
Autistic autobiographies and more-than-human emotional geographies

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Abstract. This paper draws on an analysis of forty-five published autobiographical accounts of individuals with an autistic spectrum disorder (ASD) to highlight the important role of their, often intense, emotional relations to 'natural' things and places. In doing so, it offers a partial corrective to clinical and popular views of people with autism as almost entirely asocial and unconcerned with the beings and doings of others. A textual hermeneutic of the phenomenal insights reported by authors reveals instead that their personal geographies are characterized by rich, rewarding, and meaningful relationships with the wider more-than-human world, and that aspects of their lives can be undeniably, agreeably, 'social' in this broader sense. Such an analysis may offer important, albeit methodologically limited, insights into experiences of ASD while also challenging dominant understandings of 'sociality'—in the sense of 'being-with-others'—and of emotional involvement, that focus entirely on interactions between human beings. Indeed, to some extent, these emotionally charged experiences of the 'natural' world resonate with the feelings of many more neurotypical individuals.

Introduction

"Autism made social life hard, but it made animals easy."

Temple Grandin (2005, page 1)

Qualitative analysis of recent autistic autobiographies (Davidson, 2007; 2008a; 2008b, and below) reveals that authors' relations with nonhuman others constitute a significant emergent theme. This theme, which is explicitly the focus of best-selling volumes such as Temple Grandin's (2005) *Animals in Translation: Using the Mysteries of Autism to Decode Animal Behaviour* and Dawn Prince-Hughes's (2004) *Songs of the Gorilla Nation: My Journey Through Autism*, recurs so frequently (appearing in approximately half of the forty-five texts studied) that it clearly merits further investigation. Such autobiographical writings suggest that autistic interactions with animals—and sometimes also inanimate aspects of the 'natural' environment—have profoundly emotional qualities of a kind more usually associated with social settings. This suggestion is conspicuously at odds with widespread popular views, largely supported by clinical accounts, that autistic individuals⁽¹⁾ are exceptionally asocial and almost entirely unconcerned with the beings and doings of others (Frith, 1996; Tidmarsh and Volkmar, 2003). The name given to the disorder does, after all, derive from the Greek *autos* (meaning 'self') and is fully intended to connote the aloneness and separation of those frequently described as living as if 'in a world of their own' (Szatmari, 2004; see also Davidson, 2007).

⁽¹⁾ 'Person-first' language is avoided in this paper to reflect the preference of the majority of authors whose work contributes to this study. As Elesia Ashkenazy explains, "Though it is common for both the medical and cure-focused communities to refer to an autistic person as a person *with* autism, such references are not the lingo of the greater whole of the autistic community. In a nutshell, saying a person *has* autism may imply that the person is defective or that there is an inherent problem or sickness within the person. It also implies that autism can somehow be separated from the person" (Ashkenazy, 2009, original emphasis). Also see Jim Sinclair's (2009) influential work "Why I dislike 'person first' language".

This model has begun to be challenged by many of those diagnosed [whether clinically ascribed or self-identifying (see Davidson, 2008b)] with disorders on the autism spectrum (ASDs) who are able to ‘publicly’ communicate—through a process of personal reflection on and writing about—their experiences [see, for example, the accounts collected by Douglas Biklen (2005)]. In fact, ASD authors recount narratives that present radical challenges to the ‘self-centered’ stereotypes that circulate around autism, although all agree that social interactions with other humans are often experienced as a perceptually overpowering and disorienting nightmare. Yet, despite this, the very existence of these increasingly numerous narratives are, even in their own terms, indicative of these authors’ desires and struggles to overcome the communicative difficulties they recount in detail. As Biklen (2005, page 49) states: “Far from confirming the deficit model, where the person labeled autistic is presumed isolated and uninterested, recent autobiographical accounts reveal people in search of connections with the world.”

What they also reveal, though, is that these *connections* are, for a significant number of ASD authors, often experienced most readily and most intensely with(in) a ‘natural’ world that apparently offers some respite from the disruptive, intrusive, and communicatively overburdened social world. These personal geographies are characterized by rich, rewarding, and meaningful relationships with more-than-human entities such as animals or trees, which, in this broader sense, offer a form of agreeable sociality, a kind of being-with-others imbued with many varied phenomenal and emotional resonances.

Of course, such a claim might be perceived as uncritically accepting precisely of the kind of distinction between ‘natural’ and ‘social’ worlds that has been deemed problematic in recent geographical and philosophical literature (Braun and Castree, 2001; Latour, 2004; Wolch and Emel, 1998). The idea that our understandings of nature are sociohistorically variable and that our experiences and evaluations of ‘natural’ entities necessarily differ according to prevailing interpretations is widely (if not universally) accepted. But this should not be taken to mean that all there is to the world is human interpretations, that ‘nature’ is *just* a social construct (Smith, 1999). The phenomenal reality of the more-than-human world is not dependent upon the degree to which that world is socially preinterpreted—my chemical knowledge of the molecular structure of water will not stop me drowning or slake my thirst.

Indeed, the case of autism seems to offer a wide spectrum of possibilities where such social preinterpretations are minimized or even entirely absent precisely because of a lack of access to socially mediated and communicated understandings—whether through ‘choice’ (a concern by those with ASD to avoid and shield themselves from social situations) or ‘necessity’ (the difficulty or even impossibility of understanding socially articulated meanings). Ironically, in such circumstances, experiences of the ‘natural’ world might actually appear more immediate, more ‘real’, engaging, and evocative, precisely because the mediating and disturbing effects and affects of human sociality are, relatively speaking, absent. The entity on which concern is focused is not being constantly overwritten, taken up by, or involved in those socially contrived and socially meaningful activities that seem to confuse and confound those with ASDs. The point here, then, is not to posit an absolute distinction between nature and culture, or between nature and artifice; it is, by beginning with ‘insiders’ accounts of their own autistic experiences, to explain how, and to some extent why, emotional involvements with elements of a world that are always both more than, and irreducible to, their human (social) interpretations become an important focus for a different form of sociality, an emotionally experienced being-with-others who are more-than-human.

