On Autism

by Jeffrey Burghauser (September 2024)

Metaphysical Head #1 (Mihail Chemiakin, 20th C)

Back in the 1960s, an old professor of mine found himself tasked with hosting a delegation of Soviet poets. How to entertain a busload of Russians on official business in Buffalo, New York? The professor had an absolutely inspired idea: take them on a field trip to a typical American supermarket. The poets were floored, of course, at the sight of so much food; some cried openly.

Without wishing to produce the impression of ingratitude for

the unprecedented accomplishment that is the American supermarket, I must confess to finding them disorienting places. They're windowless. Their culinary taxonomies are confusing. (While both relish and soy sauce are obviously condiments, neither is near the ketchup—the *quintessential* condiment. The relish is by the pickles; the soy sauce, in the "Asian" section.) And, for some reason, the supermarket sends my iPhone frantically searching for a signal.

On a recent Kroger run, I was examining some broccoli crowns, which were stacked on the lowest tier of an open-display fridge. I tend to get absorbed in undertakings like this, which is a mercy when one wants to avoid noticing where one actually is.

From within my improvised Arcadia, however, I recoiled with a spastic violence that was considerable enough to startle a fellow shopper.

"When vegetables attack!" the middle-aged suburbanite laughed.

Huh?

It took a few moments to piece things together. You see, a damp clot of kale had cascaded from the topmost tier, and violated my field of vision *en route* to the floor. This had made my whole sense of reality lapse. Judging from the stranger's expression, I must have looked every bit as disquieted as I was.

Soon thereafter, I attended an academic conference on autism. The keynote speaker was doing her thing; official diagnostic criteria were advancing like wind-up toy monkeys across a lunch counter. They included:

- "Highly restricted, fixated interests that are abnormal in intensity or focus." ("…*such as the precise density*

of broccoli florets," I reflected, "*and the likelihood of condensation beading on their surface, rather than being absorbed into the crown.*")

- "Hyper- or hypo-reactivity to sensory input or unusual interests in sensory aspects of the environment." ("…*such as responding to a falling kale as if it were a Luftwaffe raid over London*," I thought.)

And on it went. This was well-trodden speculative terrain for me. As a bookish neurotic with occasional spells of melancholia (not to mention a host of other quirks, some of which recall Oliver Sacks case studies), modern psychiatry isn't totally unknown to me. More than one ponderously credentialed beard-kneader has invited me to reflect upon the correspondences between my own quirks and certain entries in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual*.

We're told that autism is inherited, like cystic fibrosis or a castle. But what does "inheritance" mean under these circumstances? I know an extended family of farmers just outside of town, the patriarchs of which are a sturdy, taciturn bunch. It doesn't stir any scientific concern that their sons are (rather than opera-singing theoretical physicists) sturdy and taciturn. It's equally unremarkable that my own sons are neither sturdy nor taciturn. They kvetch with endurance and emphasis. They muse upon the motives underlying religious observance. They detest salami, and will gladly explain at immense length why this is so.

In other words, whether "nature" or "nurture" be responsible, most kids take after their parents. This observation is unlikely to impress the Royal Swedish Academy of Sciences.

Sometimes, of course, autism is said to emerge, as it were, spontaneously. Dad does HVAC instillation, and spends his leisure hours drinking Coors Light while squawking and

bellowing at televised football. Mom is a good churchgoing homemaker who attains contentment by making macramé curtains. But little Johnny has thick eyeglasses, no social finesse, and a disturbing fondness for railroad timetables, like the eponymous hero of Vladimir Nabokov's *Pnin*. (Professor Pnin's pathetic social incompetence comes not from being autistic—which he isn't—, but from being Russian.)

Such is the diagnostic bayou presented by autism: everything and its opposite may lead to a diagnosis. It's both hereditary and random. It's characterized both by muteness and Ciceronian eloquence; by crippling literal-mindedness and cool irony; by introversion and oblivious extroversion; by staggering mathematical skill and downright innumeracy. If there's a diagnostic trawling net that could theoretically ensnare (with equal ease) William F. Buckley Jr., Dustin Hoffman's character from *Rain Man*, and the guy who runs the conveyer rack at my local drycleaner, then the criteria must be grievously ill-calibrated.

