all of them are explicitly cited. The writings by Asperger himself are regarded as indispensable in comprehending and critiquing the concepts of autism and neurodiversity. Some individuals may opt not to use the term 'Asperger' due to personal discomfort, but from scientific, social and cultural standpoints, the deletion of these descriptions and works is viewed as detrimental. Consequently, it is recommended that all those with an interest in the subject, whether directly or indirectly, exercise critical thinking, explore contradictory literature and refrain from overlooking these texts, as neglecting them could result in an incomplete and narrow understanding of the subject matter.

The content of this Classic Text encompasses topics beyond autism, yet readers may find information that sheds light on Asperger's perspectives and methodologies in a comprehensive manner. Nonetheless, it is essential to recognize that not every piece of information is equally important, interesting or relevant, and one should avoid overlooking other valuable insights.

Hans Asperger's final text on autism, in particular, shows the evolution of his viewpoint from his 1944 thesis until he died in 1980, and challenges the appropriateness of labelling these idiosyncrasies as 'disabilities'. As he stated in 1938 and 1944, contrary to Kanner's belief in the rarity of autism, 'If one learns to pay attention to the characteristic expressions of the autistic person, this psychopathic disorder, especially to a milder degree, is not rare at all, even in children' (Asperger, 1944: 10), and 'everything that deviates from the ordinary, thus "abnormal", must not necessarily be "inferior" as a result' (Asperger, 1938: 1317).

It is also worth highlighting that there is a belief in the genuine concern Asperger had for the characteristics he described, and this is supported by accounts from those who were close to him, such as the analysis by Lyons and Fitzgerald (2007). This is also shown by his ability to articulate these characteristics with precision and clarity. In conclusion, we quote the following from his 1944

postdoctoral thesis: ‘they have a particularly keen sense for the abnormality of other children; indeed, as abnormal as they may be themselves, they are positively hypersensitive to it’ (Asperger, 1944: 46).

Discussion and final comments

Wing (1981) is credited with coining the term ‘Asperger’s Syndrome’, following her clinical work involving 34 individuals, ranging in age from 5 to 35 years. It is important to note that her research involved significant modifications to Asperger’s original studies and descriptions. Her departure from Asperger’s original concepts was deliberate, as she sought to emphasize the triad of impairments previously identified (Wing and Gould, 1979). Additionally, Wing pointed out that only 20% of the children she categorized as having Asperger’s Syndrome possessed an IQ above 70. This shift in perspective marked a conceptual departure, whereas Asperger’s original descriptions were dissociated from the broader autism spectrum, leading to a renaming of the condition. Moreover, Asperger’s contributions do not appear to be integrated into the current clinical designation of ‘Autism Spectrum Disorder’ (Maenner et al., 2014; Smith, Reichow and Volkmar, 2015), nor were they incorporated into the diagnostic category of ‘Asperger’s Syndrome’. In fact, his work has largely faded into obscurity. Based on these observations and analyses, two key elements warrant discussion.

Heredity and autism in females

The discussion surrounding ‘autism in females’ has been a subject of debate, and despite the publication of many books, scientific articles and popular articles over several years, the issue remains unresolved. The concept of autism being potentially ‘invisible’ in girls and women, and its identification through the analysis of the extent to which individuals conceal their autism, remains a contentious issue.