The paper, then, sets out to provide a hermeneutic context for the self-reported experiences of ASD authors' relations to this more-than-human phenomenal world, paying special attention to their emotional geographies. The focus on emotions is important because emotions are, as Martin Heidegger (1988) argues, vital modes of appropriating and connecting to the phenomenologically experienced world, modes of understanding and relating that are, moreover, often preinterpretative and/or resistant to being fully communicated. The clinical and externalist focus on the relative absence of ASD connections to the social world necessarily undervalues these, often intense, kinds of emotional engagements. What is more, ASD authors' insider accounts are, of course, themselves attempts to render these emotional experiences into a socially communicable (linguistic) form. The hope, then, is that interpreting these accounts might illuminate something of the 'nature' of (at least some) autistic experiences, while also having wider resonance with the—currently socially undervalued—feelings of many more neurotypical individuals who also develop a sensibility and sensitivity concerning this more-than-human world. It is not accidental that many 'ecologically' sensitive people also seem to value their encounters with rocks, birds, or trees in terms of their providing respite from the constant, interminable, and intrusive circulation of social forms and meanings.

Researching autistic worlds

Perhaps surprisingly, given the wide range of disorders, disabilities, and differences that has featured in geographical and social science research, and despite the increasing prevalence (see below) and extensive presence of autism in the popular and cultural imagination (eg Haddon, 2004), firsthand experience of autism had, until very recently, attracted relatively little attention [see Bagatell (2007), Biklen (2005), and Jones et al (2001; 2003), reviewed in Silverman (2008)]. The amount of clinical literature available is, of course, massive—there are several journals dedicated to the subject—and while diagnostic guidelines have inevitably changed since Leo Kanner and Hans Asperger's independent descriptions in the 1940s (Frith, 1996), most recent accounts [drawing on the DSM-IV-TR (APA, 2000) and/or ICD-10 (WHO, 1992)] focus on the same core features initially identified—poor social skills, limited imagination, and repetitive, obsessive behavior and interests (Tidmarsh and Volkmar, 2003, page 517). The majority of recent accounts also agree that incidence of ASDs is increasing at an alarming rate, and current estimates of ASD prevalence are at around 1 in 100–150 (eg Baird et al, 2006), up from 4 in 10 000 in the 1970s. This apparently massive increase is described by the director of the UK Autism Research Centre as “most likely a reflection of better awareness and broader diagnosis” (Baron-Cohen, 2003, page 136). However, debates persist around possible alternative and particularly environmental explanations of this increase, variously described as ‘exponential’ and of ‘epidemic proportions’ (Nash, 2002). Controversies around the possible role of the MMR (measles, mumps, and rubella) vaccination are well cited in the popular press, but the majority of clinical accounts maintain that ASDs are strongly genetic in origin and that environment is largely irrelevant (Baron-Cohen, 2003, page 37).

It is widely recognized that sex is an overwhelmingly significant predictive factor for autism, and Simon Baron-Cohen is fairly typical in drawing attention to the fact that there are ten diagnosed males to every female. Far less typically, he has recently argued that autism is a form of “extreme male brain” linked to heightened levels of prenatal testosterone (Baron-Cohen, 2003). This claim is predictably contentious, and debates continue about the gendered incidence and experience of autism (see Davidson, 2008b) and, also, its ‘social construction’ (Molloy and Vasil, 2002; Nadesan, 2005). For example, Tony Attwood (2006, page 2) argues that, while the ratio

of referrals for diagnostic assessment for Asperger's syndrome (generally considered to be at the less 'severe' end of the autistic 'spectrum') is, indeed, 10:1, epidemiological research suggests that the actual figure is more like 4:1, partly because girls tend to have "subtler, or less severe, expression of the characteristics". (This, of course, does not necessarily undermine Baron-Cohen's argument.) Perhaps the most significant of related debates for those living with an ASD who are sufficiently 'high-functioning' to be able to write about their experience surrounds the question of whether ASDs should be conceptualized and treated as conditions of neurological and affective 'difference' rather than disability (Baker, 2006; Gevers, 2000). While such questions do not determine the discussion that follows, they do have important methodological and interpretative implications (see below).

Of the various core features of autism discussed in clinical literature and the increasing number of published firsthand accounts, it is the affective, relational differences that are of particular interest for this paper. The professionals' view of the presence—or, rather, absence—of such socioemotional qualities is best summarized by Baron-Cohen's (2003, page 137) statement that: "Autism is an empathy disorder: those with autism have major difficulties in 'mind reading' or putting themselves into someone else's shoes, imagining the world through someone else's eyes and responding appropriately to someone else's feelings." The question though is whether this inability to 'mind read' is necessarily linked to an *emotional deficit* or whether it is tied in more complex ways to problems associated with experiencing and understanding social interactions which result in finding such encounters particularly (and emotionally) disturbing.

Difficulties in responding to other people are not simply a matter of not recognizing their presence but seem to be closely connected to ASD individuals' extraordinarily heightened and/or fragmented perception of their surroundings. For example, Williams (2006, page 120) describes being "mesmerized by lines, patterns, symmetry, colored lights, spinning objects ... smells and noises. They could ... send me into inexplicable hysterics, manic bliss or an acute and phobic sense of invasion. I called this 'sensory heightening'." Williams argues that such feelings may themselves be products of social-emotional difficulties rather than straightforward sensory malfunctions; nonetheless, the phenomenology and emotionality of such an experience is "very real to the person experiencing it" (page 120). (The constant presence of such an emotional rollercoaster also helps to explain certain autistic traits, such as obsession with detail, repetitive behavior, and preference for sameness and predictability.) Although this area of autism is relatively underresearched, Ayshe Talay-Ongan and Kara Wood (2000, page 201) note that "the diagnosis of the disorder by many clinicians includes behavioral descriptions of abnormal sensory sensitivities", and their own empirical study suggests that the "presence of abnormal sensory experiences may also be precipitating and sustaining factors in communicative and affective impairments associated with the disorder" (page 210; see also Shore, 2003). The sensations caused by other people, who Williams refers to as 'outsiders', and the projection of their unpredictable expectations are experienced as an unbearable emotional intrusion into the ASD individual's world. Such accounts could then be taken to suggest that it makes a perfect kind of protective sense to avoid people as much as possible [in a manner reminiscent of agoraphobic social avoidance (Davidson, 2003)].