Not that there's any apparent will to correct this; a bad status quo is sometimes prevented from becoming even worse by everyone quietly agreeing to leave important words untrammeled by anything so restrictive as an actual definition. In Ohio, my adopted home state, we have the Autism Scholarship Program, without which many families would be subjected to intolerable financial strain. Any kid who's nudged into the therapeutic bureaucracy's crosshairs is (by definition) struggling in school. Whatever diagnostic paradigm best reflects reality, these students often face challenges requiring intervention—and intervention isn't cheap. According to the Ohio Department of Education & Workforce, students qualify for the Autism Scholarship if they've been "identified by their district as a child with autism and for whom the district has created an individualized education plan (IEP)." In other words, to receive an Autism Scholarship, you must be autistic. Edifying stuff. While the school district is empowered to

diagnose, one can also obtain a "private diagnosis," which, according to Ohio Revised Code 3310.41(A)(6)(c), should: "Be dated and signed by the doctor or psychologist providing the diagnosis, [including] the address and telephone number of the doctor or psychologist providing the diagnosis, preferably on letterhead." And, in case you were curious, "psychologist" means "any person who holds self [*sic*] out to the public by any title or description of services incorporating the words 'psychologic,' 'psychological,' 'psychologist,' 'psychology,' or any other terms that imply the person is trained, experienced, or an expert in the field of psychology."

Any outfit so untroubled by this level of tautology (a "psychologist" being anyone who practices psychology, and "psychology" being, well … we're never really told) might not be the place to look for a sturdy definition of "autism," which is far more nebulous a label than "psychologist."

Our current diagnostic paradigm is most dangerous because, among the fundamental misunderstandings in which it's rooted, is a fundamental misunderstanding of excellence. An illuminating parallel is found in a 2015 scientific paper concerning (of all things) monkey genitals. It reported the discovery of an inverse relationship between the volume of a male howler monkey's call and the size of its testicles. Experts speculate that howler monkeys have only so much raw genetic resources. If a monkey is going to be given massive cojones, there isn't enough magic remaining to generate a good Wagnerian bellow. And conversely, the Axl Rose of the crew can only acquire his particular talent (a function of the hyoid bone, I'm told) at the expense of his reproductive apparatus.

A twenty-year career in education has pointed me toward the conclusion that a similar principle applies to human learning—that each intellectual credit has its corresponding deficit. I've certainly encountered some students over the years who were super-geniuses in multiple academic disciplines, *and* athletically graceful, *and* socially

dexterous, *and* morally upright, *and* responsible custodians of their own finances, *and* able to sight-read Monteverdi's sacred works, *and* never forget where they've parked their car. By and large, however, super-geniuses, when not staggering the cognitive commoners with their skills in, say, physics, spend an awful lot of time waddling haplessly through English Lit, and failing to get dates. One recalls Welsh poet Dylan Thomas, who, while an artistic genius, was so clueless about his own personal hygiene that his long-suffering wife would place chocolates alongside the bathtub in an attempt to lure him thither. The lives of the artists are dense with similar stories; up until recently, they were considered endearing.

A skill is often counterbalanced by a limitation. But sometimes the skill and the limitation are identical. Consider the case of Solomon Schechter (1847 – 1915), the scholar who unlocked the secrets of the Cairo Genizah. Since devout Jews don't discard books or documents containing God's name, once a text becomes irrelevant or damaged beyond use, it's deposited in a special storeroom called a "genizah," typically located in a synagogue or cemetery. An older genizah can serve as a time capsule, supplying panoramic views of remote periods, since it contains everything from private correspondence to theological treatises. When, in the nineteenth century, a genizah of uncommon antiquity and size was discovered beneath Cairo's Ben Ezra Synagogue, Prof. Schechter became the puzzle master, piecing together the scraps of parchment and paper. In total, the Cairo Genizah contained roughly 400,000 documents composed in Hebrew, Aramaic, Arabic, and other languages. Schechter was uniquely qualified to impose order on the chaos, which he did indefatigably for many years, sacrificing his lungs to the ancient mold, his eyesight to the small, faded letters, and overall finding himself an ideal candidate for the container ship of maladies attending the sedentary, isolated scholarly life.