Asperger (1944: 58) explicitly stated that autistic mothers exhibited the same characteristics as their autistic sons, which, unfortunately, contributed to the development of the infamous ‘refrigerator mother’ theory. For Asperger, heredity played an undeniable role in the condition. This observation was also echoed by Kanner (1943, 1971) in his descriptions of infantile autism. Asperger further emphasized that he had observed girls who corresponded to his descriptions, even in the USA. However, should we revisit the idea of distinct autistic entities as historically conceived (Asperger distinctly differentiated his concept of autism from Kanner’s)? Does this imply that some women fit the description of ‘autism in females’ while others do not, thus raising questions about the validity of the concept itself? Could there exist multiple variations of ‘autism in females’? Furthermore, many autistic men claim to align with this new description of autism, centred on ‘masking’ or ‘social camouflage’. Does this mean they are not considered to be men? Masking entails adaptation strategies to a social environment that often proves hostile, exclusionary and discriminatory for autistic individuals. However, this does not inherently render autism ‘invisible’. Asperger consistently contended that doctors and educators lacked the ability to observe effectively, relying on standardized and unsuitable analytical frameworks, which might give the impression of invisibility. It is well documented that women generally exhibit superior socio-emotional abilities compared with men, a phenomenon that extends to autism. Could this reflect a fundamental neurobiological distinction between men and women, rather than suggesting a variation in the autistic profile (Sukhareva, 1926a, 1926b, 1927a, 1927b; see Rebecchi 2022 for a recently translated and annotated version)? Furthermore, it appears that the dichotomy between ‘autism in females’ and ‘autism in males’ often relies on outdated and rigid gender stereotypes (men being portrayed as logical and unemotional, while women are depicted as nurturing and decorative). Might there be a middle ground between Fombonne’s (2020) assertion that ‘what we see is not actually what we see, but rather what we cannot see’ and the assertion that autism is always elusive and challenging to identify?

What is autism (truly)?

Current conceptions of autism, while not necessarily mutually exclusive, encompass various perspectives:

- A pathology or disorder defined by the symptom dyad outlined in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM). This dyad is observed in numerous genetic syndromes and developmental disorders, without any accompanying strengths, abilities or advantages. This prevailing view, consistent with Lorna Wing's perspective, underscores that autism results from developmental issues manifesting as the DSM's dyad of symptoms and does not represent a distinct 'neurotype'. Within this framework, debates regarding the use of terms such as 'disorder', 'pathology' or 'illness' appear unwarranted, as the core conception remains unchanged. This perspective primarily relies on clinical observation for diagnosis, given that the DSM's dyad is characterized by a set of observable behaviours.
- A mindset, as articulated in 1957 by George Frankl (who worked with Kanner and Asperger), that represents a unique, but not necessarily abnormal, perspective.² This mindset complements the ability to engage with others, perceive what others emit and radiate, and foster connections, even if transitioning from this state to an autistic state may occur with difficulties or discomfort.
- A (altered) state of consciousness, defined by Dittrich (1998) as a marked deviation in subjective experience that disrupts an individual's psychological functioning, leading to changes in mood, self-perception, environment, time and space.
- A type of personality or even a new dimension of personality, in addition to the traditional dimensions of openness, conscientiousness, extraversion, agreeableness and neuroticism. This perspective aligns with the work of Wakabayashi, Baron-Cohen and Wheelwright (2006).
- A set of traits and characteristics present to varying degrees in everyone. This view corresponds to the perspective put forward by Plomin (2019: ch. 5).

Asperger contended that autistic behaviours could be identified in numerous individuals across various situations, including those with neurological disorders, anxiety, disappointments, intense suffering, creative states and spontaneous mental activity. Consequently, it is possible for all humans to exhibit autistic behaviour, even from early childhood. Asperger also asserted the existence of pathological degrees of autism, implying the existence of non-pathological degrees as well. According to his perspective, a certain degree of autism is almost indispensable for high-level scientific or creative achievements, as these pursuits demand creativity, originality, innovation and dynamism, which are qualities associated with autism. Therefore, Asperger's perspective appears to encompass elements from the various conceptions previously discussed. However, it is important to emphasize that the conception of autism spectrum disorder is probably the most distant from Asperger's perspective and the least suitable definition, given that its components can be found in numerous conditions, such as social anxiety, burnout or even schizophrenia, without necessarily indicating a distinct neurotype. As Baron-Cohen (2017) highlights, no single definition of the term 'disorder' effectively describes autism, and this label should only be applied when there is nothing positive about an individual's state or when, even in the face of environmental changes, the individual remains incapable of functioning. Therefore, Baron-Cohen underscores the significance of using the term 'difference', as autism represents a divergence in functioning, with autistic individuals simply developing differently (sometimes even performing better, not in terms of value but rather performance, rendering the term 'disability' also inappropriate).