Autistic people are thus often described as preferring the 'company' of objects, maps, timetables, and mechanical 'systems' to that of people (Baron-Cohen, 2003, page 490). Attraction to technical/cultural systems does, indeed, feature heavily in ASD writings, but so also, and arguably just as significantly, do *natural* systems, things, and others, with whom apparently comfortable and comforting, lasting relations

are formed. The point here is not to argue that ‘nature’ is more important than ‘culture’ in ASD worlds and writings, but, rather, to question why such natural relations are so often overlooked by external, clinical accounts. One possible explanation relates to a much more general environmentally blinkered and anthropocentric tendency prevalent in the contemporary West and significant sectors of academia (see below).

Autobiography analysis as investigative method

The rise in the number of ASD autobiographies published mirrors the dramatic increase in the reported incidence of ASD (see above). Such life narratives provide an invaluable yet underexplored qualitative resource for those interested in understanding ‘insider’ accounts of ASD. The specific methodological implications of utilizing such autobiographical materials are discussed at length in several recent text (eg Avrahami, 2007; Davidson, 2008a; 2008b; and Smith and Watson, 1996; 2001). They include issues concerning the reliability of memories and their recursive interpretation, especially when inserted into a totalizing and linear life narrative, the pressure to conform to a particular (post-Enlightenment) textual form and model of the self, and the potential influence of previous works. [For example, the theme of the autistic as an ‘alien from another planet’ recurs frequently (Miller, 2003; O’Neill, 1999), but it is difficult to disentangle its use as an apt metaphor for ASD experiences from the influence of previous well-known external accounts, such as Oliver Sacks’s (1995) *An Anthropologist on Mars*]. The fact that ASD autobiographies are sometimes ‘facilitated’ by others (see Smith, 1996) adds a further level of interpretative difficulty.

There are also real problems in trying to generalize from ASD autobiographical accounts to the experience of autism in general. First, many of those with ASDs lack the skills or resources, whether cognitive, social, or financial, to present their accounts in a publishable form. This focus on book-based autobiography therefore screens out the vast majority of—and probably more typical—ASD experiences. Only the most coherent accounts are likely to be published and such accounts will usually be written by those at the less ‘severe’ end of the spectrum. The question of how representative such texts can actually be of the experiences of those incapable of publishing their own stories is obviously moot. Their nonrepresentative character is also suggested by the fact that there are proportionally many more accounts written by women than might be expected given the highly gendered incidence of ASD. (Only eighteen of forty-five texts identified and analyzed prior to the point at which data saturation was judged to have occurred were male authored.) This disproportionality may also reflect the generally more subtle expression of ASD in women (see above). Extending conclusions drawn from ASD biographies to autism in general is therefore problematic, although similar problems reoccur with other methods geared toward gathering insider accounts—for example, semistructured interviews (Davidson, 2003).

And so, without underestimating the methodological limitations of this approach, the fact that autism is not an all-or-nothing condition but a conditional *spectrum*—taken together with the widespread phenomenological similarities between autobiographical accounts and across the gender divide—suggests a genuine overlap in ASD experiences that might well provide insights even into more severe cases. Indeed, we would argue that autobiographical writings constitute uniquely suitable ‘data’ for qualitative research on autism (Davidson, 2007; 2008a; Smith, 1996), a view that is, crucially, explicitly supported by many of the ASD authors whose work informs this paper. Not only do such texts present insider accounts but the very communicative and social challenges that typify the condition mean that those with ASDs often prefer to interact with others via the written rather than spoken word [which goes some way towards explaining the popularity of ASD Internet chat rooms (Davidson, 2008a; Miller, 2003)].

Gunilla Gerland (2003, page 53), for example, states that “[e]xpressing words in writing was much easier for me than taking the long way round, as I experienced it, via speech”. Similarly, in her preface to an edited collection of personal stories of college students with autism, Dawn Prince-Hughes explains at some length that writing is simply the best way for an autistic person to communicate with (both ASD and ‘neurotypical’) others. For example, she states that “[i]t allows time to form one’s thoughts carefully, it has none of the overwhelming intensity of face-to-face conversation, and it affords the writer space to talk about one question or thesis without limit” (2002, page xiii).

Prince-Hughes also draws attention to a sense expressed by many ASD authors that there is a desperate need for research that is both sympathetic to the nature of ASD experience and also conducted, as far as possible, on ASD individuals’ own terms. “There is simply no way for nonautistic people to gather this kind of information through questionnaires or interviews, or through reading what nonautistic people have said about us” (2002, page xiv). As Mitzi Waltz argues, “[p]eople with autism are denied primacy, and even agency, in all but the least-mediated personal texts” (2005, page 432), and for such reasons (among others), close attention should be paid to self-produced ‘ethnographic narratives’: such “autistic autobiography is rare, and in my opinion valuable” (Prince-Hughes, 2002, page xi). Donna Williams (1996), too, emphasizes the need for an ‘inside-out approach’.

While there are many more accounts available online, this study focuses on hard-copy publications that are obviously, unambiguously intended to be publicly available and read without restriction (or ethical reservation). Of course, the autobiographical sources identified are not exhaustive but indicative of the range of writings currently available. This study draws on forty-five ASD autobiographies and edited collections of autobiographical accounts identified through academic search engines, by snowballing from academic research papers and firsthand accounts, and via non-academic literature searches (eg Amazon.com, the *New York Review of Books*, and the *London Review of Books*). It is difficult, if not impossible, to estimate the exact number (and gender) of autobiographical accounts published but, while there are limitations to such purposive sampling (Curtis et al, 2000), we suggest that the results of this broad-based and inclusive technique are reasonably representative of available firsthand accounts.

These autobiographical writings were subjected to a sequential process of detailed annotation, coding for emergent themes, and critical discourse analysis (Fairclough, 1995). However, the emphasis in this paper is very much on the interpretative potential of phenomenological and hermeneutic approaches. The challenge in interpreting these texts is to allow the descriptive immediacy underlying ASD authors’ experiential accounts to emerge in ways that challenge the reader to attend to the far from usual meanings they acquire. The focus is on what life looks like, feels like, and *means* for these authors. This requires that we trust insiders’ accounts, despite sometimes surprising departures from typical experience, expectations, or what is widely considered common sense, about how, for example, we cannot have emotional or social relations with piles of sand or patches of grass, or that we cannot really be ‘friends’ with worms or with rocks (Gaita, 2002).

