

Autism: an Historical Ontology

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History of autism in its clinical aspects

The considerations we wish to propose concerning autism are the result of research we have undertaken, individually and collectively, during recent years. Each of us has followed a particular line of research, but the theoretical background underlying them is the same, and is exactly what lies at the core of the theme of this conference, to relate a cultural object to the contingencies that have created the conditions for its occurrence at a given time, to trace its historical ontology.

In recent years, autism has become a *hype*. What was, until a couple of decades ago, no more than a rare psychiatric diagnosis has emerged center stage, through a proliferation of people being catalogued within the autistic “spectrum”, and this fact has produced a cultural phenomenon that goes far beyond the limits of medical science.

In our paper we will discuss our itineraries in the mapping, analysis and contextualization of autism and Asperger’s Syndrome, the names given by the medical sight to relational disabilities. Autism is highlighted as an extremely complex “cultural object” and subject to a complicated evolution. Our goal is to consider the object “autism” in its complexity and to represent its redundancy and its dispersion according to Foucault’s theories, rather than frame it within the confines of an organic and definitive meaning.

As a diagnostic category, *Autism* appears in 1943. The category has an interesting historical preparation in psychiatric discursive practices. The research we have coordinated recently in the Archives of the Psychiatric Asylum in the island of San Servolo, at Venice, has discovered how *Autism* was effectively diagnosed before it was introduced as a diagnostic category. During this study we analysed the clinical files dating from 1874 to 1940, collected in the above-mentioned archives. This research revealed how the criteria used to diagnose autism after 1943 were delegated to other diagnostic categories before 1940. Results of the investigation have now been published. In child hospitalisation, regularly taking place in asylums over a span of 60 years, during the period investigated, those children were classified as Idiots (the category was Idiocy or Idiotism), now almost all of them would be classified as persons with autism.

What is the historical flux of the two terms with regard to signification? What is the difference between Idiocy and Autism? What are the etymological roots that make a difference between the two terms? Is the historical flux of a difference between the two terms (Idiocy and Autism) a straightforward one? Or does it

resemble a river concerning which, to explain its flow, one has to tell the story of its origins?

In the classical Greek world, *Idiotes* was used for people who had no public voice, whose words were insignificant. The so-called “mouth of the slave”, *stoma doulon*, marks the deviance from the mother tongue, since the *Idiotes* are unable to speak the mother tongue. It is not just a question of fluency or knowledge, it is a political/ethnic issue. Whoever does not speak the mother tongue is barbaric: it stammers, mumbles, barks. Belonging to the mother tongue is the main condition to belong to the community, the Idiot is unrecognised. Idiot in modern Western languages is an insult. Hence, diagnosis and insult combine in the same codex. It functions as an identification of someone who, for performative reasons, is excluded, for example certain categories of immigrant, a code of discrimination.

In classical Greek, instead, *Autos* indicates an active retreat from the community. If the *Idios* has no voice, the *Autos* does not give a voice to her/himself; she/he is not interested in belonging to a community and actively places her/himself outside of it. Autism, as a word, has an interesting flavour of subjectivation. It is as if the subject withdraws into him/herself not because of the otherness, but by choice.

Bleuler introduced the word Autism at the beginning of 19th Century, during the era of the very birth of Psychoanalysis, which Bleuler was involved with for a period of his life. Bleuler was also the inventor of the new term Schizophrenia, substituting it for the category of *Dementia Praecox* in the field of Psychosis.

Although at this time Autism was not yet considered a diagnostic category, being, for Bleuler, simply a symptom, Autism emerged into the discursive dominion of Psychosis. Bleuler introduced the word Autism as an adjective, referring to a trait of what he called Hebephrenic Schizophrenia, a particular form of schizophrenia, appearing during adolescence.

It took more than 30 years for Autism to become not just a symptom of another disorder, but a disorder in itself. Two Child Psychiatrists used Autism as the name of a disease, i.e., a diagnostic category, for the first time in 1943: Leo Kanner and Hans Asperger.

While Kanner considered Autism as an extreme severe disease, Asperger defines Autism as a disorder without cognitive impairment and with the possibility of an evolution during its lifespan. Although both Kanner and Asperger were originally from Austria, they never met each other, and worked in two places that were distant from each other. They were unaware of each other's work, and so at no time shared their clinical experiences. Both Kanner and Asperger borrow the word Autism from Bleuler.