In light of these diverse perspectives, it is evident that the interpretation of autism may vary depending on the chosen definitions and angles of analysis. Encouraging intercultural studies

outside the autism spectrum disorder framework would be beneficial in order to compare different conceptions and representations across the cultures in time.

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Notes

1. The chapter, entitled ‘Kindlicher Autismus Typ Asperger’, was published posthumously in the book *Psychotherapie und Heilpädagogik bei Kindern* (1982), edited by Hans Asperger and Franz Wurst; the publisher was Urban & Schwarzenberg (which became Urban & Fischer Verlag in 1999 and was acquired by Elsevier in 2003).
2. Accessed online (26 June 2023) at: https://kuscholarworks.ku.edu/bitstream/handle/1808/30591/Frankl_1957.pdf

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Classic Text No. 139

‘Early childhood autism, Asperger type’, by H. Asperger (1982)

Asperger children were most noticeable at school age in a very contradictory way: they were intelligent but often failed at school, had a different psyche, were highly reflective and observant but were very difficult in discipline, were seemingly devoid of feelings and yet able to experience subtle ones. Most importantly, they were very idiosyncratic in their dealings with people, visibly limited and self-centred. This is what led to the name “autistic” – but not in the sense of Bleuler, who called the mentally ill schizophrenics autistic, giving this name to the impenetrable wall that separated them from other people. On the other hand, the term “psychopathy” seems correct: the condition is clearly innate, visibly independent of environmental factors, and the same is true of Kanner’s autism. In the case of Asperger’s autism, heredity is clearly apparent: almost without exception, similar characters are found in the ancestry.

Symptomatology

Expressive symptoms

These children can be recognized very quickly, as soon as they enter the room, by their very peculiar expressions, which are completely different from the means by which normal people make contact with each other. In fact, the term “contact” does not appear in older works of child psychology; it is obvious that such characteristics were not noticed earlier. Autistic children “look” differently from other children. Their gaze does not plunge into the interlocutor’s, but is lost in the distance and seems to pass through the other; it does not respond to the interlocutor’s efforts to relate to him. The situation is similar to that of other expressions creating contact: facial expressions are poor, sometimes bizarre. Motor skills are stiff or awkward, not at all fluid, not quite adapted to performing practical tasks, and sometimes exhibit stereotypies. However, when these children are motivated, they are capable, for a time, of amazing feats of dexterity.

Psychological abilities

The psychological skills of autistic children are very typical of early childhood. With unshakeable certainty, they judge teachers and other people, and above all they recognize their weaknesses and cause them: “I am so mean because you are so annoying”, says a schoolboy to his teacher. It is an apparent contradiction that these children, so maladjusted in their social behaviour, have such abilities, while other children, less gifted, correctly judge adult authority without being able to rationalize it. Intellectual observation and understanding require a distance from human realities, whereas for normal disciplinary behaviour, a good emotional resonance is more or less sufficient! The psychological talent of these children, described above, is also accompanied by a differentiated examination of consciousness: physical processes, heartbeats, breathing and also thought processes are heard and described accurately in a way that only these autistic, intelligent children can do.

Behavioural disorders

What has been described so far – the linguistic abilities, the early abstraction abilities, the originality of thought, the strong spontaneity – has essentially positive aspects. Now we have to talk about the unusual and severe behavioural disturbances that autistic children cause in their environment. The normal child effortlessly integrates into the world around him after small conflicts, which are quickly resolved, resonating with the situation with healthy instincts, becoming a part of it, understanding it without rationalization. Autistic children, on the other hand, are “completely different”, constantly detaching themselves from the situation, from the group. From the first moment, they are perceived as strangers and rejected. In the most joyful crowd, they stand aside, absorbed in a book, for example, seemingly oblivious to the joyful hubbub around them. But the other children, quite naturally, do not leave them alone. The autistic child attracts the accumulated aggression of the group. After the end of the class lesson, for example, she/he disappears into the wild group of “enemies”, powerless against the skilled brawlers, unable to resist a fair fight. All that remains is for her/him to take revenge with an often very ingenious malice.