Phenomenological and hermeneutic dimensions of more-than-human geographies

Since the questions raised by this study are phenomenological (experiential) and hermeneutic (interpretative) in nature, the study’s methodology also reflects this. While phenomenology is not the only qualitative approach where evidence is “derived from first-person reports of life experiences” (Moustakas, 1994, page 84), it does offer an approach that is unusually sensitive to accounts of experiential differences, since its

starting point, as the term suggests, is the phenomenon (the immediate experience) itself as it is presented to thought. In other words, and especially as it developed out of the original work of Edmund Husserl, phenomenology has been concerned to ‘bracket out’ the naturalistic presuppositions we usually hold about *how* our experiences accord with the world’s underlying reality and our subsequent concern with uncovering the cause of these experiences rather than thinking about the experiences themselves. This naturalistic or ‘commonsense’ attitude is, as (Moran, 2000, page 147) notes, “deeply embedded in our everyday behaviour towards objects and also at work in our most sophisticated natural science”. By contrast, bracketing, referred to by Husserl as the *epoché*, excludes or abstains from the question of how experience relates to reality, effectively meaning that when it comes to reviewing the accounts of others’ experiences we are required to take them at face value rather than trying to squeeze them into our own preconceived ideas of how the world actually is, of what it is possible or meaningful to experience.

Those seeking to apply Husserl’s own approach tend to emphasize how this process of bracketing seeks to attain a kind of a-situational purity insofar as it attempts to approach phenomena in a way that is entirely free of suppositions. Thus, Clark Moustakas (1994, page 85) claims “[i]n the *Epoche*, we set aside our prejudgements, biases and preconceived ideas”. This ‘setting aside’ is an aim to be worked towards as a “preparation for new knowledge” (page 85) rather than an actually achievable state of affairs. It

“inclines me towards receptiveness. I am more readily able to meet something or someone and to listen and hear whatever is being presented, without coloring the other’s communication with my own habits of thinking, feeling and seeing, removing the usual ways of labelling or judging, or comparing” (page 89).

Aspects of such claims, however, seem at variance with any hermeneutic approach, much as that of Hans-Georg Gadamer (1998), which claims that all interpretation must inevitably start from “historically effected consciousness” (*wirkungsgeschichtliches Bewusstsein*)—that is, from within our already ‘socially’ pregiven horizon of understanding. Moustakas’s decontextualized, almost unworldly, notion of phenomenological abstraction is partly a result of not recognizing the problems inherent in simply trying to extrapolate Husserl’s *introspective* methodology to cover the experiences of *other* people. Our encounters with others’ experiences, and perhaps especially others’ textual or reported accounts of experiences, necessarily have a hermeneutic aspect. [Decontextualized understandings of phenomenology are also challenged by later phenomenological theorists. Heidegger, for example, specifically views our experiences as consequent upon our *there-Being* (Da-sein) and our ‘Being-in-the-world’, which also includes our being ‘thrown’ into particular sociohistorical and geographical circumstances that facilitate or impede certain kinds of understanding.]

Geographers cannot then simply apply Husserl’s methods. But, that said, the important methodological point here is precisely the manner in which both phenomenology and hermeneutics foster openness towards different experiences as an ongoing task. In the case of phenomenology, this is a recognition of the importance of (others’ potentially different) experiences as such, while, as Gadamer argues, the act of interpretation is itself dependent upon maintaining an openness toward what the other expresses to us (about those experiences). In this sense, they supplement each other in the ways they foster openness to other experiences as a methodological virtue.

Indeed, the tension between a pure (Husserlian) phenomenology and a socio-historically emplaced hermeneutics might be understood as mirroring the tension between the actual (more or less preinterpretative) experiences of the autistic insider and the need to communicate these experiences to themselves and others within a given

social horizon where possible. And, to this degree, the hermeneutic phenomenology of Gadamer might prove especially informative precisely because it draws ‘outside’ researchers’ attention to the limits of their own interpretative presuppositions.

Hermeneutically, the researcher necessarily works within the recognized and unrecognized ‘prejudices’ that are associated with, amongst other things, particular academic traditions—that is to say, within the ‘effective historical consciousness’ of his or her own situation. In our case, these effects might include the discourses, practices, vocabularies, ideologies, and so on which have influenced and contributed to the development of human geography. So when Gadamer emphasizes the interpretative importance of these ‘prejudices’, he does not intend this term to be understood pejoratively because such effects are, to some degree, both inevitable and invaluable. His point, too, is that we have to start all our interpretations from some-*where*, from a given interpretative situation. But this also means that if we are not open to different possibilities this ‘horizon’ of understanding can limit what we regard as important and constrain our ability to reach an understanding with others who do not share our presuppositions. (This is why he refers to the interpretative act as a ‘fusion of horizons’ of understanding.)

Now this helps explain why many approaches to those with ASDs, including clinical interpretations, have tended to focus on their deficiencies in emotional and communicative relations to other humans. Modern Western forms of knowledge, influenced by traditions of academic humanism and dominant human-centered ideologies regard relations to other humans as key to and definitional of human sociality. This is also true of *human* geography, where attempts to take social geographical studies beyond an exclusive focus on people—to a place where natural objects, others, and environments are more than mere background to humanity’s concerns—are rare. Even those interested in animal geographies (see Philo and Wilbert, 2000; Wolch and Emel, 1998) and in research around therapeutic landscapes (eg Williams, 2007) tend to emphasize the construction of social meanings around these entities/places rather than the phenomenology of encounters with them. [The claim of, say, a deep ecologist to experience nature in the raw, or to ‘think like a mountain’ (Seed et al, 1988), gets short shrift.] Unsurprisingly, human geographers tend to place social meanings at the front and center of their studies, thereby reflecting the working presuppositions of their discipline’s investigative lens. And, of course, phenomenology and hermeneutics, too, also have a similar effective history, being so closely linked to the development of the humanities and social sciences.⁽²⁾

Phenomenologically, the claims of ASD authors remain problematic so long as we stay within these socially and academically dominant horizons. Claims to experience emotional relationships with nonhumans seem to run up against the problem of transposing a person’s position into that of, for example, the animals those with ASDs claim to understand so well and to relate so closely to. So, for example, although Heidegger’s phenomenology allows that the human “already finds himself [sic] transposed into the animal in a certain manner” (1995, page 211) he also claims that the animal is that which it is most difficult to think, that there is, in effect, an unbridgeable gulf between us. We cannot, he suggests, think what it is like to be an animal precisely because its world, its phenomenal experiences, are so very different to those of human

⁽²⁾Difficulties in interpreting the more-than-human world also, somewhat ironically, expose the limits of Gadamer’s own focus on *human language*, which tends to overlook affective (emotional) embodied aspects of our interpretative relations to social *and natural* circumstances. This is why Mick Smith (2005) suggests that Gadamer’s notion of an ‘effective human historicity’ needs to be supplemented with an ‘affective natural historicity’ when we want to understand human relations to, and especially their feelings about, the wider nonhuman world.

beings and, in particular, because so much of our understanding revolves around the importance of a linguistic capacity that the animal lacks.