Asperger, who had his own clinical practice in Austria, was writing essays on this topic in German. Kanner was instead working in the US, at Baltimore University, and was writing about his own experiences in English. Because of the difficulties of

reading German in Anglo-Saxon countries, Asperger's research was largely ignored for fifty years, until it was translated into English in 1981.

In Kanner's view, Autism affects children when infants. He considers the disorder to be a severe form of psychosis in which, besides severe mental retardation, repetitive movements such as parapraxies or echoparaxies are included. These children move as if they are praying, swaying back and forth for hours. Kanner claims that such repetitive swaying is the main criterion for a differential diagnosis between Oligophrenia and Autism. Both are characterized by mental retardation, but Autism, with such ritual movements, displays disquieting signs of a relationship disorder. Kanner proposes it as an infantile form of Schizophrenia.

Asperger's position is quite different. In his essay '*Autistic Psychopathy*' in *Childhood* (translated in English in 1991) Asperger clearly ascribes a positive connotation and a positive evolutionary process to Autism. If Bleuler uses the term Autism for designating a symptom of schizophrenia, Asperger makes of Autism a diagnosis in itself, and distances himself from Bleuler's position of considering Autism as having something to do with Schizophrenia. In Asperger's words: "[...] unlike schizophrenic patients, our children do not show a disintegration of personality" [7, p. 39]. Asperger presents some clinical cases, such as Fritz V.: referred by his school to the Psychiatric Clinic of Vienna University when he was six. Fritz V. was considered uneducable. In his clinical writings, Asperger makes a detailed description of Fritz's family. Asperger writes about a family lineage of poets and scholars on his mother's side. Then he accurately describes the difficulties of the mother/child relationships when the mother accompanies Fritz to the hospital:

"Very characteristic, for instance, was the situation when mother and son walked to the hospital school together, but each by themselves. The mother slouched along, hands held behind her back and apparently oblivious to the world. Beside her the boy was rushing to and fro, doing mischief. They gave the appearance of having absolutely nothing to do with each other. One could not help thinking that the mother found it difficult to cope not only with the child but also with the practical matters of life." [7, p. 41].

Asperger's children exhibit the same swaying, back and forth, that Kanner also observed, Asperger's children also have difficulties entering into relationships, but, even so, he defines his children as little professors. Someone has made the hypothesis that Asperger was also trying to protect the children he was curing from the nazi extermination of handicapped and psychiatric patients, the infamous Aktion T4. It is quite clear that the children he was visiting were apparently less difficult to treat than those who were being treated by Kanner.

Main recent studies on autism

The starting point, in our framing of autism at the times of its emergencies, is the inaugural *Lesson* at the *Collège de France* by Ian Hacking on the nature of

classification. There the author puts forward the theoretical basis of his later work programmatically, picking up on what Foucault called "historical ontology", in his subsequent lessons at the Collège, particularly during the 2004 course, as well as in many texts over the last fifteen years, Hacking chose autism as object of investigation, as a privileged example for his theorizations.

In the inaugural *Lesson* he focuses on how objects come into being through a nomination. The denomination process creates objects, not in an immediate way, but through a gradual and culturally overdetermined process of stratification. That which it constructs does not remain the same object in perpetuity, but constantly evolves. Hacking discusses this particularity, this constitutive *dynamic interaction*, as peculiar to the objects of the human sciences. The theme of the distinction between *Naturwissenschaften* and *Geisteswissenschaften* is not resolved through the contrast between objective and interpretative methods of inquiry. The human sciences

“[...] differ because there is a dynamical interaction between the classifications developed in the social sciences, and the individuals or behaviour classified. When we characterise a type of person or behaviour, it can affect some people so classified in a direct way, and may even change them. Hence regularities about individuals of that kind may change. Our knowledge of those individuals must be revised as they change, and our classifications themselves may have to be modified. I have called that the looping effect of human kinds.”
(Hacking 2002:10)

