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The Empathetic Autistic: A Phenomenological Look at the Feminine Experience

by:

Dana Fritz

A Dissertation submitted to the Faculty of the Graduate School,
Marquette University,
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for
the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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ABSTRACT

THE EMPATHETIC AUTISTIC: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL LOOK AT
THE FEMININE AUTISTIC EXPERIENCE

Dana Fritz

Marquette University, 2021

Western philosophy has asserted that in order to be a person, one must be rational. This idea was not challenged until the nineteenth century. One school to challenge this notion was phenomenology, which asserted that what made one a person was their ability to empathize. While the founder of the school, Edmund Husserl, did not assert that the ability to decipher nonverbal cues was necessary in order to empathize, several of his followers did. This emphasis on deciphering nonverbal cues proved problematic for some populations, especially the Autistic.

Autism is a neurological condition which makes it difficult to decipher nonverbal cues. Because of this, Autistic people are accused of lacking empathy. This is especially problematic in the case of women. Scholars such as Simon Baron-Cohen argue that on average, women are more empathetic than men. If one lacks empathy, then one has an extreme male brain. The extreme male brain is called Autism. Hence, even if an Autistic person identifies as female, her femininity is in question due to her having a male brain.

If phenomenology argues that the person is shaped by their ability to empathize, then there must be a way to account for the experiences of Autistic women. In order for phenomenology to account for empathy, there must be a theory which can account for breakdowns in empathy, can critique current therapies which force the Autistic person to pass as non-Autistic, and must provide the Autistic woman a path to being authentically herself. One such theory is that proposed by Martin Heidegger. Heidegger argues that being-with-others is vital for one to be a *Dasein*. Still, Others can press upon *Dasein* to conform to their standards. The pressure to conform can lead *Dasein* to forget who she is. In order to be authentic, *Dasein* must go through the process of anxiety, after which she can become authentically herself. Thus, Heidegger's theory gives women a path in which they can share their experiences, thus providing necessary insights to philosophy, psychology and sociology.

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Introduction

For millennia, philosophers have debated what makes an entity a person. Initially, rationality was seen as the defining characteristic of what made one a human. If an entity could engage in rational thought, then it was considered a human. This notion of rationality was often limited to men of European descent though.¹ It was not until the nineteenth century when thinkers such as Friedrich Nietzsche questioned this model, thus opening the way for new theories of personhood to emerge.²

One alternative view of rationality came from Edmund Husserl and his school of phenomenology. Husserl argued that an entity could be considered a person not based on rationality, but empathy.³ It is important to note that Husserl did not consider empathy to be the sharing of one's emotions. Rather, empathy was formed when two people acknowledged each other as inhabiting the same world.⁴ Empathy is experienced through an instantaneous three step process. First, the person sees the Other has having a body similar to oneself. Then, they notice that the Other's body is animate and can move of its own free will. Finally, the two entities pair with each other, and acknowledge each others humanity. For Husserl, empathy is a transcendental, not an emotional, process.⁵

¹ Yates, Velvet L. "Biology Is Destiny: The Deficiencies of Women in Aristotle's Biology and *Politics*" *Arethusa* John Hopkins University Press 48(1) Winter 2015, 1-16; 1

² Brown, Kristen *Nietzsche and Embodiment* State University of New York Press Albany, NY 2006; 6-8

³ Husserl, Edmund *Cartesian Meditations An Introduction to Phenomenology* (Translated by Dorian Cairns) Kluwer Academic Publishers, Netherlands 1999; 92

⁴ Ibid 112-113

⁵ Ibid 108-117

Edmund Husserl left the framework for future phenomenologists to build upon.⁶ This is why he did not mention the sharing of emotions or the ethical implications of his work. This task was left to other phenomenologists, one of whom was Edith Stein.⁷ Stein argued that in order to empathize with someone, one needed to be able to read the Other's emotions. If they could not do that, then they had a deficient sense of empathy.⁸ Sartre mentions the look of the Other, and the need for eye contact in order to establish empathy.⁹ Both of these theories rely on nonverbal communication in order to create an empathetic bond.¹⁰

If two people can engage in nonverbal communication, then the process of empathy should progress smoothly. Not everyone is adept at nonverbal communication, especially the Autistic.¹¹ Autistic people often struggle to decipher nonverbal communication.¹² They may not understand what certain gestures entail, and may not be able to make eye contact. For Husserl, this is unproblematic so long as they acknowledge the other as a fellow animate body. For some modern phenomenologists who have built

⁶ Husserl, Edmund *Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and to a Phenomenological Philosophy* (trans. F Kersten) Kluwer Boston Inc. Hingham MA 1982; 136

⁷ Stein, Edith *On the Problem of Empathy* (Translated by Waltraut Stein) ICS Publications; Washington DC 1989

⁸ Ibid 86-87

⁹ Sartre, Jean-Paul *Being and Nothingness* (trans. Hazel E. Barnes) Washington Square Press, NY 1956; 345-350

¹⁰ See Stein and Sartre

¹¹ While there is a debate as to whether or not to use person-first language such as person with Autism, I choose to use the term "Autistic." This is because many Autistic people argue that Autism is such a part of their identity they want it recognized. Also, "Autistic" is less cumbersome to write than "person with Autism."

¹² CDC "Signs and Symptoms of Autism Spectrum Disorders" CDC March 29, 2021 <https://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/autism/signs.html>

upon his work though, this inability to decipher nonverbal cues could inhibit the Autistic person's ability to empathize.¹³

Many theories have been proposed for how to go about resolving this dilemma, such as enticing the Autistic person into behaving similarly to a non-Autistic person.¹⁴ This can lead to the Autistic person "passing" as non-Autistic, though. Passing entails that a member of a minority group pretend that they are a member of a majority group. A modern example of passing would be a lesbian marrying a man and raising children in an evangelical Christian household in order to hide her homosexuality. Still, keeping on this mask can lead to psychological issues such as depression and anxiety. Thus, passing is not a viable longterm solution.

The issues of Autistic empathy becomes even more dire when one considers Autistic women. Stereotypically, woman are seen as more empathetic than men. Some scientists such as Simon Baron-Cohen have gone so far as to argue there is a masculine systematizing brain and a feminine empathizing brain.¹⁵ According to Baron-Cohen, Autism is caused by an extreme male brain. If one is too much of a systematizer, then he will develop Autism.¹⁶ This puts the Autistic woman in a precarious position since her brain type does not seem to agree with her assigned gender. Her viewpoint gets lost amongst the masculine nature of research.

¹³ For one such phenomenologist, see Haney Kathleen M. "Edith Stein and Autism" *Husserl's Ideen* (Editors Lester Embree and Thomas Nenon) Springer New York, NY 2013; 35-54

¹⁴ Devita-Raeburn, Elizabeth "The Controversy Over Autism's Most Common Therapy" *Spectrum* August 10, 2016 <https://www.spectrumnews.org/features/deep-dive/controversy-autisms-common-therapy/>

¹⁵ Baron-Cohen, Simon *The Essential Difference* Basic Books, New York 2003; 1

¹⁶ Ibid 149-151

By researching the issues which surround Autistic women, one can better understand what type of phenomenology needs to be created in order to account for the feminine Autistic experience. First, this phenomenology must be able to account for social conflicts, namely the conflict between conformity and a minority identity. Second, it must be able to critique current Autistic therapies such as Applied Behavioral Analysis, which have recently become more controversial.¹⁷ Third, it must allow for Autistic women's voices to be heard by giving them a path to be authentically themselves.

This dissertation will argue that the theory of *Mitsein* and *das Man* proposed by Martin Heidegger can fulfill these three requirements. Heidegger argues that the person, or *Dasein*, is always amongst others. Still, the other puts pressure upon *Dasein* to conform to certain norms.¹⁸ While this is not always detrimental to *Dasein*, it can cause her to lose track of her life's projects, as well as her sense of Being.¹⁹ Still, *Dasein* is prone to anxiety, which is a moment in which the world no longer hangs together.²⁰ In this moment, *Dasein* understands where she is going, what her possibilities are, and that she belongs to a world.²¹

Using this blueprint, an Autistic woman can begin to analyze and push back against the norms asking her to conform to societal standards. She can accept the parts of her which are viewed as traditionally feminine, analyze the parts of her which may be

¹⁷ Devita-Raeburn

¹⁸ Heidegger, Martin *Being and Time* (trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson) Harper and Row New York 1962; 163-168

¹⁹ Ibid 219-224

²⁰ Ibid 228-232

²¹ Ibid 232-235

nonbinary, and form a new identity which encompasses both her professed gender and Autism.

This dissertation will be divided into seven chapters. Chapter I will give a brief overview of Western philosophy, and how theories of rationality gave way to Edmund Husserl's phenomenology. Chapter II will examine how phenomenologists have built upon his work, as well as some critiques others have leveled against them. Chapter III will give an overview of Autism and its impact on the Autistic person's ability to empathize. Chapter IV will be an examination of Heidegger's philosophy and how it can be applied to the Autistic population as a whole. Chapter V will discuss feminists views of Heidegger, as well as the gendering of Autism. Chapter VI will explore Heidegger's views of authenticity and how they relate to Autism. Finally, Chapter VII will give an account of how Autistic women live out their various identities, and provide them with a path forward. By the end, this dissertation should give a voice to Autistic women, and provide philosophy with a deeper understanding of the feminine Autistic experience.

Chapter I Rationality and Empathy from Plato to Husserl

From the time of Plato to the Age of Enlightenment, philosophers argued that rationality made an entity a person. If an entity was not rational, then it could not be considered a person. This criteria only applied to white men though. Groups such as women, those of non-European descent, and the disabled were excluded from any discussion of what made an entity a person since they were considered to be irrational.