The relationship with authority figures, parents and teachers is also disturbed. The sense of attitude towards others, which normally develops in the child, seemingly on its own, and long before it can think conceptually, which is so finely differentiated, precisely adapted, which distinguishes between the familiar and the strange, the affectionate and the rejecting, the strict and the conciliatory and which “responds” to it, is visibly lacking in the autistic child. So there are constant conflicts. Sometimes the boy is grotesquely disrespectful: what another hardly dares to think, he says to the adult’s face without hesitation, and he is even glad that the other is angry about it.

In education, the educator’s affect plays an important role. The child does not learn to obey because the educator speaks coldly and intelligently; rather, the child longs for the educator’s love and tenderness – and is “good” at getting it – and tries to avoid the educator’s negative affects. Even the infant “understands” his mother’s angry, irritated face and harsh, even furious voice, and acts accordingly. And during a long period of development, it seems to us that the affective expression of order and prohibition is more important than intellectual reasoning, but this is not the case with the autistic child! It is difficult to know if, confined to himself and incapable of humanity, he does not understand the expression of others or if it is precisely this that pushes him to the opposite reaction. In any case, one often has the impression that the child consciously provokes the anger of the educator and that he or she is amused by it (the educator must take the consequences, as we will explain later).

Other difficulties stem from the fact that the autistic child cannot or will not skilfully imitate and acquire the everyday skills he or she would normally copy from adults. In the absence of a true motor disorder, it is extremely difficult to teach him to dress and stand properly, to tie a knot, to behave at the table (for example, he has problems with some globules of fat in the soup and forgets everything else).

If we try to reduce the characteristics of autistic children to a common denominator, we could say that the problem lies in the “deep person”, in the “thymic”, emotional part of the personality; this explains the disturbance of human relations and of everything that builds human contact. Some English and German authors think that autism is a cognitive defect, a disorder of apperception (the child is not able to understand the contact with others and thus reacts wrongly), but we think that this explanation is too much on the surface, i.e. only in the perception; however, intelligent autistic people can perceive and describe excellently, and in our opinion the concern is deeper: in the structure of the personality!

Autistic children usually react paradoxically to their teacher’s affect: they do not allow themselves to be brought back to reason by his powerful anger, but they enjoy it and provoke it. This is what Peter Rosegger did as a child, knowing perfectly well how to defy his father’s anger, waiting with half-satisfaction and half fear for the storm to break. This is why we must meet autistic people “in suspended

affect” and not get angry with them inwardly, but face them calmly, even with a cunning mind. We have found that there is little point in demanding obedience and docility from them. It is better to establish a general law to be obeyed, for example, in the sense of “A smart boy does it like this . . .”.

The language of our autistic people (who, by the way, are found exclusively among boys) is very typical. Whereas normally the relationship between speaker and listener is clearly expressed by tone of voice, volume and tempo, and other qualities that are difficult to describe, the language of “my” autistics is different from what one might expect: sometimes monotonously babbling, singing and strident, and sometimes exaggeratedly modulated, like that of a bad comedian. But what is even more striking is that at least the usual cases of our type have a particularly close relationship with the logic and abstraction of language. They learn to speak earlier than they learn to walk, they very quickly have a grammatically well-structured language with subordinate clauses that precisely formulate logical superordination and subordination. Moreover, they often create neologisms, found in the moment and not adopted by others, so precise and sure, certainly far from the ordinary, but which can only delight us.