This obviously has potentially important ramifications for interpreting ASD authors' claims about their phenomenological experiences with the more-than-human world.

The phenomenological/hermeneutic question raised in trying to understand ASD authors' claims is whether non-ASD people can begin to know what it is like to be a person who claims to *feel more like* an animal, or even a place, than they feel like other people. What would that even mean and what are the implications of our asking such questions?

Autistic and (ab)normal emotion

As suggested above, firsthand autistic accounts challenge the idea that those with ASDs have an impoverished emotional capacity (Davidson, 2007; Jones et al, 2001) emphasizing, instead, differences in experiencing and difficulties in communicating or understanding emotions: "A person with autism has been described as being a distant and cold-hearted type of person. ... I feel a lot inside only I cannot express my feelings as openly as a normal person can" (Cowhey, 2005, page 71). Many describe feeling terrible pressure in the presence of others to perform in particular ways, to *act*—in order to pass as—'normal'. This entails determining and learning rules of behavior that seem to come 'naturally' to nonautistic others, such as when and where it is appropriate to smile, exactly how to do so, and even for how long. Thus, "every autistic person is a sociologist. We have to be" (Dave quoted in Osborne, 2002, page 68). Those with ASDs seem to face a hermeneutic challenge if and when they attempt to understand, or be understood by, non-ASD humans. What they 'lack' is not, on their own accounts, an emotional capacity as such, although it may appear to others to be so, but certain capabilities concerning interpretative intuitions that are more usually assumed as 'second nature' and hence to constitute a shared ground for the interpretative community. This makes any fusion of horizons of understanding much more difficult since those with ASDs have, instead, to make these implicitly assumed commonalities explicit through 'socio-logical' experimentation.

This interpretative difficulty is further complicated by phenomenological differences—that is to say, their emotional *experience* of those with ASDs as well as their expression [a distinction broadly accepted although conceptualized differently by various theorists of emotion (see Solomon, 2003)] tends to be far from typical too. ASD authors describe feelings around others that are unusually and often intolerably vivid and complex (Tidmarsh and Volkmar, 2003, page 518). Relating her own experience of sensory distortion, Prince-Hughes (2004, page 67) writes: "I lived in a kaleidoscope [... looking] at broken colored fragments of people", whose faces appeared as "blurry objects exploding with invasive stimuli" (page 169). Her account is fairly typical, and such sensory confusion can involve blurring of other kinds of boundaries. As Kamran Nazeer explains in his own autobiographical account: "There is high incidence of synesthesia too, that is, minds that correlate certain sounds, tastes or textures with colors" (Nazeer, 2006, page 69). Given that such melting of 'commonsense' distinctions can render people an overwhelming mess of noisy eyes, arms, and legs, it is unsurprising that emotions commonly associated with their presence are strongly negative, tending to involve fear and anxiety that lead to avoidance. People are very challenging to be with for many reasons. Simply sharing space with another is bewildering, and obstacles multiply when attempts are made to share anything more, such as observations or ideas, or even minimal information.

Phenomenal and hermeneutic challenges compound each other since language, with all its layers of expressive, communicative, and bodily complexity is experienced as being extraordinarily difficult and demanding: “you need to comprehend tone and gestures as well as context and the words used in order to get the meaning” (Nazeer, 2006, page 11). In a lighthearted illustration of his point, Nazeer claims that “[s]triking up conversation with strangers is an autistic person’s version of extreme sports” (page 31). People are best steered clear of, as even strange others can demand “to be taken account of [and] interact in a directly confrontational way that they called ‘normality’” (Williams, 2003, page 16).

Attending to ASD authors’ accounts allows us to see that antisocial tendencies need not necessarily mean that the autistic person is unfeeling. In fact, the opposite may be the case, as the very intensity of autistic feeling can mean other people are simply (felt) *too much*: one contributor to Jean Kearns Miller’s (2003) collection, ‘MM’, illustrates common misunderstandings when she claims: “people think that because I need more quiet that I am a selfish bitch [... but] I need the quiet not because I have a cold heart but because I can hear every plea from every being in whatever space I stand or sit or lie down in” (page 30). Like many ASD authors, she is *too* sensitive to, and overstimulated by, others’ actions and affects. Being with human others can be exhausting, as MM continues to explain, while at the same time highlighting that her preferred alternative is not solitude:

“I can only afford a certain amount of time among humans, and if I don’t get to moving my senses will overload, and the rest of the day I will have to put myself in the quiet of my room, and miss out on the trees and rocks and streams that talk to me so much more gently than any human” (page 30).

Williams feels similarly about social avoidance of a kind that seeks out different kinds of connection, rather than aloneness per se. She writes that:

“The rewards for friendship seemed a sick joke: closeness, attachment, belonging. Closeness made earthquakes go off inside of me and compelled me to run. Attachment reminded me painfully of my own vulnerability and inadequacy and was a threat to security. Belonging was with things and nature, not with people” (1994, page 113).

Thus, we begin to see that, while ASD authors cherish protected time and territory, the space they require to sense safety is not necessarily the ‘empty’ space (or ‘fortress’) of aloneness.⁽³⁾ It may be unpopulated by people, but the environment they desire can still be alive with nonhuman otherness, in whose company a rich and rewarding range of positive emotions can be experienced: in other words, they develop unusual or atypical emotional geographies. Most ASD authors are aware of this atypicality: Grandin writes, “I am told by my nonautistic friends that relationships with other people are what most people live for, whereas I get very attached to my projects and to certain places” (1996, page 140) and, again, “my strong emotional bonds are tied up with places more than people” (page 92). Even, and perhaps especially in the face of extreme perceptual distortion, natural objects and places can be profoundly, delightfully interesting, so long as there are no demands from others or pressures to ‘make sense’. ASD authors recount experiences of taking pleasurable sanctuary in hypnotically beautiful aspects of the nonhuman world. The senses of sand falling between her fingers—its shifting appearance and texture—could occupy Grandin for many happy hours: “Each grain was different ... as I scrutinized their shapes and contours, I went into a trance which cut me off from the sights and sounds around me” (1996, page 44).