It was not until the mid-nineteenth century that this idea was seriously challenged by philosophers such as Friedrich Nietzsche.²² He argued that a key component of personhood is the will to power, not rationality. Other schools of thought such as phenomenology also challenged the notion that rationality was what made an entity a human. Phenomenology shifted the focus from rationality to intersubjectivity. Unlike most entities, the human is able to grasp the others as humans in living bodies. The person sees others as similar to herself and knows they can share common experiences with the Other. This ability to be intersubjective makes an entity a human.

This chapter will examine the history of philosophy from Plato to Husserl. Part I will explain the role rationality played in Western philosophy until Friedrich Nietzsche. Part II will explore how rationality was replaced with intentionality through philosophers such as Franz Brentano. Then, it will discuss the philosophy of Edmund Husserl, the

²² Nietzsche, Friedrich *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (trans. Walter Kaufmann) Penguin Books New York 1954; 34-35

founder of phenomenology and his arguments that the person is not defined by rationality, but by empathy.

Section I: A History of Rational Thought

From Ancient Greece to the Enlightenment, Western philosophy has argued that the human is the rational animal. The first person to make such an argument was Plato, who argued that the person had three parts of their soul: the appetitive, the spirited, and the rational.²³ Although animals shared the first two portions of the soul, only humans possessed the rational. Aristotle builds upon this idea, arguing that man is the animal who uses speech, thus excluding those who cannot speak.²⁴ Building off of Aristotle, Thomas Aquinas argues that the human soul is rational. It is this rational portion which is able to enter the afterlife.²⁵

The apex of the idea that rationality is what makes an entity a human comes from Descartes' famous thought experiment. In his search for certainty, Descartes doubts all his senses, claiming they are too unreliable to trust. Once he has discarded all he knows, he argues that no matter what he believes, he is a thinking entity. Nobody can fool him into believing that he thinks, leading to his famous line, "I am, I exist."²⁶ Thus, rationality, not the body, was the key to being a human.

²³ Plato *The Republic* (Translated by G.M.A Grube and Rev C.D.C Reeve) ed. John M. Cooper and D.S. Hutchinson (Hackett Publishing Company Indianapolis, IN 1997 1071; 439a-441c

²⁴ Aristotle *Politics* (trans Joe Sachs) Focus Publishing Newburyport, MA 2012; 5

²⁵ Aquinas, Thomas *Summa Theologica* (trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province) Benzinger Bros Cincinnati, OH 1947; 487-488

²⁶ Descartes, Rene *Meditations on First Philosophy: With Selections from the Objections and Replies* Translated by Mike Moriarty Oxford 2008; 13

Perhaps the first mention of rationality in Western philosophy is from Plato's explanation of the tripartite soul, most famously found in *The Republic*. In Book IV, Socrates discusses the various aspects of the soul. He claims,

Hence it isn't unreasonable for us to claim that they [the parts of the soul] are two, and different from one another. We'll call the part of the soul with which it calculates the rational part and the part which lusts, hungers, thirsts, and gets excited by other appetites the irrational, appetitive part, companion of certain indulgences and pleasures.²⁷

The rational portion of the soul is the planner, the one which determines how best to provide for the appetitive portion. The appetitive portion is necessary for survival since it determines what one needs to thrive.

Since both parts of the soul are necessary, they could be thought of as two different aspects of society. Joshua I Weinstein explains,

Just as the guards of the polis divide the two classes, the philosopher-rulers and their military assistants, so do the guards of the soul divide in two: the truth-loving, thinking aspect of the psyche and its competitive, spirited element.²⁸

Each member of a society has a role to play, such as that of a leader, a farmer, a skilled worker, or another profession. The parts of the soul each have their own roles too. If an entity lacked an appetitive soul, then he would not know what he needed to live, thus causing him to perish. If an entity lacked a rational aspect of the soul though, it could not be considered a person.

In addition to the appetitive and rational parts of the soul, there is a spirited aspect. Socrates says of this portion,

²⁷ Plato 1071; 439d

²⁸ Weinstein, Joshua I *Plato's Threefold City and Soul* Cambridge University Press, New York 2018; 2

Besides, don't we often notice in other cases that when appetite forces someone contrary to rational calculation, he reproaches himself and gets angry with himself that he's doing the forcing, so that of the two factions that are fighting a civil war, so to speak, spirit applies itself with reason?²⁹

The spirited portion of the soul is that which feels emotions. It is the part of us which feels uneasy when we perform an undesirable behavior. For instance, a man may be watching videos instead of working on his latest book.³⁰ As he watches the videos anxiety may be building within him that his task is not accomplished. Eventually this anxiety and self-anger will compel him to stop watching videos and resume working.³¹

If one only views the appetitive and spirited portions of the soul, one would not see any difference between a human and an animal. A dog can pursue its own needs, and often holds strong emotions towards its owner. This is why Plato emphasizes rationality. Socrates argues, "Therefore isn't it appropriate for the rational part to rule, since it is really wise and exercises foresight on behalf of the whole soul...?"³² Reason governs the human's life. The appetites bow to reason, and spirit enforces its will. It is the rational part of the soul which must be nurtured since it is what distinguishes the human from all other entities.

²⁹ Plato 440 a-b

³⁰ Until the twentieth century, women were for the most part not considered a worthy object of Western philosophy. Hence when discussing the history of the West I will use male pronouns and the word "man" to emphasize this disparity.

³¹ This example is heavily based upon Terrible Writing Advice "WRITER'S BLOCK: Terrible Writing Advice" last modified March 3, 2017 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=U4Ue08j1PG8>

³² Plato 441 e

It is not enough for reason to govern the soul. Instead the other aspects of the soul exist to fill the desires of reason. C.C.W Taylor explains:

First, the agent's specific desires are directed by the intellect with a view to the agent's overall good, and secondly, that good consists in a life of which the satisfaction of the specific desires of the intellect (i.e. desires for intellectual activity) takes priority over the satisfaction of other kinds of desire...[A]ccording to the metaphysical system of the *Republic*, the supreme object of understanding is the Form of the good.³³

For Socrates, the good life does not consist of filling one's physical appetites, but involves engaging in intellectual activities such as contemplating aspects such as the good. One example of this may be a political activist. The activist may have all the money he requires to live comfortably, thus satisfying his appetites. Still he may have a nagging sense of depression, a constant wondering if his goals are in line with what could be considered good. Socrates would claim that this depression comes about because he is not contemplating what justice truly is. Until he satisfies his thirst for rational activity by contemplating the true meaning of justice, he will feel unfulfilled. Unless one exercises rationality, he is not acting in accord with his nature, which will lead to feelings of malaise.

The tradition of the rational soul continues with Aristotle. In order to understand the soul, Aristotle discusses its functions. He begins,

We say, then, taking [it as] the principle of our examination, that the ensouled is distinguished from that which lacks soul by being alive. But while being alive is spoken of in many ways, if even only one of these belongs [to a being], we assert that it is alive—for instance intellect, sense perception, motion, and rest with respect to place, [and] further, motion with respect to nourishment and decay as well as growth. Therefore, also all things that spring forth [from the ground] seem to be alive.³⁴

³³ Taylor, C.C.W. *Pleasure, Mind, and Soul* Clarendon Press, Oxford 2008, 169

³⁴ Aristotle *De Anima* (trans. David Bolotin) Mercer University Press Macon, GA 2018; 45

Plants are alive by virtue of their ability to take nourishment from the ground. Since animals can move and take in nourishment, they are considered to be alive. This ability to take in nourishment is key in separating animals from plants. Although wheels can move, they cannot sense their surroundings, nor can they nourish themselves, meaning they lack the life animals have. Human souls have a faculty other souls do not have though, namely reason. It is this faculty which separates them from animals.

The goal of rationality is not only to ponder the good, but also to convey arguments. Aristotle argues,

[A] human being alone among the animals, has speech. And while the voice is a sign of pain or pleasure, and belongs also to the other animals on that account...speech is for disclosing what is advantageous and what is harmful, and so too what is just and what is unjust.³⁵

A pet rat can squeak if it is picked up too tightly, but it cannot argue that its owner's actions are unethical. Only a human can use language to discuss the ethics of how animal welfare. Note that this definition of humanity is exclusive. Since speech is necessary to be considered a human, a nonverbal Autistic child may not meet the criteria for personhood. Thus, from the time of Ancient Greeks, the personhood of those with certain disabilities was called into question.

Disabled people who lacked speech were not the only ones excluded from personhood. Women and non-Greeks also had their humanity called into question.

Aristotle argues,

Among the barbarians, though, the female and slave have the same rank. The reason is that they do not have that which by nature rules, but their association becomes that of a female slave and a male slave. That is why the poets say, "it is reasonable for Greeks to

³⁵ Aristotle *Politics* 5

rule barbarians,” on the grounds that a barbarian and a slave are by nature the same thing.³⁶

Aristotle was only interested in discussing Greek men. This reasoning excluded philosophical insights from women and people of color for centuries. In this way, Western philosophical thought often only reflected white Europeans, even if by virtue of them not being Greek, Aristotle would have considered them inferior.

For centuries, the emphasis on rationality and speech remained unchallenged.

Thomas Aquinas went so far as to build upon it. Like Aristotle, Aquinas argues that a soul is necessary for an entity to be considered living. He argues,

To seek the nature of the soul, we must premise that the soul is defined as the first principle of life of those things which live: for we call living things "animate," [*i.e. having a soul], and those things which have no life, "inanimate."³⁷

A stuffed animal does not have a soul by virtue of its inability to nourish itself. A pet rat does have a soul since it can move and obtain its own food. Since humans are living entities, they have souls.