In the human sciences we are therefore dealing with interactive classifications; diagnostic classifications provide a key example. In the following years, Hacking's courses at the Collège de France elaborated upon the proposals of this inaugural lecture, substantiating them through argumentation and examples. These lessons of the year 2004 are at the same time a cultural contextualization of the growing interest of the diagnosis of autism, and a verification of his theoretical assumptions. He retraces the history from Bleuler to the phenomenological psychiatry, when autism was just the name of a symptom of schizophrenia, to the “discovery” in 1943 by Leo Kanner and Hans Asperger and to the present time, with the actual proliferation of etiologies and therapeutic interventions of different orientation, often conflictual (empowerment/cure, psychogenesis/neurologic disorder, psychoanalysis/behavioral therapies and so on). He clarifies his assumptions about human kinds, and their difference from ‘natural kinds’, the invariant objects of hard sciences. Human kinds are specific categories identified by behaviors and practices, groupings which define membership within a social horizon. Human kinds are the alcoholic, the heroin addict, the schizophrenic, the homosexual, the suicidal, and, undoubtedly, the autistic. What is specific to “human kind” is the *looping effect*, *effet de boucle*, the fact that those sorted into a category, take on its assumptions and end by changing and reformulating its characters.

Hacking considers autism to be especially interesting in explaining his theory of the human kinds, since there has been considerable cultural production by autistic

people explaining how they experience their specific condition, thus reformulating the public perception of autism. He wrote several texts on the topic of the self-recount of autistic people, analyzing what one of them, Donna Williams, an Australian autistic person, called “aut/biographies”. A vast editorial production in recent years has given a voice to autistic people and has thereby redefined the autistic spectrum, not only the public perception of it, but also the medical one.

One of the fundamental questions that came us to mind while trying to understand what autism actually is, was: “what was autism before *autism*?”, that is, before Kanner and Asperger, and the subsequent reformulations of the term. There has been some extremely interesting historical and theoretical research focusing on the topic, questioning the contingencies that gave rise to autism. We will now bring briefly attention on two of the most interesting works, Majia Holmer Nadesan’s *Constructing Autism* and Gil Eyal et al. *The Autism Matrix*.

As many other scholars dealing with it, Majia Nadesan’s interest for autism comes from a direct interpellation, her son having been diagnosed into the spectrum. Her book, in the line with the social constructionist paradigm, retraces the cultural preconditions that shaped the possibility of the emergence of what she calls the “idea of autism” in the first part of the XX century.

Another interesting book aims at the cultural edification of autism as an evolving object: *The Autism Matrix* by Gil Eyal and collaborators, at Columbia University. The originality of his argument arises through connecting the growth of attention on autism to the cultural contingency of the phenomenon of deinstitutionalization, starting in the 1960s.

Deinstitutionalization acted as a “moral blender” (in the terms of the authors) that dissolved the interpretative horizon shaped over the previous two centuries. Parents took up the discourse concerning relational disabilities promoting different interpretations of the problem and new approaches to therapy, inserting in the political agenda a focus on the problems of their autistic sons.

Before Eyal dealt so clearly with these binds between relational problems and institutionalization, we had the possibility of verifying this in research we conducted in the archives of the ex-neuropsychiatric hospital in Venice, located on the Island of San Servolo. This reasearch was published in 2013 with the title *A sé e agli altri: Storia della manicomializzazione dell’autismo e delle altre disabilità relazionali nelle cartelle cliniche di S. Servolo*.

One area of research that connects our interests as a group of scholars is the history of psychiatry, with a shared respect for authors such as Michel Foucault, Robert Castel, Marcel Gauchet, Gladys Swain, Andrew Scull, Jan Goldstein, Georges Lantéri-Laura, Laure Murat and so on. With that cultural background, we attempted to discover, from the clinical files of the archive, how those relational disabilities that are now termed “autism” by the medical model were treated.

The central idea in the work of Gladys Swain and Marcel Gauchet is that psychiatry was founded at the beginning of the 19th century with the emergence of the idea that madness can be cured, a concept concretized in the Pinelian notion of

madness without delusion. Following this, psychiatric understanding tried to elaborate ways to appeal to the residual cognitive resources of the mad man. The moral method was gradually elaborated, from Pinel to Esquirol to Leuret.

The moral method is structurally dialogical, so we wondered what becomes of those whose problems inhibit a dialogue, what about relational disabilities, that is autism before “autism”, in the psychiatric institutions using the moral method?