⁽³⁾ *The Empty Fortress* was the title given to Bruno Bettelheim’s (1967) controversial account of what he described as the protective autistic shell.

While this ‘interaction’ seems clearly one-sided, others’ relations appear more ‘social’ in nature, at least in the sense that they involve unusual openness to other beings and posit some kind of reciprocal connection. Prince-Hughes (2004, page 50), for example, states that “I could feel the personalities of the rocks, the trees, the grass, the hills”, and, in her own striking terms, Williams (2003, page 16) writes:

“I was a social kid: social with the dirt, the trees, the grass I felt the world deeply and passionately. I was cheerful in my own world and I had a fascination with anything that was not directly confrontational and which would allow me to simply be.”

It seems that many and varied nonhuman others often match these criteria, allowing ASD authors to simply be and feel themselves, comfortably and even pleasurably, however divergent from the norm their feelings are taken to be by clinicians.

Autistic friendships and feeling different

Wendy Lawson’s autobiography describes the supposedly atypical emotional relations with nonhuman others she began to form in childhood: “Although I was unable to relate to other children (or even most other people, whatever their age) with animals it was different” (2005, page 28). She writes in detail about one particular companion animal, a ginger mongrel from whom she became inseparable:

“During my teenage years, my dog Rusty was my most loyal companion and we explored life together as only trusted friends know how ... she never changed. We understood one another, even without words. She demanded nothing from me except my acceptance and availability” (page 52).

The understanding which Lawson experienced, to the exclusion and bafflement of even ‘close’ family members, was felt to be *shared* with her friend: “To bark like a dog seemed perfectly normal to me” (page 44). This communicative connection with companion animals is not unusual in accounts of autism, as Jean Kearns Miller illustrates:

“I was raised by our Siamese cat. I could understand her language better than the human language, and so I spoke Siamese way before I spoke English, and I thought the cat was my real mother because I could understand her more than I could understand humans” (2003, page 54).

This quotation is drawn from an anthology of writings by women with autism that began life as an Internet list-serve. In one thread reproduced in the book, participants discuss the question: do you “have ongoing relationships with animals and/or with inanimate aspects of the world that are just as strong/important as (or more so than) your relationships with humans?” (page 54). Several do, and one respondent, Wendy, writes (in Miller, 2003, page 45): “I talk to cats like they are people, because I have this feeling that they can understand me. And if I treat them as friends, they become friends.” Another, Diane (in Miller, 2003, page 45), states: “I fixated on cats. But isn’t it sad that, so often, our parents and others have tried to take away these very fixations that have made our hearts open? When growing up (and even still now) I was frequently criticized by my family about liking cats so much.” Parents, understandably, typically prefer that their child act and have friends like other children, and ASD authors often write about the extent to which family have tried to force them into moulds of normality that simply do not fit. Often, however, they are also sensitive to the fact that there may be good and caring reasons for doing so. Gunilla Gerland’s book contains the following revelation:

“Earthworms were one of my great delights ... I fondled them and kissed them. I dug them up in my garden and cautiously patted them. My mother did not approve of my love of worms and wanted me to be less intimate with them” (2003, page 36).

Gerland's mother tried to persuade her not to kiss the worms, but she did not respond: "Then my mother made a good decision—the family should buy a cat. It worked. I loved our cat Love in the cat way, a love with one's integrity maintained, suited me very well." Her mother is understandably pleased when Gerland's infant affections take a more conventional turn—"it was more acceptable to fondle a cat" (page 37)—and, indeed, it is common for childhood relations to be formed with furry feline friends. For ASD authors, however, relationships are often established with less typical animals, not traditionally viewed as suitable 'companion' material.

Temple Grandin describes her particularly empathetic relations with cows in several publications that combine autobiographical and scholarly approaches to both animals and autism (eg Grandin, 1996; 2005).⁽⁴⁾ She claims that these "animals saved me" (2005, page 4), and takes pains to explain that she feels closer to cows than to people. Moreover, at times she suggests that she feels more *like* these animals—not simply that she likes or feels more *for* them—than for people: she refers to a strong connection between autistic people and animals: "autistic people have mostly simple emotions, too. That's why normal people describe us as innocent. An autistic person's feelings are direct and open, just like animal feelings. We don't hide our feelings, and we aren't ambivalent" (2005, page 89).

"Autistic people can think the way animals think. Of course, we also think the way people think—we aren't *that* different from normal humans. Autism is a kind of way station on the road from animals to humans, which puts autistic people like me in a perfect position to translate 'animal talk' into English" (pages 6–7, emphasis in original).

Grandin acknowledges that "[s]ome people will probably think this is an insulting thing to say about autistic people" (page 89) and she certainly does go further than the majority of ASD authors in stressing her sense of feeling different from humans in such potentially divisive, animalistic terms. Again, "my feelings are simpler and more overt, and like cattle" (Grandin and Scariano, 1996, page 92). But, if we bracket 'commonsense', humanist, presuppositions about the potentially insulting nature of such comparisons in terms of the way that Grandin's remarks might be taken to render those with ASD 'less than fully human', her account, like those of other ASD authors, actually offers an interpretative opening on autistic emotional geographies that would otherwise be unavailable.

Grandin explicitly situates autism as a 'way station' between abilities to understand animals and (non-ASD) humans, and explains this position as one of 'translation'. Miller, too, claims to speak cat before English, and to have an ability to understand animals that non-ASD people tend to lack themselves and thus fail to understand in others. Lawson writes of understanding her dog even without (or because of a lack of) words between them. The feelings of closeness these authors express between themselves and other animals—the 'love', 'intimacy', and 'delight' felt in touching the worm, the relations of 'trust' and 'friendship' with the dog, the maternal relation posited with the cat—are all directly correlated with degrees of hermeneutic intimacy: that is, in terms of the ASD authors' self-described experience of *understanding* animals, of an ability to translate between the animal's world and their own. This claimed fusion of horizons of understanding reflects the emotional geography of their lives, their daily practices, and their behavior; it provides and delimits a comfort zone.