Aquinas continues his arguments by creating a clear distinction between body and soul. He states,

Now, though a body may be a principle of life, or to be a living thing, as the heart is a principle of life in an animal, yet nothing corporeal can be the first principle of life. For it is clear that to be a principle of life, or to be a living thing, does not belong to a body as such; since, if that were the case, every body would be a living thing, or a principle of life.³⁸

³⁶ Ibid 3

³⁷ Aquinas 481

³⁸ Ibid 482

A corpse is not an animate object because it does not have a soul. Even though it was once ensouled, death separates the soul from the body. Thus, having a body is not enough for an entity to be considered alive. There is a sharp divide then between body and soul.

Although all living things have souls, not all souls are created equally. Aquinas argues, “Since man is said to be the image of God by reason of his intellectual nature, he is the most perfectly like God according to that in which he can best imitate God in his intellectual nature.”³⁹ It is rationality which makes one a person, not a humanoid body. When a person uses reason to contemplate God, then he is acting in accordance with his nature. Thus, animals do not reflect God as perfectly as humans do.

Although Aquinas’ views of rationality are similar to those of Plato and Aristotle, there are some key differences. Olli-Pekka Vainio explains how reason analyzes a desire as follows:

First, there is a sense experience that evokes a desire. Desires have a cognitive component that make them communicable to will and, consequently, to reason. Will, having experienced the desire, asks reason for guidance: is this, what appears to me as good, actually good?⁴⁰⁴¹

One example of this may be a man who desires Doritos. If he is attempting to lose weight and counting calories, he will ask himself if eating Doritos will allow him to achieve this

³⁹ Ibid 629

⁴⁰ Vainio, Olli-Pekka “Imago Dei and Human Rationality” *Zygon* 49(1) March 2014; 124

⁴¹ See Aquinas 548-553 for more information

goal. Unlike a rat who will eat the chip without a second thought, the man evaluates his options before deciding what his next course of action should be.

Once reason has been consulted on what to do, he can act. Vainio continues,

Then reason, based on its acquired notion of goodness and happiness either affirms or neglects will's proposal. Will is ultimately dependent on reason for its evaluations of what is good and that which promotes happiness.⁴²

In order to determine what will give him happiness in the long run, the man must evaluate if Doritos will help him achieve this goal. Does the temporary pleasure of the Doritos outweigh the long-term benefits of weight loss? If he eats Doritos every day, will this hinder his weight loss goals? These are the types of things he considers when determining whether or not to eat the chips. It is reason, not pure instinct, which determines his actions.

At first, one may argue that this account does not hold up based on the fact that people do behave impulsively. A manic person may spend thousands of dollars on Pokemon cards despite not even liking the games due to his mental condition. Thus, reason may not be involved in every action. Vainio does not believe this is the case. He argues, "If reason does not have the correct understanding of the good, it leads us astray. Because reason is always involved, we are to some extent culpable even when we act 'in ignorance.'"⁴³ The manic's ability to reason is inhibited due to his mental illness. This does not mean that reason is uninvolved with his actions, just that he was mistaken. Every action is rational. Because of this, to be human is to be rational.

⁴² Ibid 124

⁴³ Ibid

The ability of the soul to reason affects not only this life, but the afterlife as well.

Aquinas claims,

Granted even that the soul is composed of matter and form, as some pretend, we should nevertheless have to maintain that it is incorruptible. For corruption is found only where there is contrariety; since generation and corruption are from contraries and into contraries....Now there can be no contrariety in the intellectual soul; for it receives according to the manner of its existence, and those things which it receives are without contrariety; for the notions even of contraries are not themselves contrary, since contraries belong to the same knowledge. Therefore it is impossible for the intellectual soul to be corruptible.⁴⁴

Unlike animals whose soul will disappear upon their death, the human soul will go into the afterlife since reasoning is part of its nature. In heaven, the soul will contemplate God since it will be able to express its nature more fully. If an entity does not have reason, then it cannot enter heaven, meaning it will be annihilated upon death. In this way, the emphasis on rationality has affected certain strains of Christianity, most notably Roman Catholicism.

The idea that the human is rational reaches its zenith with René Descartes. The ultimate exercise in rationality came in his famous thought experiment found in *Meditations on First Philosophy*. In his thought experiment, Descartes seeks to strip away all of the statements and sensations he feels that he cannot trust in order to build an epistemological foundation on something which is completely certain. He begins:

Certainly, up to now whatever I have accepted as fully true I have learned either from or by means of the senses: but I have discovered that they sometimes deceive us, and prudence dictates that we should never fully trust those who have deceived us even once.⁴⁵

⁴⁴ Aquinas 488

⁴⁵ Descartes, 14

Mirages are an instance where one believes he has seen something, only to be mistaken upon closer examination. Someone may believe he sees water on the interstate, only to draw closer and see the highway was dry. In this way, bodily sensations are unreliable.

It is not only a body which can be unreliable, but a mind could be unreliable too, as shown through the example of dreams. Descartes notes, “How often my sleep at night has convinced me of all these familiar things — that I was here, wrapped in my gown, sitting by the fire — when in fact I was lying naked under the bedclothes.”⁴⁶ Humans sense things as they dream. In a dream, a man may see and hear a deceased grandmother’s voice as clearly as if she were alive. Still it is widely agreed upon that these “sensations” are products of our mind, not actual physical representations. So, sensory input is often unreliable.

Descartes skepticism of the senses is not limited to our physical limitations, but extends to the sciences as well. He notes:

From all this, perhaps, we may safely conclude that physics, astronomy, medicine, and all the other disciplines which involve the study of composite things are indeed doubtful; but that arithmetic, geometry, and other disciplines of the same kind, which deal only with the very simplest and most general things, and care little whether they exist in nature or not, contain something certain and indubitable. For whether I am waking or sleeping, two plus three equals five, and a square has no more than four sides; nor does it seem possible that such obvious truths could be affected by any suspicion that they are false.⁴⁷

Sciences such as physics can lead to wrong observations. One such example is watching two cars passing each other. While the passing car appears to go forward, the car which is being passed appears to regress. This is not due to one car reversing, but because the motion of the cars creates an optical illusion of one going backwards. Compare this to the

⁴⁶ Ibid

⁴⁷ Ibid 15

concept of a triangle. All triangles have angles which equal one hundred eighty degrees. This is not known through experience or upon viewing a triangle. Instead the fact that all angles of a triangle must equal one hundred eighty degrees is part of the definition of a triangle, which can only be known through reason. If an object were to have angles which equalled three hundred and sixty degrees then it cannot be a triangle, a fact which can only be known through reason. Hence observation is unreliable, but logical concepts in geometry are.

Since the senses have proven inaccurate, Descartes turns to his mind to find certainty. In order to accomplish this task he question whether he can be deceived by an all-powerful being. Descartes asks, “Is there not, after all, some God, or whatever he should be called, that puts these thoughts [Descartes’ doubts] into my mind?”⁴⁸ An all-deceiving God could put thoughts into Descartes head which would make him believe that a triangle’s angles equalled one hundred and eighty degrees or that the entities Descartes believes are people are in fact snakes slithering by. In this regard, reason may be untrustworthy as well.

Still there is one thought that no entity could ever use to deceive Descartes: the fact that he exists. He argues,

Beyond doubt then, I also exist, if he is deceiving me; and he can deceive me all he likes, but he will never bring it about that I should be nothing as long as I think I am something. So that, having weighed all these considerations sufficiently and more than sufficiently, I can finally decide that this proposition, ‘I am, I exist’, whenever it is uttered by me, or conceived in the mind, is necessarily true.⁴⁹

⁴⁸ Ibid 18

⁴⁹ Ibid

Regardless of what any entity says or does, Descartes knows he exists. If a god wants to deceive Descartes then the god must deceive a being. Descartes knows he is a being because he can think. Thus, certainty is not produced by the senses or the outside world, but by the mind. The only things one can be certain of are things of the mind, not the body. Thus, rationality is at the center of what makes an entity a person.

From the time of Plato, Western philosophy has defined the person as the rational animal. Plato describes three parts of the soul: the appetitive, the spirited, and the rational. The appetitive pursues basic needs, the spirited feels emotions, and the rational dictates how to behave. More importantly, the rational aspect can ponder concepts such as the Good, separating the human from the animal. Aristotle puts much less emphasis of the spirited portion of the soul. Still, he believes that the human is the rational animal. Thomas Aquinas argues that in order to understand God, one must be rational. If one is not rational, then he may not be able to participate in the afterlife.

Descartes' thought experiment is the pinnacle of the idea that man is the rational animal. The body is unreliable since it can be mistaken. Instead, only rationality can be trusted. Even if there was a god who could deceive Descartes into believing false theorems, the fact that he exists is undeniable. In this way, rationality was seen as the key component of what made an entity a person, at least until the nineteenth century.

Section II: Objections to the Rationalistic View of the Human

For centuries, the idea that rationality is what made an entity a person was unquestioned. This changed with Friedrich Nietzsche. Nietzsche argued that the key component which made an entity a human was not rationality, but how they exerted their will to power. Power, not rationality, is how humans view the world.

This break from rationality allowed other schools to rise. Franz Brentano argued that intentionality was the key to understanding consciousness. Thoughts are always directed towards objects, whether they be abstract concepts or something in the world. One of Brentano's students, Edmund Husserl, took his ideas and formed his own school; phenomenology.

Phenomenology offers a new way of viewing the world, namely by bracketing sensations. Like Descartes, Husserl sets aside how he views the world. Unlike Descartes, he does not doubt that the world exists, but seeks to understand how he perceives it. In the *epoché*, or this bracketing, one can analyze how he perceives reality.