Our research on thousands of clinical files from 1874 to 1940, identified a set of diagnostic categories pointing to problems in the relational sphere, and they involve words still in use, although now with derogatory values, being insults such as idiot and imbecile, and we reconstructed the relationship of the institution with such inmates.

In order to frame relational disabilities in the psychiatric discourse of the 19th century, it is useful to recall a specific lesson (16/1/1974) by Michel Foucault at the Collège de France, now published in *Psychiatric Power*, which analyzes the psychiatrization of the child as a determining factor in the affirmation of psychiatric power. Foucault captures the enactment of two opposing processes. The first is the progressive distinction of idiocy from *delirium*, through a peculiar characterization of the notions of idiocy and imbecility. The second is the cooptation to the protection of psychiatry and asylum of those identified as suffering from a developmental disorder, and, not by reason of insanity: the taking over of "abnormal" by the mental device.

During the 19th century, the theoretical production of psychiatry dealing with idiocy and imbecility categories is extraordinarily wide: from Pinel, for whom idiocy was one of his four diagnostic categories (the others being melancholia, daementia and mania), to Esquirol and his students, Ferrus, Belhomme, Voisin and above all Eduard Séguin, who emigrated to North America, and inaugurated the educational care for children with relational problems, thereby receiving the title of "idiots apostle". Later, at the end of the century, *Psychologie de l'idiot et de l'imbécile*, by Paul Sollier, undertakes a synthesis of previous research. In England, idiocy was studied by Maudsley, Haslam, Ireland and Down. This bears witness to the fury, underlined by Foucault, for the mapping out of relational differences. With Binet, at the turn of the century, all of this theoretical production was dismissed and a focus on the qualitative dimension of the relational is replaced by the cognitive attitude, measured using tools to evaluate a quantification of IQ (the *Stanford-Binet* test).

Investigating through literature, cinema and cultural productions

Besides these clinical aspects, our investigation addresses the cultural traces of relational disabilities in literature, cinema and, in a broader sense, in cultural productions at many levels.

Let's think at the enormous number of books, essays, fiction, and movies that take autism as their main subject.

The proliferation of a discussion of autism invites questions about how this has happened, and why autism has gained such symbolic centrality at the present time. Nevertheless, besides this proliferation of recent fiction and documentary

productions, we prefer to consider two classical modern authors (Samuel Beckett and James Joyce) regarding traces of the autistic condition in literature. This is in some way legitimated by a strange event that specifically is bind to the autism hype, that is the posthumous classification on autism, and more specifically by a book by Michael Fitzgerald, *Unstoppable Brilliance: Irish Geniuses and Asperger's Syndrome*, about nine Irish personalities with Asperger's, two of them are Beckett and Joyce. We don't follow that curious path, we just try to think at the relevance of the theme of relational difference in the work of the two authors. It is well known that Joyce and Beckett, although with different literary styles, were close to each other in Paris during the 20s, when the young Beckett frequented Joyce home for various reasons, the most important being his admiration for Joyce's literature and style of writing. It is also quite clear that Beckett developed a totally different approach to writing. The hectic style of Joyce became, in Beckett, the precise opposite. As in Deleuze's essay concerning Beckett style, the most appropriate description is the one of 'the exhausted'.

Autism in Beckett

In Samuel Beckett's novel *Murphy*, the author illustrates the ways in which autism focuses attention on the links between illness categories, emotions, and narrative. *Murphy* may represent autism at the level of the hero's characterization, as well as through the discursive and rhetorical disposition of the text. We could outline how, towards the end of the novel, the text seems to lose its intrinsically realist orientation through a series of dialogues between *Murphy* and Mr Endon, a patient affected by schizophrenia: the main character cannot replicate his rival's symmetrical and cyclical play at chess, just as he is unable to lose himself purposely in a state of madness.

Nevertheless, it's precisely during the chess game with Endon that *Murphy* finds himself facing an absolutely private system in a process that deeply unsettles him and ultimately leads to his own accidental death. In fact, he resigns "with fool's mate in his soul", and dies shortly afterwards. The autistic dynamic within the novel is revealed as an aspect of the discursive process of metonymic transfers, further elaborating the impression of the dynamic that the reader may initially find in the characterization of *Murphy* himself.