⁽⁴⁾ While Canadian composer Glenn Gould's candidacy for an ASD diagnosis is a matter of some dispute, his behavior has certainly led commentators to reflect on this possibility. Interestingly, one biographer recounts his penchant for spending time with and singing to cows (Ostwald, 1997, page 93).

This (hermeneutic) situation, this ability to translate, is presented as both an explanation *of* (ie a phenomenal account) and an explanation *for* (ie the cause underlying) the different feelings and relations experienced by those with ASDs. In other words, their hermeneutic situation is inseparable from the phenomenological experience of an empathic association that supposedly goes beyond the hermeneutic limits of human language. In most cases, although, again, Grandin tends to be more explicit than usual about this, the translation taking place with those who lack (human) words is described in terms of a shared *feeling*, an understanding of how the animal, whether cow, cat, worm, or dog, itself is supposed to feel. Dominant humanist approaches would undoubtedly find such a claim implausible, regarding it as just an example of misunderstanding the interpretative indeterminacy of nature, of self-projection and/or wishful thinking. However, the phenomenological point is not whether such understandings are actually possible, whether Grandin, for example, does understand cows better than any non-ASD person, but that such experiences and such a self-understanding define the contours of her world. Once we bracket out the question of how such experiences relate to ‘reality’, we can concentrate on their ‘reality effects’ in terms of how they *affect* the emotional geographies of those with ASDs because it is precisely these feelings that allow them the space to compose and understand their worldly relations to other animals, places, and, when possible, people. How they live their daily lives—and, in Grandin’s specific case, how animals end theirs, since she is responsible for the design of half of all North American slaughterhouses (Grandin, 2005, page 7)—is not something geographers should ignore. Interestingly, and despite the fact that this might seem a strange mode of employment for someone claiming to empathically understand how cattle ‘feel’, her employment in this capacity is certainly based on her having convinced at least some non-ASD people that her hermeneutic as well as her phenomenological claims are valid!

Animal magic and animistic affect

The nature of ASD encounters with animals/places also reflects ASD understandings of self-identity and often constitutes a key aspect of developing the kinds of social self-reflexivity that non-ASD people take for granted. In a very important way, self-constitutive relations with animals often come first and the phenomenology of feelings experienced concerning nonhumans is only later taken up by autistic individuals as an educative illustration of the possibilities of human-to-human relations. The phenomenology of nonhuman relations described by ASD authors belies any accusation of unjustifiable anthropomorphism; rather, understandings of social relations (in the usual, narrowly human sense) are interpreted through the lens of prior nonhuman encounters. For example, ASD author Prince-Hughes, who, like Grandin, is also an academic, has written at length about her close relations and subsequent ethological studies with gorillas. Even as a child, her nonhuman companions were not entirely typical, and she describes time spent not with a pet pony, but, rather, with a

“herd of old Morgan horses that had been let go to roam wild in the hundred acres across the road from the trailer. My relationship with them and the emotional sustenance it gave me was a foreshadowing of the closeness I later had with the gorillas. I watched them, learned their habits, and knew where to find them at all times of the day” (2004, page 49).

The emotional sustenance and intense pleasure she and others describe are often derived from a sense that natural others leave ASD authors *space to be themselves*. Animals make minimal demands and rarely pass judgment: after all, “[n]o animal can be a snob” (Kojève quoted in Agamben, 2004, page 11). The animal gaze can be felt to affirm rather than weaken a sense of self and self-worth. Their gentle recognition and

(almost unconditional) acceptance seems to extend to natural environments and ‘objects’, experienced by some ASD authors as genuine others in relation with themselves. Williams (2003, page 40), for example, states:

“I felt in company with trees. I couldn’t distinguish between the sense of company in being friends with a tree versus a person except the company with a tree was easier. I didn’t just climb a tree, I was in company with it like two friends sharing beingness together. ... My experience with trees is social.”

This is actually very close to the kind of experience that many environmentalists trying to defend old-growth forests from clear-cut logging or road developments have (Merrick, 1996). Williams goes on to elaborate this sense of *being* at ease in a style that is, in places, strikingly reminiscent of Heidegger’s phenomenological writings:

“I used to cry and stroke our old palm tree in my front yard, telling it in silence all my feelings of despair and rage, but also sitting at its elephant-like trunk-feet and jointly appreciating the day and good feelings too. The tree, unlike people, lived a self-in-relation-to-self world. Unlike the self-in-relation-to-other world of people, the tree was by nature indirectly confrontational and good ‘simply being’” (2003, page 40).

This similarity in the style of expression with certain phenomenological writings may be accidental but the attention to phenomenal detail and the sense of connective rather than separative ‘sociality’ does speak to an experiential *openness* to the world, a kind of be-holding, that is, if only we think about it, often lost to all of us in the hustle and bustle of social life, in what Heidegger (1988, page 307) refers to as “lostness in the everydayness of the they-self”. It suggests an involved attitude of reciprocation that allows us to feel part of the world rather than standing apart from it. In taking up such a stance, we cease to be spectators, and become open to affective (emotional) contagion. Moreover, and in terms that resonate with ASD narratives, “nothing is more contagious than genuine tranquility” (Jacoby quoted in Behnke, 1999, page 109). Many accounts illustrate something of this sense of openness to contagion, to otherness:

“All around me I could feel the personalities of the rocks, the trees, the grass, the hills” (Prince-Hughes, 2004, page 50).

“I seem to be able to feel the trees, the rocks, the water and voices from the past of a land” (MM quoted in Miller, 2003, page 49).

This animistic presence and sense of agency and even personality in nature is not only strongly felt, but also highly valued and somehow humbling: in a continuation of the thread from which MM’s statement is drawn, Ava (quoted in Miller, 2003, page 49) writes:

“Many of us here clearly feel a connection with rocks, plants and animals. For me, this is not just an intellectual thing, it is something passionate and living, that I experience deeply in mind, emotions and body all at once (eg my response to a familiar tree). Bound with that is a sense of love, respect and responsibility for life, that is most simply and purely experienced in the world of nature, but which also extends to the complexities of human life and the wonders of the wider universe.”

Again, this seems reminiscent of the accounts of deep ecologists and radical environmentalists (Smith, 2001). For Ava, the nonhuman world is truly awesome, and she describes her sense of connection with it as the basis of her religious experience. These relational bonds with the natural world do, however, ‘extend to’ humanity, and this sense of learning about culture from nature is present in others’ accounts as well. Miller comments on this in the following way:

“A perhaps startling suggestion, is that we may even have learnt empathy and other moral attributes, through our early relationships with the nonhuman world, despite a common NT [neurotypical] assumption that fascination with the nonhuman risks making us more robotic” (2003, page 54).