On the surface, the *epoché* runs the risk of being solipsistic. Husserl does not believe this is the case though. In the *epoché*, one can analyze how he perceives Others. He realizes that the Other has a humanoid body as he does. Even if this body has difference such as skin color or disability, it is still recognizable as a human body. Having a humanoid body is not enough for the Other to be considered a person though. Instead, the Other must act in a self-governing autonomous manner. Once these conditions are met, the person can enter into an intersubjective community with the Other, or as Husserl calls it, empathy.

One of the first people to challenge Descartes' position on rationality was Friedrich Nietzsche. Unlike other philosophers, Nietzsche questioned whether the "I" was as uniform as Descartes claimed. Nietzsche states, "For the new year. - I'm still alive; I still think: I must still be alive because I still have to think. Sum, ergo cogito: cogito, ergo sum."⁵⁰ Unlike Descartes who claims, "I think therefore I am," Nietzsche states, "I am, therefore I think: I think therefore I am." For Nietzsche, thinking is a skill which is developed throughout one's life. One is not born with an intellectual capacity. Instead, one creates a distinction between mind and body which may have no basis in reality.

Nietzsche argues that thinking, and by extension rationality are simply ways of gaining power. He claims, "What is good? All that enhances the feeling of power, the Will to Power, and power itself in man."⁵¹ One need only to look at evolutionary biology to see how rationality could be a way of exerting power over one's environment. Compared to other creatures, humans are biologically weak. They cannot run as fast as cheetahs, nor are they strong enough to overtake an animal such as an elephant on their own. It was only through the use of tools that the human was able to gain mastery over his environment. In order to use tools, one needed to critically evaluate which tool would work best and how to create each required tool. Since very few people can perform every function necessary to sustain life, humans needed to find ways to work together. In order to create these groups, people needed language in order to convey their intentions. The

⁵⁰ Nietzsche, Friedrich *The Gay Science* (Translated by Josefine Nauckhoff) Cambridge University Press 2001; 157

⁵¹ Nietzsche, Friedrich *The AntiChrist* (Translated by Anthony M. Ludovici) Prometheus Books, Amherst, New York 2000; 41

need to master tools and the need to cooperate propelled the person towards creating rationality. Thus, rationality is a way of exerting one's power over the world and ultimately, others.

In order to further analyze this concept. One only needs to look at Nietzsche's concept of the I. Jonas Monte writes,

In fact, Nietzsche is taking issue with conceiving of a thinking thing as having a faculty that can cause and command mental states. This is because what delimits the whole being as a fictional Ego is social construction (words, concepts, structured content), but this fictional Ego remains only a "visible" conceptual expression of the whole.⁵²

Rationality is not some innate capacity which manifests itself the same way in all humans. Rather, the ability to reason is shaped by interacting with the members of one's society. No single entity can be called an "I" because one's identity is a collection of one's physical drives, societal constructs, and the external environment in which one lives. For Nietzsche then, rationality is relative to the outside world. This opened the door for other philosophers to create new conceptions of the "I," ones which did not depend upon rationality.

Perhaps just as importantly for Nietzsche is the idea that the person is always in relationship with the outside world. Kristen Brown writes,

For Nietzsche, the body unites the mind and impinging forces of the outside world into an interpenetrating non-dualism according to which a mixing, but not a reductive merging, of difference occurs. Nietzsche's mix tries to interconnect, but not reduce, body to mind or mind to body.⁵³

⁵² Monte, Jonas "Sum, Ergo Cogito: Nietzsche Re-orders Descartes" *Aporia* Vol. 23 No. 2, 2015; 21

⁵³ Brown 17

For Nietzsche, the body and the world are united. There is no mind or soul mediating between them. The only importance is what the person perceives. So, mastering one's environment in a certain way, not rationality, is the key to what makes an entity a person.

In order to move away from rationality as the basis for philosophy, the focus must shift to some other aspect of a person's existence. Franz Brentano proposes intentionality as the basis for understanding the person. He claims,

Every mental phenomenon is characterised by what then Scholastics of the Middle Ages called the intentional (or mental) inexistence of an object, and what we might call, though not wholly unambiguously, reference to a content, direction toward an object (which is not understood here as meaning a thing) or immanent objectivity.⁵⁴

When a girl sees a red ball, her attention is focused on the round object. She takes in the color and shape of the object. From this, she makes judgments surrounding it. Through her attention, she experiences the ball.

Mental acts go beyond sensing objects though. Instead, they can be focused on anything in the world, including other thoughts. Brentano continues,

Every mental phenomenon includes something as an object within itself, although they do not all do so in the same way. In presentation, something is presented, in judgment, something is affirmed or denied, in love loved, in hate hated, in desire desired, and so on.⁵⁵

Not only does the girl perceive the ball, but she may have emotions towards it. The ball may be her favorite toy, meaning she has judged it worthy of being played with. If it bounces, she can judge if it should go higher or lower. Regardless of how she judges the

⁵⁴ Brentano, Franz *Psychology from an Empirical Standpoint* (trans. A.C. Rancurello, D.B Terrell and L.L. McAlister, Routledge, London 1995; 88

⁵⁵ Ibid

ball, her attention is directed towards it, meaning she is intentionally perceiving it as part of her world.

Many of Brentano's former student took up the charge of analyzing intentionality and applying it to the world. One such person was Edmund Husserl, the founder of phenomenology. Like his mentor, Husserl's ideas were based around the notion that all thinking was intentional As explained by David Woodruff Smith,

The structure of...experience typically involves what Husserl called 'intentionality', that is, the directedness of experience toward things in the world, the property of consciousness that it is a consciousness of or about something.⁵⁶

As with Brentano, every thought is directed towards an object. If one thinks about a domestic rat then that thought is directed towards an entity in the world, namely a rodent found in one's apartment. In order to be aware of the rat, one must direct some of her thoughts towards it. One can see a rat, touch its silky fur, and hear it skitter around its cage. In this way, the rat is sensed as a part of one's world.

Using Brentano's views of intentionality, Husserl endeavors to find a new type of transcendental philosophy, one which does not rely on Descartes' dualistic certitude. Still, he does not discard Descartes' method, but seeks to perfect it. Husserl argues,

Accordingly, one might also call transcendental phenomenology a neo-Cartesianism, even though it is obliged-and precisely by its radical development of Cartesian motifs-to reject nearly all the well-known doctrinal content of the Cartesian philosophy.⁵⁷

⁵⁶ Smith, David Woodruff "Phenomenology" *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* December 16, 2013 <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/phenomenology/>

⁵⁷ Husserl *Cartesian Meditations* 1

Like Nietzsche, Husserl believes the distinction between the outside and interior world is superficial. The person is always already in a world. To demonstrate this, he uses a method similar to that employed by Descartes, namely the *epoché*.

Like Descartes, Husserl does not take lived experiences and perceptions for granted. Instead, he turns to consciousness for analyzing the world. Consciousness is always rooted in lived experience. Lived experience is a subject worthy of philosophical investigation. Gabriella Farina explains,

A phenomenology of perception must therefore put in brackets scientific, cultural and philosophical prejudices burdened with historically constructed conceptions (causalism, physiology, mind/body dualism) and try first to simply describe the lived experience (Erlebnis) of perception.⁵⁸

Husserl wants us to acknowledge how certain ideas can influence our perceptions. By bracketing our prejudices we do not discard them, but set them aside for later analysis. The process of doing so is called *epoché*.

The *epoché* is a single stroke which is perfected through a rigorous process.

Husserl claims,

Phenomenology's instructions have, in the entire life experience of the individual and in history, no precedent, they can make no recourse to any elementary and typical familiarities. With respect to the worlds of pure subjectivity, but this means with respect to our pure, original life, through which all natural being and validity has its self-evidence, we are at the outset in a similar situation as someone blind from birth whose cataract has been removed and who now literally has to begin to learn how to see. The successful surgery does not yet make one see, that is, apprehend the spatial world in its familiar spatial forms and visual characteristics. The visual apperceptions must firstly form themselves, build themselves up in the nexus of apperception's inner motivations.⁵⁹

⁵⁸ Farina, Gabriella "Some reflections on the phenomenological method" *Dialogues in Philosophy, Mental, and Neuro Sciences* 2014; 53

⁵⁹ Husserl, Edmund *First Philosophy* (eds Sebastian Luft and Thane M. Naberhaus) 325

Unlike Descartes' meditations, the *epoché* only lasts a moment. It is an automatic process which can only be undertaken intentionally. The instant one performs the *epoché*, she begins to see the world through a new perspective. She discards her previous prejudices in order to view objects differently. In order to be philosophically astute, one must continue to perform the *epoché* in order to better discard preconceived notions and begin to see the world as it is given. This way, one can sharpen and clarify her worldview.

While the *epoché* is instantaneous, it can be further broken down into steps. According to Lucia Moya-Strasser, the first step is to bracket all assumptions. She states, "The rule of epoché...invokes us to put aside our biases assumptions, prejudices and focus on immediate experience."⁶⁰ As an example, a woman may take for granted that she lives in Beardstown, Illinois, twelve blocks from the Sangamon River. She may believe that the leaves on the oak tree are turning brown, and that it is autumn. In the *epoché*, all these assumptions are aside. Instead, only the sensations she feels should be taken into account. It is only by doing so that she can begin to analyze the world as it is pre given to her.

In order to discuss properly the experience of consciousness itself, the outside world must be bracketed. Husserl describes bracketing experience as follows, "In short, not just corporeal Nature but the whole concrete surrounding life-world is for me, from now on, only a phenomenon of being, instead of something that is."⁶¹

Within the bracketing, one reaches a state of consciousness where one is best able to

⁶⁰ Moya-Strasser, Lucia "Considering The Epoché As An Attitude Rather Than As A Method" *Existential Analysis: Journal of the Society for Existential Analysis* January, 2016 27:1, 50

⁶¹ Husserl, *Cartesian Meditations* 19

express her first-hand experiences. This is vital because phenomenology is the study of how one analyzes phenomenon. Once the process of bracketing is complete the person should be in a state where one is best able to analyze her lived experiences. It is in this state where we can begin to analyze the outside world.