The traditional view is that Schechter's exertions were

heroic. Nowadays, however, I suspect that he'd have received an autism diagnosis, followed by whatever combination of patented medicine and psychotherapy is needed to facilitate Sol's ascent to the pinnacle of earthly existence: the distinction of being the best insurance adjuster in Kenosha, Wisconsin.

Prof. Schechter would not be popular today. I imagine him being replaced at the behest of some HR golem by a junior colleague who, rather than possessing *useful* madness (the sort that allows a man to spend a decade hunched over papyrus fragments), possesses *useless* madness (the sort that allows a man to believe that Hamas is just as benign as Lutheran World Relief). When Donald Trump retakes the White House, I hope he appoints a Secretary of Education who embraces the motto: "Let Americans Be Weird Again."

Great thinkers are often great weirdos; since every constellation of traits now constitutes a bona fide "identity" deserving federal protection and universal huzzahs, the weirdos ought to get into the act. During Black History Month, we're all expected to *ooh* and *aah* over a legacy including such indispensable boons to civilized life as "I, Too, Sing America," the windshield wiper, the traffic light, "Minnie the Moocher," and the potato chip. Weirdos are at least as impressive. During Weirdo Appreciation Month, we'd celebrate novelist Marcell Proust (who lived in a cork-lined room), pianist Glenn Gould (who reflexively sang along to whatever Bach keyboard work he was playing), and literary Swiss Army Knife Samuel Johnson (an immense, lumbering figure who, owing to what would today be diagnosed as OCD, Tourette's, and God knows what else, would alarm the uninitiated with his bizarre gesticulations and involuntary bird-noises). Mathematicians would be robustly represented, including Paul Erdös, who was challenged by a colleague to abstain from chemical stimulants for one month; upon successfully meeting the challenge, Erdös famously said to his colleague: "You've set mathematics back a

month."

Although being eccentric isn't guaranteed (or even likely) to make you a great intellect, it's undeniable that great intellects are often weirdos. Contrary to what your well-intentioned teachers might have said, a broad perspective isn't necessarily good or healthy; and geniuses often possess a pathological surfeit of it. Imagine, for example, that you're John Milton, and that you've just completed an epic poem intended to "justify the ways of God to Man." The dimension of reality in which your daughter is scheduled to have a ballet recital must seem unreal, if not downright trivial. Also, if you're a genius, and you believe that your creative output is of cosmic value, then you'll inevitably develop a highly idiosyncratic sense of what your time is "worth"—a sense that's disjointed from any conceivable real-world pay-scale. If you happen to be in the middle of composing, say, the *Mass in B-Minor*, you can't *possibly* get paid enough, since the *Mass* will earn you immortality, whereas no amount of gold can do that.

Cognate with our misunderstanding of excellence is our misunderstanding of individuality. From sea to shining sea, high school guidance counselors' offices are adorned with posters of predatory birds soaring into the sunset, of sinewy *übermenschen* dangling from the sides of mountains, and of maidens in sundresses strolling barefoot through upland meadows whilst dreamily blowing on dandelion seedheads—the images captioned: "Be Yourself," or some variant thereof.

But true originality is lonely; it's best personified not by a daydreaming dryad holding an invasive taraxacum in her slender fingers, but by folk artist James Hampton, who spent his life making ecclesiastical paraphernalia out of tin foil, Yoo-hoo bottles, and construction paper, or by Lord Byron quaffing Gewürztraminer from a polished human skull, or, indeed, by an anonymous vicenarian in Omaha with cigarette ash in his chest hair—a man old enough to have concluded that there's nobody on

God's green earth who will ever understand him, but young enough to know that he's staring down the barrel of 60ish years of social dysfunction, Stouffer's frozen meatloaf, and mediocre internet pornography. Originality, like excellence, can be a crushing burden.

But human life in general can be a crushing burden. "I'll never get out of this world alive," sings the irreplaceable Hank Williams. An awkward child, he applied himself to music with superhuman intensity, music being (per the diagnostic rubric) a "highly restricted, fixated interest that is abnormal in intensity or focus."

Was Hank Williams autistic? Fascinating question. Because nobody has ever seen him shopping for broccoli, we may never know.

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