Curative pedagogical therapy

We now turn to the important problem of educational therapy for children that we have described. Anyone who has followed the previous explanations will understand that this will not be easy. Autistic children are and remain difficult, both at home and at school. Even though tests prove that they are much smarter than average, they are still not good students! What they can do, they owe to their own thinking, their own research. But they cannot learn, they cannot submit to the methods presented and demanded by the school. We know children whose understanding of the laws of numbers and their functions borders on genius, but who are poor calculators at school because they complicate their lives, get lost in their own methods, but above all offend the teacher by refusing to do things as he or she requires. And in areas that are not in their particular interests, they do not perform at all, despising everything with sovereign authority. To all this is added the lack of respect for authority, even if the teacher does not suffer from the typical professional attitude and believes that he must punish the lack of respect for his highly worthy person. Such behaviour on the part of a child must be very disruptive to the situation of the whole group.

What the educator should do in general is to respect the child as he is – this seems necessary and effective, especially with an autistic boy. One should not necessarily want to impose on him what he does not like, but recognize what he does in a particular way, and also point it out in front of the class in order to alleviate the tense situation of the mocked and attacked outsider. One must “play the game” in some sense: offer him books that promote him in his particular field, discuss it with him; in doing so, one must acknowledge that the conversation is on the same level, not that the teacher or doctor can demand authority, but rather that one must face the critical confrontation with the autistic person.

At this highly intellectual level, it is possible to establish good communication with these intelligent autistic children, and bonds can be formed that last a lifetime and also provide a good emotional background. A word about the emotional domain of these children is in order here. One often has the impression that these children are “insensitive”, devoid of feelings, as expressed by the school of psychiatrist Schröder of Leipzig: they can do such things at school and especially in the family that one could consider them incapable of empathy. They make life difficult for the mother, because they torment her and say brutal things, so that the small family circle can be seriously disturbed. But again, we see that such a boy cares for an animal in a touching way, goes to great lengths for this animal, but also shows, mostly in secret, a deep emotional involvement. Of course, these emotions are often “different”, isolated, singular. But above all, they are permanently linked to people who understand and respect them in their specificity.

Social value

Finally, we must address the question of the future of these children who are so out of step. It is clear that the autistic children in our population are recruited only among boys (whereas Asperger in the USA also saw typical autistic girls). We find this quite explicable: this type can be said to be an extreme variant, if you will, of a caricature of the male – with its exaggerated abstraction, extensive loss of reference to reality, distancing from instinct, overspecialization. All of this is far removed from “typical female possibilities” – there has been much philosophizing about gender equalization in the USA in the context of female emancipation.

At puberty, most of these children are extremely behaviourally disturbed. They change schools several times because some of the other children can no longer stand them. If the formal intellectual talent is there afterwards, it is absolutely necessary to strive to get them into the higher school and to take care of them for several painful years during their curative educational struggles, for example with the understanding school doctor as an advocate. For one should not lose the convincing positive sides of the child, which the teacher sometimes does not even notice! Autistic children urgently need to be trained in their special abilities during their secondary education, otherwise they would not have good career prospects. In the later years of high school, the situation is generally better: the talent for abstract and critical thinking comes into play, and the peculiarities of behaviour and learning techniques are then tolerated.

While especially academically gifted children often have great difficulties finding their profession after the end of school, hesitating, doubting and even changing career directions, young autistic people usually find their way with almost dreamlike certainty into the profession that seems to be predetermined for them according to their interests, sometimes even from an early age. Indeed, they draw most of their energy from their selves, the “autos”.

They often choose very specialized, sometimes even remote professions – in the sciences, sometimes also in the arts – and their achievements sometimes border on genius. It should not be forgotten that the development of modern science, with its more and more differentiated specialization, adapts to these types. Yes, it seems to us that a dose of “autism” is almost necessary for certain high-level scientific or artistic achievements: a detour from what is concretely necessary, simple and practical, the ability to take new, unlearned, unused paths of thought and creation, and even the narrowing down to a particular field worked with strong dynamics and originality.