Although the outside world is bracketed, Husserl does not want to become a skeptic. He continues, “Reflecting, I can at any time look at this original living and note particulars; I can grasp what is present as present, what is past as past, each as itself.”⁶² Husserl allows for himself to grasp particulars, notably times in his life. In a state of reflection, one can remember the house in which he grew up as well as his cat which has long since passed away. He can also reflect on his present circumstances, such as the job at which he works and the cat on his lap. He is able to tell which experiences have concluded and which endure into the current moment.

Once all assumptions are bracketed, one can proceed to the second step of the *epoché*. Moja-Strasser explains that this consists of, “The rule of description, we should describe what is rather than use theoretical explanations.”⁶³ One should no longer appeal to prejudices and relearned knowledge in order to describe the world. Instead, she should report things as they appear. Instead of saying that she sees an oak tree, one in the *epoché* would describe it as a large plant with blotches of gold and red spattered about it. She would make no appeal to the changing seasons, but would instead discuss the chill in the breeze or the appearance of a nearby squirrel storing

⁶² Ibid

⁶³ Moja-Strasser 50

away nuts. In this way, she grasps the world as it is given to her without appealing to scientific theorems of preconceived notions.

The third and final step is to admit that all the data received in the *epoché* is equal. Moja-Strasser states it is, “The rule of horizontalisation or equalisation, to treat the data observed as having equal value to avoid creating hierarchies of importance.”⁶⁴ All data received in the *epoché* is given the same weight. The leaves on the trees changing color is given no more importance than the morning frost or the scurrying squirrel or the car speeding down Chandlerville Road. One focuses on all modes of givenness without favoring one over the others.

This leads to Husserl’s idea that regardless of any bracketing, the fact remains that the world is always experienced by a subject. Husserl states,

Anything belonging to the world, any spatiotemporal being, exists for me—that is to say, is accepted by me—in that I experience it, perceive it, remember it, think of it somehow, judge about it, value it, desire it or the like.⁶⁵

Unlike Descartes’ ego which simply exists, Husserl’s consciousness is intentionally grounded in the world in a particular time. The ego always interacts with other objects and other people. Regardless of any manipulation the person always interacts with objects and lives among other subjects.

Since all assumptions are equal, it is possible that none of them could be accurate. There is a chance that our perceptions are based upon a fiction, and not a reality. This is not problematic for Husserl. As pointed out by Søren Overgaard:

⁶⁴ Ibid

⁶⁵ Husserl *Cartesian Meditations* 21

The *epoché* also puts on hold our ordinary assumptions about ordinary experience—e.g., that distant objects usually look smaller than they are—so that we are able to describe faithfully what we actually experience.⁶⁶

It does not matter if from an altitude of two thousand feet, a car appears no bigger than a toy. All that matters in the *epoché* is that one perceives it to be such. In this way, Husserl separates himself from Descartes. The first phenomenologist is not interested in proving that things are as they appear, but only in examining how they appear.

At this juncture, the *epoché* seems to be a solipsistic exercise. The person in the *epoché* is only examining her experiences, not those of others.. This is an oversimplification. According to A. D. Capili,

Yet, on the other hand, it must be said that Husserl himself considers this transcendental solipsism as a “subordinate stage” in the phenomenological enterprise, which prepares the beginning philosopher to approach higher-level issues pertaining to transcendental intersubjectivity.⁶⁷

While initially the *epoché* consists of an individual’s experience, that sensory experience must then be corroborated with others. It is not enough to say that the square root of nine is three. Others must corroborate this statement with their own experiences and mathematical expertise. It is in this way that we can gain a more holistic account of the lifeworld.

Even within the *epoché*, one still finds evidence of the existence of others.

Husserl states, “[M]y animate bodily organism...has the central ‘Here’ as its mode of

⁶⁶ Overgaard, Søren “Ordinary experience and the *epoché*: Husserl and Heidegger versus Rosen (and Cavell)” *Continental Philosophical Review* 43 (2010) 307-330; 322-323

⁶⁷ Capili, A.D. “How do we ‘See’ that which is ‘Invisible’? The Stakes in Husserl’s Account of Perceiving the Other” *Kritike* 7:2 December 2013, 1-18; 3

givenness; every other body, and accordingly the ‘other’s’ body, has the mode ‘There.’”⁶⁸

When one thinks of a location, all other locations are relative to one’s own. For instance, if a mother calls to her child, the latter’s response is usually akin to “I’m over here.” It would be unusual to hear a child say, “I’m over there.” This is because the speaker is in a location, and speaks as if every location is relative to his/her own. Wherever there is an “I,” there is a “here.”

Although “here” is almost always associated with a speaker’s current location, that does not mean “here” never changes. Husserl continues,

I do not apperceive him [the other] as having, more particularly, the spatial modes of appearance that are mine from ‘here;’ rather, as we find on closer examination, I apperceive him as having spatial modes of appearance like those I should have if I go over there and be where he is.⁶⁹

Although two people cannot occupy the exact same space at the exact same time, one can imagine what it is like to be in another’s location. To use the example of the mother and child, the mother cannot be on the top of a domed jungle gym at the same time as her child. Still she can imagine what it is like for him to sit at the top. Once her child crawls down from the jungle gym and runs towards the slide, the mother can make her way to the top of the jungle gym and sit where he had been; thus making it her new “here.” It is through this shared sense of locomotion that the mother and child can share experiences.

It is not enough simply to move as others do. After all a robot could be programmed to climb to the top of a jungle gym, but we do not consider it to constitute

⁶⁸ Husserl *Cartesian Meditations* 116

⁶⁹ Ibid 117

an “Other.” Rather, it must be clear that the other is a self-governing body. Husserl explains,

Furthermore the Other is appresentatively apperceived as the ‘Ego’ of a primordial world, and of a monad, wherein his animate organism is originally constituted and experienced in the mode of the absolute Here, precisely as the functional center for his governing.⁷⁰

Unlike a robot, the other can consider his location to be a “here.” Like me, the other governs himself from the location of his “here.” It is through this shared sense of belonging to a “here” where humans begin to relate to each other.

Self-governance is not enough of a condition to be an Other. Rats are self-governing entities, but that does not mean they are considered Other. Rather the Other must be experienced as another person like oneself. In addition to being a self-governing entity, an entity qualifies as an Other, if it is humanoid in appearance. As Husserl explains, “It [the Other’s body] brings to mind the way my body would look ‘if I were there’”⁷¹ Because one can recognize the Other as having a similar body to her own, she begins to recognize the other as similar to herself.

Upon recognizing the Other as having a similar body type, there is the potential for a pairing takes place, provided the other is behaving as a self-governing entity and in a way similar to oneself. Husserl continues,

The first-awakened manner of appearance of my body is not the only thing that enters into a pairing: my body itself does likewise: as the synthetic unity pertaining to this mode, and like many other modes, of its appearance. *Thus the assimilative apperception becomes possible....*⁷²

⁷⁰ Ibid

⁷¹ Ibid 118

⁷² Ibid

Upon seeing a humanoid with a similar body type to her own, a person forms an instantaneous bond with the Other. This does not mean that a body must appear identical to hers. A woman can pair with an amputee because she realizes that in spite of the latter's missing limb, the Other has a shape which is overall similar to hers. She recognizes that if she were to lose the same limb she would appear as the amputee does. Thus pairing can occur between people who differ in appearance. Once pairing occurs, then the process of empathy can begin.

Once the pairing with the other is complete, Husserl claims the two people can begin to form a community. He writes,

The other organism, as appearing in my primordial sphere, is first of all a body in my primordial Nature, which is a synthetic unity belonging to me and therefore, as a determining part included in my own essence, inseparable from me myself.⁷³

Once a person has bonded with another, they become part of each other's life world. Although not physically and psychologically fused, a person's life world is altered by the presence of another. One example of this is language. Most babies can learn any language, but nobody can fluently speak every language currently spoken. This is because one is not born knowing a specific language; rather he is taught a language by others. If a boy is exposed to Swahili he will speak Swahili; yet if he is never exposed to Polish then he will never know Polish. Exposure to these languages depends on the community the boy is in as well as what those community members speak. Even if the Swahili speaker wants to learn Polish, he must do so through others. He cannot meditate on Poland and hope to absorb the Polish language through his abstract reasoning. He

⁷³ Ibid 121

could buy a Polish dictionary and attempt to learn the language, but even then another person who knew the language wrote it. No matter what the boy does, he cannot learn Polish without some help from the Other. Thus, the Other influences the very core of one's being.

The importance of others is not limited to corroborating experiences. If performed correctly, the *epoché* exposes the uniqueness of others. Husserl explains, “[A]ll of us together belong to the world as living with one another in the world; and the world is our world, valid for our consciousnesses as existing precisely through this ‘living together.’”⁷⁴ Throughout the *epoché*, one may bracket the existence of others, but he never doubts their existence. Instead, the one in the *epoché* realizes that the other is inherent in her experience. It is only through the other that one can find any meaning in the world.

One way meaning is given through others is because we live in a shared world. Husserl explains, “Its [the world’s] Objectivity is restricted, though concretely the world the world is given to me and to everyone only as a cultural world and as having the sense: accessible to everyone.”⁷⁵ Fields such as Biology or Mathematics are not secrets which can only be known by one person. Rather, they are accessible to everyone in a society. Although there may be issues such as language barriers and/or age which make it difficult for certain members to fully grasp the concepts, these can be overcome through interacting with others. This accessibility makes knowledge a public, not a private, affair.

