Autistic genius?

Fitzgerald's thesis is not new. Hans Asperger spoke of "autistic intelligence" as being intelligence of "true creativity", adding "it seems that for success in science or art a dash of autism is essential." Oliver Sacks suggested that Wittgenstein had autistic traits. So too did Einstein, van Gogh and possibly Bill Gates, according to Temple Grandin, who is herself autistic. Asperger even noted that the autistic mind is an extreme variant of male intelligence. Despite these earlier revelations, Fitzgerald's tantalizing book is a must read, as are Simon Baron-Cohen's brilliant contributions to this area, such as The Essential Difference (Perseus, 2003).

The fact that genius can fall within the autistic spectrum challenges our deepest notions of creativity. Are there two different routes to creativity: normal and autistic? The normal mind is good at recognizing the gist of something but poor at recalling details. This, I believe, is because the brain forms concepts or mental models that encapsulate the familiar. Concepts impart automatic judgements and confer intuition, but hide details from conscious awareness. As a result, we see the whole but not the parts. In contrast, the possible to have the best of both worlds? Could certain psychopathologies inadvertently plunge someone into a temporary state of autism, allowing them to see the parts normally denied to conscious awareness?

To gain deeper perspective on such issues requires information from diverse research. The second book under review, edited by Uta Frith and Elisabeth Hill, gives a valuable update in 13 insightful chapters, written by authorities on the subject. I especially enjoyed the editors two chapters and those by the groups of Baron-Cohen, Happé and Schultz. Although tilted to the specialist, this excellent book portrays a panoramic view of autism. It is loaded with all kinds of goodies: autism is no longer a rare disease; it can be associated with congenital blindness; people with autism have difficulty recognizing faces; they show a strong desire to systematize; and on average their brains are larger and heavier than normal brains from around the age of 2-4 years (but probably not as adults). Movement disturbances may play a role in autism — a reduction in facial expressions may reflect problems with the underlying social brain network.

We are told that there is still no unifying theory of autism. But I suggest that a failure in the process of concept formation and its associated top-down inhibition of the parts that make up the whole may offer a mechanism that could unite the current descriptive theories. Concepts order the world internally. Without them, order must be imposed externally, hence the setting up of rigid routines.

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