But we must not forget that *Murphy* was published in 1938, well before the proper description of the condition by Kanner and Asperger. Nonetheless we may assert that Beckett's novel captures, to an infallible degree, different aspects of autistic spectrum disorders and incorporates them into a literary autistic dynamic.

Emotions become a problematical category in his writing, but not simply because of the complexity of his narrative or discursive forms. The autistic condition essentially generates difficulty for the description of the relationships between self and the other, particularly bearing in mind that these are shaped by an understanding of the emotions and how these enable or frustrate social interactions.

Murphy allows us to observe the operation of the autistic dynamic in three distinctive ways: first of all, by incorporating features of autistic spectrum disorder into the characterization of the protagonist; second, by inserting an explicit narratorial disquisition concerning the split between feeling and mechanical image reproduction in Murphy's mind; and third by introducing a series of shifts along the metonymic discursive axis.

Another important theme is silence, very much present in the novel. These silences may be emotionally unnerving or completely becalming, depending on how the characters are involved. As we shall see, given the character of Murphy's antithetical speech, there is a discursive oscillation between his silence and the hidden normative order that his silence disrupts. This becomes part of the autistic dynamic of the text and a marker of the text's divergence from social realist discourse. All the people he meets, and particularly his girlfriend, Celia, want him to say something to relieve their own desire for meaning. Yet he is either completely silent or is, when he speaks, enigmatic, thus generating degrees of emotional confusion for his interlocutors.

The Autistic Joy(ce).

In Joyce, we find examples of the autistic perception of the world; for instance in Joyce's Stephen Hero. The key word is "epiphany".

Joyce's description of an epiphany, is a relationship between something external and something internal. The "trivial incident", a more or less trivial episode becomes an epiphany in the very moment in which Stephen, on focusing attention on it, creates a significant link between the episode and poetry. Something trivial undergoes a transfiguration in aesthetic terms.

Seemingly, Stephen begins by commenting on Aquinas' philosophy, although in reality he deconstructs such philosophy to create a new aesthetic vision: "The three things requisite for beauty are integrity, a wholeness, symmetry and radiance" (Ivi, p. 212). Nevertheless, concerning the third of the three things mentioned, Stephen says: "Now for the third quality. For a long time I couldn't make out what Aquinas meant. He uses a figurative word (a very unusual thing for him) but I have solved it. Claritas is quidditas... This is the moment which I call epiphany" (Ivi, p. 213).

What does this interpretation of Aquinas' philosophy mean in more simple terms? Aquinas considers radiance (or claritas in latin) as universal harmony transformed by God into the form of light (lux). Stephen, in changing claritas to quidditas, claims that claritas could be even a simple basket viewed from an aesthetic perspective, and he focuses attention on the materiality of real external experience in the immediate environment.

Claritas, as with quidditas, is the experience of the subject who recognises such transfigured materiality, instead of being sensitive only to a universal harmony deriving from God.

The only thing shared internally/externally is misty. This becomes clear through the epiphany created. It is something that passes from the inside to the outside and from the outside to the inside; it is a quidditas, something concrete and material.

Autistic signification has to do with the quidditas of the object appearing in the epiphany.

We have to put what we call “information theory” in parentheses, since it presumes the presence of discrete and univocal unities to be transmitted by a sender to a receiver. Such theory – which takes into account any noise that tends towards dispersion - notes the importance of redundancy in transmitting complete information from sender to receiver.

However, autism appears to question the very meaning of the notion of “integral transmission”. Transmission of what? Who decides: “this is noise, this is information”? Who has the authority to make the decision?

Autism tends to perceive epiphanies where “normal” minds tend to see a compact and predefined information unit. It questions “the sense of meaning” and opens a dialogue with “the noise” that contains unexpected revelations. The autistic world appears to be a plurality of infinite sets.

So we might well read the clinical files of Asylum “Autistic”, or whoever, admiring the secluded “Autistic” and seeing their therapists as alienated “scientists” unable to grasp the secrets of a relationship and inevitably subjected to the psychiatric dispositive of the 19th and 20th Centuries.

And now, what is the situation? At present, the Spectre (Spectrum) of Autism, just like the Phantom of the Opera, dwells sometimes below, sometimes above, the proscenium.