⁷⁴ Husserl, Edmund *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology* (trans. David Carr) Northwestern University Press Evanston, IL 1970; 108

⁷⁵ Husserl, Edmund *Cartesian Meditations* 132

The other not only makes knowledge available, but determines which type of knowledge is accessible. Husserl continues,

Each man understands first of all, in respect of a core and as having its unrevealed horizon, *his* concrete surrounding world or *his* culture; and he does so precisely as a man who belongs to the community fashioning it historically.⁷⁶

A person can only view the world through the lens of her society. A woman's culture gives her the opportunities she can pursue, dictates what is accomplishable, exposes the tools needed to achieve her goals, as well as imparts the knowledge needed to thrive. Every piece of knowledge in the woman's life comes from her culture.

Communities not only shape the present circumstances one finds herself in, but roots one in a past while also determining the future. He states,

Constantly functioning in wakeful life, we also function together, in manifold ways of considering, together, objects pregiven to us in common, thinking together, valuing, planning, acting together.⁷⁷

The other is instrumental in determining how the world presents itself. In order to know what an oak tree is, society must determine the conditions under which we could call an entity an oak tree. Our understanding of the oak tree is passed down from previous generations and how they have defined the plant. Our connection to the other goes deeper though. Communities often unite for a common cause such as cheering on a favorite basketball team, or writing a new bill aimed at curtailing the opioid epidemic. Thus the other is a constant presence in one's daily life, and is always defining possibilities.

⁷⁶ Ibid 133

⁷⁷ Ibid 109

For millennia, Western philosophy has not questioned the idea that the person was defined by rationality. Friedrich Nietzsche challenged this assumption, arguing instead the person was an entity which exerted the will to power. He rejects the distinction between the body and mind, arguing instead they are one. What makes an entity a person is how it interacts with the outside world, not rationality.

Franz Brentano also questioned whether the person is the rational animal as well. For him, the person is consciousness. In order to analyze consciousness, one must understand intentionality. The person's thoughts and emotions are always directed towards objects, whether they be material objects such as a ball or abstract concepts such as love. It is through this intentionality that one can determine what it means to be human.

One of Brentano's most famous students, Edmund Husserl, uses intentionality to analyze the relationship the person has to the world. In order to do this, Husserl refines Descartes' philosophical method, renaming it the *epoché*. In the *epoché*, one brackets all her assumptions of the world. The world is described as it appears. In doing so, one realizes that one gains her perceptions from others. The Other has a perspective of an object that she does not have. She also realizes the Other has an animate, self-governing, humanoid body. Even if the Other appears different than her, they have enough commonality to be able to relate to each other. In this way, they form a community.

Conclusion

From its inception, Western philosophy has argued that the person was defined by rationality. Plato argued for the tripartite soul, one which consisted of the appetitive, the

spirited, and the rational. Animals have the appetitive and spirited portions of the soul in common with humans, but according to Plato they do not have a rational soul. Only man has a rational soul, making him the rational animal. Aristotle agrees with Plato in arguing that rationality is what makes a man a human. Thomas Aquinas goes one step further, arguing that without rationality, one cannot enjoy a pleasurable afterlife. Thus, even in Western religion rationality was associated with humanity.

The pinnacle of the notion that man is the rational animal came from René Descartes. In order to obtain certainty, Descartes doubts everything. He discards his bodily perceptions because they could be mistaken. He considers his mental processes to perhaps be more accurate, but then entertains the idea that an evil god has put ideas into his head, meaning his thoughts should be doubted. After these meditations, Descartes concludes that he is a thinking being-cogito ergo sum. In this way, the body and the mind are completely separated, and rationality is prized above all.

Few philosophers challenged the notion that man was the rational animal until Friedrich Nietzsche. He argued “I am, therefore I think.” For Nietzsche, there is no distinction between the mind and the body. Instead, they are in relation to each other and the world around them. What marks the person is how he exercises the will to power.

Franz Brentano argues that the person is consciousness. Consciousness should be analyzed. The best way to do so is to consider intentionality. One’s attention is always directed towards something, whether it be a concrete or abstract object. It is this intentionality that makes one a human.

Edmund Husserl, a former student of Brentano, agrees that one must explore consciousness in order to discover truths about their humanity. He suggests performing the *epoché* to do so. In the *epoché*, one brackets, though does not doubt, her assumptions of the outside world. She describes the world as it presents itself to her. In doing this, she realizes that she is in a location, along with Others. These Others inhabit her lifeworld, and inform her perceptions of it. Unlike other entities in her world, the Other is self-governing. Unlike an automaton, a person can dictate her future actions. The Other also has a humanoid body, which looks similar to the person performing the phenomenological method. In this way, the person can recognize the Other as similar to herself, thus allowing them to build a community.

Husserl was not the last phenomenologist. His students took his descriptive project and built upon it. In the next chapter, their work will be focused upon. Chapter II will explore both the strengths and the weaknesses of his students' work, paying close attention to their views of intersubjectivity and empathy.

Chapter II

An Analysis of Empathy's Role in Phenomenology

Empathy has played a prominent role in phenomenology since its inception. There are two reasons for this. First, phenomenology seeks to examine the world as it is given. The way a person experiences the presence of an object is different than the way she experiences another person. In order to give a more complete analysis of one's lived experience then, phenomenology must be able to account for how people are perceived by each other as people, or as phenomenology would term it, empathy.⁷⁸ Although Husserl discusses empathy at great length, his project is only descriptive. His goal was to give future phenomenologists a starting point from which they can build a more robust philosophy, not give a definitive account of what it is.⁷⁹ This is why Husserl does not take into consideration certain aspects of empathy, such as how facial expressions influence one's ability to empathize with the other, nor does he take into consideration how breakdowns in empathy can occur. He leaves those tasks to future phenomenologists.

Edith Stein takes up the task of building upon Husserl's view of empathy. She argues that empathy requires more than recognizing the other as an animate body. In order to fully empathize with a person, one must recognize the other's facial expressions. In this way, they can create an emotional bond between them.⁸⁰ The empathizer must also be able to decipher the nonverbal cues of the other, though this is not an infallible

⁷⁸ Husserl, Edmund *Cartesian Meditations* 90; 112-128

⁷⁹ Husserl, Edmund *Ideas* 136

⁸⁰ Stein 40-49

process.⁸¹ In order to have a fuller view of empathy, the empathizer must also be able to understand why the other feels as he does.⁸² Although not all of these steps must be taken in order to empathize with others in our daily lives, they are necessary for empathy to become the basis for ethics.

Jean-Paul Sartre also emphasizes facial expressions when discussing the other. He argues that empathy is based off “the look.” When two people make eye contact with each other, they immediately recognize the other as being a person similar to themselves. The look also allows one to understand the other’s emotions via facial expression. Through this mutual look, one gains a sense of self-consciousness.⁸³

One may believe that empathy is inherently positive given its importance in phenomenology. This is not entirely the case though. Paul Bloom argues that empathy is neutral at best, harmful at worst.⁸⁴ He claims that empathy spotlights a person or group to the exclusion of others.⁸⁵ This can lead to distorted ways of interacting with others as well as poor ethical decisions.⁸⁶ One aspect of spotlighting can be found in racial relationships. Franz Fanon claims that his race is spotlighted before his subjectivity, calling into question how neutral empathy truly is.⁸⁷

⁸¹ Ibid 75-87

⁸² Ibid 75-84

⁸³ Sartre 340-354

⁸⁴ Bloom, Paul *Against Empathy* HarperCollins NY 2016; 3

⁸⁵ Ibid 9

⁸⁶ Ibid

⁸⁷ Fanon, Franz *Black Skin White Masks* (trans, Charles Lam Markmann) Pluto Press, London 2008; 83

A further issue is how to relate to people with differing neurological issues. Hilary Putnam's Super Spartans thought experiment provides an example of a group of people whose neurology operates differently than that of most others.⁸⁸ Although Putnam did not have the Autistic in mind while writing his thought experiment, the Super Spartans' lack of a pain response mirrors their experience.. Because some Autistic people experience pain differently than most Non-Autistic people, it is difficult for the latter group to empathize with the former. This leads to a breakdown of empathy between the two groups, one which will be further explored in the upcoming chapters.

This chapter will focus on the importance of empathy to phenomenology as well as the pitfalls associated with our current views of empathy. Section I will show how phenomenologists have built upon Edmund Husserl's theories of intersubjectivity. Section II explore the phenomenon of spotlighting, and how this could be damaging in our relations with each other. Finally, Section III will examine how becoming too empathetic towards one group can lead to oppression, as well as how difficult it can be to relate to certain groups. At the end of this chapter, it will be clear that current conceptions of empathy are misguided and need to be revised in light of majority and minority relations, especially when the minority in question is the Autistic.