Of course, these people remain difficult and sometimes strange throughout their lives – isn’t this the case of the “absent-minded professor”, an immortal figure of fun, an autistic person, absent-minded and ridiculously clumsy only in everyday things, but often admired in his grandiose work?

Sexual and family relationships of these people also remain difficult and full of tension: finding the “you” in love, absorbing themselves in the other – is very difficult for them and it often fails. These problems have often been described in modern poetry (by autistic authors who have described their own difficulties?). But in reality, there are also many tragic events with such personalities, probably more than with other people – which confirms the truth that difficult people suffer both from themselves and from others, as Kurt Schneider defined psychopathy. Even in the search for a profession, things do not always go well. Interests and abilities are often too far away from the real possibilities. So, there are also existences that earn, only painfully and sparingly, what is necessary for their body; at the same time, they are very neglected, lead a spunky and fanciful existence, and there are also vagabonds that no one cares about and who “have set their sights on nothing”. But there are also faithful servants who do above-average things, with unwavering commitment and uncommon skills.

But this raises the important question of the social value of difficult people who are out of the ordinary. The example of autistic personalities, in particular, shows that it would be quite wrong to

use the term “inferior” in such a context: it would be a mistake – and it would also block the way to curative education! In these cases, however, it can be clearly demonstrated that a child’s particular difficulties and abilities are inseparable and, moreover, they are mutually dependent, two sides of the same individuality. It is only through the existence of such characteristics that the diversity of the human world comes into being; and some autistic people bring much more to the world, they are “the salt of the earth”!

Regarding the problems of early childhood autism, especially the type described by Kanner, there is a vast literature from many countries. This may be surprising, given the rarity of these cases. However, we believe that this can be explained by the fact that autism is a general human problem. This point will be developed at the end.

Humanity in general

We have shown that autistic behaviour disorders can have different origins, which can very well be distinguished and should be distinguished – but which nevertheless show similarities overall and in subtle details. Thus, as has already been said, we can probably assume the existence of a constitutionally predetermined “autism factor”.

But we believe that humans generally have the ability to behave in an “autistic” manner. Human existence is marked by a tension of opposites; the human being is deeply rooted in his will to be a fellow human being. Long before the intellectual faculties are awakened, from early childhood, the human child has differentiated possibilities of contact, he is able to express himself and to perceive the expressions of others; the child pushes with a strong dynamic towards the others, he wants to be with them. Aristotle defines human existence as follows: man is a “political animal”, a creature that forms a community, linked to the community in all things, and also richly equipped in means of contact.

But the human being is not only a part of the world, resonating with people and things, to a certain extent depending on the respective environmental situation. He is also a “self”, anchored in himself, which distinguishes him from the world, sometimes even opposes it. There are developmental phases where this becomes particularly strong: in certain fear phases in early childhood, in the “defiance phase” of the young child, but especially in the period of self-discovery of puberty (both in the intellectual and emotional realm), in which serious conflicts with the environment can arise, precisely because their own self is now emerging strongly. Certain experiences can also turn people against themselves, making them “autistic” to some extent: disappointments, severe suffering. Expressions such as those during the experience of depression have similarities with autistic behaviour: the blank stare, being cut off from external stimuli. Finally, a person in a state of creative and spontaneous mental activity also exhibits “autistic” behaviour. He has to protect himself to a large extent from the outside world, against people and things, he has to go inside himself, he has to withdraw into himself; one could give many examples of this in poetic descriptions as well as in fine arts.

We must therefore admit that humans generally have the possibility of behaving in an autistic way, just as they are equipped by nature with tools that allow them to be part of the human community, to absorb the momentary situation and to “respond” to it in an adapted way.

In unfavourable environmental situations and educational conditions, pathological degrees of autism can develop, bordering on psychosis. The fact that the human being observing himself, in front of an object, recognizes so many things that are peculiar to him, is probably the fascinating thing that occupies so many researchers today in an exhaustive way.