ASD authors learn to relate to and appreciate humanity in and through relations with nature that *feel* genuinely reciprocal. If, as accounts suggest, this feeling of the ‘personality’ of the nonhuman world comes first, if we take these accounts at face value, then they cannot be indicative of what humanism might regard as a wrongheaded extension of understandings of human personality beyond their acceptable (human or near human) limits. Quite the contrary. And this coming to self-awareness through felt reciprocation with, and being sheltered by, natural beings extends to coming to social awareness of other humans and their expectations. Prince-Hughes writes at length about being taught sociality by animals who create an atmosphere of sufficient calm for her to learn, a ‘place’ apart from the negative emotions long associated with human contact:

“I am blessed to have found a place to escape that chronic anxiety. The gorillas had an enormously calming effect on me Their social subtleties and calm demeanor allowed me to relax and really watch what they were doing. I saw social *cause* and *effect* for the first time. When I realized their behavior was so much like human behavior I knew I would learn everything I needed to know from them. I began to cautiously apply the things I’d learned from the gorillas— ... and I began to have some success. I actually made some friends” (2002, page 117, emphasis in original).

The notion that nonhuman others have the capacity to teach us about emotion is not exclusive to the writings of those with autism. However, theorists of emotion who press beyond the anthropocentrically drawn bounds of typical lifeworlds are few and far between. Phenomenologist Alphonso Lingis is among those who do, and his questions illuminate much that is often considered beneath us, in more ways than one: “Is it not animal emotions that make our feelings intelligible? ... Is not the force of our emotions that of the other animals?” (1999, page 44). Illustrating our early affective interconnections, he writes of human infants that:

“Their first heavy toddling shifts into tripping vivacity with the robins hopping across the lawn. They come to feel buoyancy in the midst of the park pigeons shifting so effortlessly from ground to layers of sun-drenched air. They come to feel sullenness from the arthritic old dog the retired cop was walking in the park and that they try to pet. They contract righteousness and indignation from the mother hen suddenly ruffled up, her beak stabbing when they try to remove a chick. They pick up feelings of smoldering wrath from the snarling chained dog in the neighbor’s yard, and try out those feelings by snarling when they are put under restraints or confined” (pages 44–45).

The dominant modern Western worldview fails to see the emotional power and potential of our relations with nonhuman others. Drawing lessons from ASD and other boundary-breaking perspectives, we might, perhaps, begin to question the extent to which *typical* lives are, therefore, restricted, emotionally impoverished, and ‘alienated’ in oddly unrecognized ways just as we might reconsider the view that people with autism live as if ‘in a world of their own’. ASD authors themselves explicitly challenge this view, drawing on their personal experience with the nonhuman world to argue that, in fact, it is nonautistic lifeworlds that are narrowly drawn, self-centered (or at least human-centered), and so closed to interactions with others. We turn once more to Grandin (2005, page 24) for illustration:

“I always find it kind of funny that normal people are always saying autistic children ‘live in their own little world’. When you work with animals for a while you start to realize you can say the same thing about normal people. There’s a great big, beautiful world out there that a lot of normal folks are just barely taking in. It’s like dogs hearing a whole register of sound we can’t. Autistic people and animals are *seeing* a whole register of the visual world normal people can’t, or don’t” (emphasis in original).

Perhaps, then, paying attention to the writings of ASD authors also offers non-ASD people ways of rethinking their own worldly relations, their own emotional geographies, of re-cognizing our potential to be open to sensations of awe and exhilaration in the face of a sensorially marvelous nonhuman world. Rather than regarding encounters with nature as a distraction from everyday human activities, we might also ‘catch’ something, however little, of its emotionally contagious possibilities. This is especially so of a culture inoculated by its humanist presuppositions, its lack of phenomenal or hermeneutic openness to nonhuman otherness. “Most of humanity is ignorant for not hearing and seeing what is around them. I hear the rocks and the trees” (MM quoted in Miller, 2003, page 54). Perhaps on this level, at least, it is also possible to understand why ASDs could, at least in some instances, be thought of by those who experience them in terms of different ability rather than disability—even in terms that lead some ASD authors to refer to the “everyday heaven” (Williams, 2004), or the “wonderful world of autism” (Cowhey, 2005, page 125).

“People thought that my standing in the heat for one and a half hours to watch an insect was a crazy thing to do. I think it is they who are crazy. By choosing not to stand and watch, they missed out on sharing an experience that was so beautiful and exhilarating” (Lawson, 2005, page 115).

And this is precisely how many more neurotypical individuals—for example, those who enjoy hill walking—describe their experiences with a ‘natural’ world that if never entirely unaffected by society is still, nevertheless, relatively free from, and resistant to, the presence of constant social intrusions.

Conclusions

Approaching the autobiographical writings of those with ASDs in terms of phenomenological and hermeneutic openness suggests the possibility of understanding the wider implications of the remarkable insights into different kinds of emotional experience these texts offer. Such authors challenge the view prevalent in clinical and lay writings that autism involves impoverished or even absent emotionality. Further, it draws attention to the extent to which nonhuman others feature in the surprisingly ‘social’ emotional geographies of at least some ASD authors, despite commonly held views of autistic individuals as solitary and socially avoidant. Approximately half of these personal narratives reveal that, while perceptual differences often render other people offensive to the highly acute senses of those with ASDs, nonhuman beings can, to some extent, be experienced as profoundly pleasurable companions, who shelter the development of ASD personalities and even open educative insights into human culture that later come to facilitate social (human) contact (even if such contact remains difficult and never becomes ‘second nature’). Since this paper focuses on those texts that emphasize this most heavily, and because of the necessarily selective nature of the texts studied in terms of where their authors lie on the autistic spectrum, it is clearly impossible to use this material to generalize about the nature of ASD experiences as a whole. Nonetheless, it does provide important insights into many ASD lives, and the depth and breadth of feelings associated with these nonhuman environments are truly extraordinary. Recognizing this also offers those without ASDs a possibility of bringing to mind what is often lacking in ‘our’ own taken-for-granted everyday encounters, a chance to recognize the limits of the effective (and affective) history of modern Western societies.

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