Section I: Empathy After Husserl

Edmund Husserl's theories of intersubjectivity are rudimentary by design. He wanted to give future phenomenologists a baseline theory, not give an exhaustive account of empathy. This has led to many phenomenologists using his theories of intersubjectivity

⁸⁸ Putnam, Hilary "On Brains and Behavior" *Analytical Philosophy: Second Series* (ed. Ronald J. Butler) Blackwell Hoboken, NJ 1980

to build their own philosophies. One of Husserl's students, Edith Stein, argues that empathy is created by being able to decipher another person's emotions. While this is not necessary in every circumstance, to be an empathetic person one must be able to share in another person's emotions. One way of doing this is by examining their nonverbal cues, such as tears and expressions in the eye.⁸⁹

Jean-Paul Sartre also argues that nonverbal cues are necessary for empathy. His work focuses mostly on eye contact, namely the Look. When the Other gives the Look, one is aware of their humanity. They are aware that they are in an intersubjective world. Still, one does not see eyes in the Look. Instead, they see an expression. They see the humanity of the Other, which leads them to form an intersubjective bond.⁹⁰

Edmund Husserl never intended for his views of empathy to be exhaustive. He purposefully left out details so his followers could build upon his work. One area Husserl did not mention was the role of nonverbal cues in creating empathy. As Dan Zahavi explains,

[P]henomenologists would precisely insist that we can experience the other directly as a minded being, as a being whose bodily gestures and actions are expressive of his or her experiences or states of mind.⁹¹

⁸⁹ Stein 75-77

⁹⁰ Sartre 340-354

⁹¹ Zahavi, Dan "Intersubjectivity" *International Encyclopedia of Ethics* February 1, 2013; 5

Phenomenologists after Husserl would go onto analyze how people pick up on cues from each other.⁹² This ability to pick up on cues would go onto form the basis of thought for both Edith Stein and Jean-Paul Sartre.⁹³⁹⁴

Husserl's student, Edith Stein, takes his theories of intersubjectivity as her foundation for how two people can form bonds. In order to do this, she first explores the nature of empathy. She begins by analyzing what types of phenomenon can be given to a person. She states,

I can consider the expression of pain, more accurately, the change of face I empathetically grasp as an expression of pain, from as many sides as I desire. Yet, in principle, I can never give an "orientation" where pain itself is primordially given.⁹⁵

When a man sees a girl in pain, he may feel sadness for the child. Yet, the child's pain is her own. It is not given to the man as his own pain. In this way, the man's consciousness is separate from that of the child.

Because of this, Stein believes that one does not see pain, but the expression of the other. She continues, "Thus empathy does not have the character of outer perception, though it does have something in common with outer perception: In both cases, the object is present here and now."⁹⁶ The surprise and joy a boy has at a surprise party is immediately given to his mother. Even upon reflection, she recalls his emotion as much

⁹² Although there are several phenomenologists who discuss empathy such as Emmanuel LeVias and Alfred Schütz, this dissertation will mainly focus on Stein and Sartre for the sake of brevity.

⁹³ See Stein and Sartre

⁹⁴ Although other phenomenologists have used nonverbal cues as a basis for empathy, for the sake of brevity the dissertation will focus on Stein and Sartre.

⁹⁵ Stein 7

⁹⁶ Ibid

as the balloons hanging from the walls. Thus, an emotion is as much a part of an experience as anything in the outside world.

Since empathy is not an outside object, it is internal. Stein argues, “Thus empathy is a kind of act of perceiving [*eine Art erfahrender Akte*] *sui generis*.”⁹⁷ Empathy is more than understanding on an intellectual level whether or not one is upset. Instead, an emotion similar to the other’s are experienced in the one empathizing.

According to Fredrik Svenaeus, “Empathy, according to Stein, is an experience of another person’s experience. The experiences (Erlebnisse) that she considers to belong to empathy are various forms of feelings...”⁹⁸ In order to empathize with another person properly, a person must be able to relate to their emotions. The person must be able to identify sadness in the other and act accordingly. It is this ability to relate to emotions, and not just the ability to pair a body and mind, which forms the foundation of empathy.

In order to demonstrate this argument, she takes Husserl’s process of pairing bodies and minds while adding an additional step.⁹⁹ According to Fredrik Svenaeus,

In the second step, however, my sensual feelings follow the sensual feelings of the other person through, and in this process con-original must mean a different thing than on step one, namely that my sensual feelings feel their way into the sensual field of the other lived body and I thereby experience a contrast between the same sort of feeling as had by me in contrast to being had by the other.¹⁰⁰¹⁰¹

⁹⁷ Ibid 11

⁹⁸ Svenaeus, Fredrik “Edith Stein’s Phenomenology of Sensual and Emotional Empathy” *Phenomenology and the Cognitive Sciences* 17:4 741-760, September 2018,

⁹⁹ These steps do not necessarily need to be performed in each empathetic interaction. Stein sees little problem in stopping after step one, or not progressing past step two. In some situation, it may be more appropriate to stop at either of these points than to progress to step three. See Fredrik Svenaeus for more details.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid 750

¹⁰¹ See *On the Problem of Empathy* 77-82 for more details.

In the second step, one feels an emotion similar to the other while acknowledging that her experience is fundamentally different. A man may see a little girl laughing. Although he does not understand the reason for her laughter, he can take joy in the girl's expression. The man acknowledges that her joy is not his own, but he feels a kinship with her nonetheless. In this way the girl's joy is infectious, though it is acknowledged that her joy is different from that of others.

In order to illustrate how one can relate to another's emotions, Stein uses the example of understanding sadness. She begins,

The sad countenance...is at one with sadness. This occurs in such a way that the countenance itself can step entirely into the background. The countenance is the outside of sadness. Together they form a natural unity.¹⁰²

When a man sees a sad woman, he does not simply see tearful eyes or a quivering lip. Rather he sees a manifestation of sadness itself. He does not only see the Other's body which behaves in the way a human would if she were sad, but immediately apprehends the woman's sadness through how her body displays emotions. There is not a distinction between the internal disposition of sadness and the outside appearance. Instead they are one and the same.

This degree to which one can identify and share the Other's sadness is not only dependent upon a recognition of their humanity, but also upon the degree of familiarity one has with the Other in question. Stein explains, "I notice a familiar facial expression in a close acquaintance and determine that, when he looks like that, he is in a bad mood."¹⁰³

¹⁰² Stein *On the Problem of Empathy* 77

¹⁰³ Ibid

There are certain nonverbal cues which a face betrays that give away the Other's emotional state. When one is in a bad mood his brow may be furrowed or he may cross his arms over his chest. Sometimes the nonverbal cues are subtler, however, in which case familiarity is needed to deduce the Other's mood. A certain man who is in a bad mood may be smiling more widely than usual in an attempt to overcompensate for his foul attitude, or his voice may be a higher pitch. It is only with prior experience with the person that one can understand these nonverbal cues and act accordingly.

Once the bodily signals have been grasped, a person can begin to take on an emotion similar to that expressed by the Other. Stein explains:

In the case of understanding this experience is not primordial, but empathized....Understanding of a bodily expression is based on comprehending the foreign living body already interpreted as a living body of an "I." I project myself into the foreign living body, carry out the experiences already co-given to me as empty with its countenance, and experience the experience ending in this expression.¹⁰⁴

It is not enough to recognize the other as a living body and to understand on an intellectual level what the Other is experiencing. Rather, one must to some degree experience the Other's emotions while acknowledging that the emotion taken on is different and separate from that of the Other. To return to the earlier example of the man and the crying woman, when he sees her tears he should have a twinge of sorrow himself. He knows he does not have the exact same sadness as the woman, but he is able to share in a type of unhappiness.

It is important to note that when sharing an emotion, each person's experience is their own. Matthew Ratcliffe explains, "[I]t is not a matter of having the same feeling as

¹⁰⁴ Ibid 82

someone else and then attributing that feeling to him. Instead, from the outset, one experiences the feeling *as his*.”¹⁰⁵ If a man is counseling a friend on the loss of her mother, he understands that his friends’ experiences with her mother are unique to her. Nobody will have the exact same view of her mother as she will. It is this acknowledgement that allows him to understand that even though he is sad for his friend, he does not experience the depths of her sorrow, or feel exactly the same way. Each person’s emotions are uniquely their own.

The final portion of empathy is an understanding of why the other is in her emotional state. Fredrik Sveneaus explains,

When the empathizer, by way of the empathy process and other knowledge about the empathee, also understands what the object of the empathee’s feeling is, the empathy in question has been transformed from being merely sensual into what I would like to call a case of emotional empathy.¹⁰⁶

For true emotional empathy, one must understand exactly why the other feels as she does. When walking across campus, a professor may spot a woman hunched over on a bench. He recognizes the woman as his student. Then he notices her dripping mascara and her red cheeks. She sniffs. The professor’s eyes trail down to the paper she’s clutching in her hands, the same paper to which he has given a failing grade. In this scenario, the professor recognized the student as having a body separate from his own. After some observation, he deduced that the woman was upset, most likely about what was on the paper. Once he recognized it as the paper he had handed back to her, he immediately understands the situation. Not only can he feel a type of sadness for her, but he can also

¹⁰⁵ Ratcliffe, Matthew “Phenomenology as a Form of Empathy” *Inquiry* 55:5, 473-495 (2012); 475

¹⁰⁶ Sveneaus 754

determine a course of action which may help alleviate the situation, whether it be an offer to meet with her during his office hours or a short conversation in which he explains why she received the grade she did. In this way, the professor empathizes with his student in a meaningful way.

So far, one might think that all Stein has added to Husserl's project is discussing how one experiences the emotions of another. This is not the case though. As explained by Svenaeus,

In these published parts [*On the Problem of Empathy* and the other published portions of her dissertation] Stein makes clear that her overall aim is not only to study the structure of empathic experience but also the issues of what it means to be a person in a social context and how we ought to live together in the world.¹⁰⁷

Empathy is not only necessary for understanding how we discover meaning, but also provides a framework for ethics. If one has difficulty empathizing, then they may not know how to interact others. If they struggle to understand how to relate around others, they are more prone to making mistakes which could be viewed as behaving unethically. Thus, if someone struggles to be empathetic, they may struggle to be ethical.

At this point, one may wonder how empathy can form the basis of any ethical system. Valdecyr Herdy Alves explains,

[W]hen we assume that the other's experience belongs to the set of experiences that shapes our own life, we are conditioned to take responsibility from the ther [sic] as someone similar to us, because I don't live only my life, but I am also responsible for the live of the other that emerges in front of me and reaches my existance [sic].¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁷ Ibid 745

¹⁰⁸ Alves, Valdecyr Herdy, Rudimar Barea, Vera Rudge Werneck, Silvestre Grzibowski, Diego Pereira Rodrigues, and Luana Asturiano da Silva "Ethical Care of the Other: Edith Stein and Max Scheler's Contributions" *Escola Anna Nery* 22(2) 2018; 5

Ethics is concerned with how we treat the other. Consider that many arguments in favor of healthcare reform frame the issue as a basic human right. If a woman would like treatment for breast cancer, then she can assume that others would want the same treatment at an affordable cost. In the spirit of solidarity then, the woman may fight for universal healthcare, or at least insurance reform. Still, it is through that initial empathetic connection with those who need medical treatment that she is able to see the other as similar to herself, and acts accordingly.

Empathy does not only encourage one to behave ethically; it also shapes how we view the other. Without empathy, one cannot see the inherent dignity in another. Alves continues,

Empathy provides the possibility to act ethically, to care for human life that is wounded, while at the same time perceiving the intensity of people's feelings as joyful or sad, healthy or sick. Faced with such a perception, subjects can analyze all the favorable and contrary reasons of their actions in view of a greater good, that is humanity: to act in a responsible and careful way, or to be indifferent to what happens. I could be said that empathy enables thinking ethics, even if I don't live injustices that others suffer, because I can comprehend how dignity and integrity (sic) are wounded by human beings.¹⁰⁹

Many actions outrage us not because we are directly affected, but because we can empathize with the victims. An elderly disabled man being denied a seat on the bus often outrages people because they can empathize with his pain. From the way he leans on his cane and the pleading look in his eyes, one can judge that the seat is an accommodation he desperately needs. It does not take being an elderly disabled man to understand what he is going through. All it takes is the ability to understand that his dignity is wounded in being forced to stand.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid

This sense of understanding that we are all wounded leads us to understand that we are all united in our humanity. Alves states:

If we put the person and one's integrity in the center of four [sic] attitudes, we may recognize ourselves each time more and discover our new forms of understanding human beings, bearers of capacities to aspire to the common good, since we are similar and we live in the same world, in the same historical period. From the moment we consider the other while other, we realize that what unites us and that has fundamental value is life.¹¹⁰

Empathy allows us to see ourselves as a global community. Without this capacity, we cannot behave ethically. If anyone lacks the capacity to feel as the other does then, they lack empathy. If one lacks empathy, one will have difficulty behaving ethically. Thus, if someone struggles with empathy, they may struggle to fit into the wider global community.

Stein was not the only phenomenologist to build off of Husserl's work. Jean-Paul Sartre continues the phenomenological project of analyzing empathy by introducing the concept of the look. This analysis not only focuses on how one looks at the other, but also on how the other looks at oneself. He begins, "Therefore I can not consider the look which the Other directs on me as one of the possible manifestations of his objective being: the Other can not look at *me* as he looks at the grass."¹¹¹ When at a park, a woman may step on the grass without much thought. If she steps on a person's toes though, then she might feel as if she should apologize. Even when passing by the other, she acknowledges her as a human such as her, not as another object.

When looking at another, the former's features are lost. Sartre explains, "It is never when eyes are looking at you that you can find them beautiful or ugly, that you can

¹¹⁰ Ibid

¹¹¹ Sartre 345

remark on their color. The Other's look hides his eyes; he seems to go *in front of them*."¹¹² It is difficult to look at another person as something akin to an anatomy chart. Instead, the person is considered a human first, and a body second. Thus, looking into another's eyes forces one to acknowledge the humanity of the Other.

Because the Other is a human, one's behavior changes accordingly. Sartre explains,

I grasp the Other's look at the very center of my *act* as the solidification and alienation of my own possibilities. In fear of in anxious or prudent anticipation, I perceive that these possibilities which I *am* and which are the transcendence are given also to another, given as about to be transcended in turn by his own possibilities.¹¹³

When acting, one behaves as if she is always being viewed by the Other. This dictates her actions and the possibilities she has in her situation. For instance, a woman may fanaticize about walking to her mailbox unclothed. Still, she fears that if she does so, the neighbors will notice. Their reactions may range anywhere from ridicule to calling the police for her indecent exposure. Since the look of the Other is always upon her, the woman walks to her mailbox fully clothed.

The Other's look is so dominant for Sartre, that our very self is found in the other.

According to Luna Dolezal,

The Look is symbolic for an awakening of reflective self-consciousness. Self-awareness and self-reflection are made possible by the 'appearance' of the Other and maintained by the continued 'presence' of the Other¹¹⁴

¹¹² Ibid 346-347

¹¹³ Ibid 352

¹¹⁴ Dolezal, Luna "Reconsidering the Look in Sartre's Being and Nothingness" *Sartre Studies International* January 1, 2012, 9-19; 16

The Other's gaze is upon one always, even if her physical presence is not. One may decide not to steal an expensive item because she fears how others will react if her theft is discovered. She may have absorbed the lessons of others in always being honest. Not wanting to disappoint her family and teachers, she may forego the theft. Thus, one sees herself through the lens of the Other.

From Stein to Sartre and beyond, phenomenology has had a rich tradition of analyzing empathy. Husserl left a barebones theory of empathy in order to allow other phenomenologists to build upon it. Edith Stein builds upon his theories to better incorporate how people relate to each other on an emotional level. She claims that to further the empathetic process, one must feel an emotion similar to the other and understand the origin of this emotion. In order to feel said emotion, one must be able to recognize nonverbal cues. Sartre goes a step further and argues that one finds herself in the Other. One does this through a mutual gaze. Regardless of their exact stance, all phenomenologists argue that the other is vital to one's lived experience.

On the surface then, these accounts of empathy seem adequate in explaining our everyday interactions. Most people view the other as a fellow human, and act accordingly. It is assumed that recognizing the emotions of others or making eye contact necessary for the look are natural, universal processes; however, this is not necessarily the case. The next section will discuss the problematic phenomenon of spotlighting when attempting to base ethics and self-consciousness on empathy.

Section II: The Spotlighting Problem

Up to this point, it has been assumed that empathy is an inherently positive trait. Without others, one cannot obtain any type of meaningful knowledge. The other is not only an integral part of ethics, but leads to self-consciousness as well. In short, one cannot have a world without intersubjectivity. On the surface then, it seems as if empathy is unproblematic.

Although the other is a vital part of one's lifeworld, not all others are treated equally. There are certain people and groups with which one empathizes with more than others. One shines a "spotlight" over some groups to the exclusion and detriment of others. This is problematic because it leads to unequal treatment of certain groups, which can lead to faulty ethical judgments and, as explored in the next section, oppression.

Although most people do not phrase their endorsement of empathy through an appeal to the lifeworld, they do endorse the idea that empathy could be the basis for ethics. As noted by Paul Bloom,

It makes sense that empathy would be seen by so many as the magic bullet of morality. The argument in its simplest form goes like this: Everyone is naturally interested in him-or herself; we care most about our pleasure and pain.¹¹⁵

Just as phenomenology faces the problem of solipsism without the *epoché*, ethics faces the problem of egoism without empathy. It is easy to only take oneself into consideration since one has access to oneself. There needs to be some inner process which restrains one from doing whatever she wants. The gaze of other people as well as their opinions can drive one to behave this way. A person's aversion to causing pain and their desire to

¹¹⁵ Bloom, Paul *Against Empathy* HarperCollins NY 2016, 21

bring pleasure may also dictate how they act. In this way, empathy can form a type of ethics.

Many people have proposed that what keeps one from acting on her less than moral impulses is empathy. According to Bloom:

[E]mpathy makes the experience of others salient and important—your pain becomes my pain, your thirst becomes my thirst, and so I rescue you from the fire or give you something to drink. Empathy guides us to treat others as we treat ourselves and hence expands our selfish concerns to encompass other people.¹¹⁶

There are parallels to phenomenology. Once one pairs with the other, she realizes that his needs are like her own. Since the other is a self-governing human body, it stands to reason that he would have the same needs as her. So, if she needs water, then he needs water too. In this way, a woman can empathize with a thirsty man. This empathy could spurn her into action, helping him to get a drink.

Bloom acknowledges that empathy can be a powerful motivator. He claims, “In this way, the willful exercise of empathy can motivate kindness that would never have otherwise occurred.”¹¹⁷ It is unlikely that anyone would willingly go outside if the wind chill was fifty below zero with no clear motive for doing so. Still, if a man heard that a child has wandered outside and is now lost, he could consider the possibility that the child may develop hypothermia and die. Then, he considers what impact the death will have on the child’s parents and other relatives. These feelings spur him into action, causing him to go out into the polar vortex to find the child.

¹¹⁶ Ibid

¹¹⁷ Ibid

Some proponents of empathy are so confident in its power to stir one to action, that they believe empathy alone is sufficient to determine the morality of an action. Bloom explains, “For every specific problem, lack of empathy is seen as the diagnosis and more empathy as the cure.”¹¹⁸ One can see how empathy might lead to a solution in the phenomenon of charity appeals. A priest who works in Haiti may come to a church in the United States to ask for aid. During the course of his appeal, he will often portray the Haitians as desperate people who lack basic necessities such as food and water. Through this illustration, he hopes that the congregation will respond emotionally and give more money. The implication of the speech is that empathy will resolve the crisis faced in Haiti, and apathy will allow it to continue.

Thus far, Bloom has been discussing a type of empathy which is more akin to that which was endorsed by Edith Stein. Empathy depends on discerning the emotions of the other and acting upon them. This need not be the only type of empathy though. He continues:

There is the capacity to understand what is going on in people’s heads, to know what makes them tick, what gives them joy and pain, what they see as humiliating or ennobling. We’re not talking about me feeling your pain but rather about understanding that you are in pain without necessarily experiencing any of it myself.¹¹⁹

Understanding what is going on inside someone’s head on some level is important for interpersonal relationships. As noted by Husserl and Stein, pairing cannot begin if the other is not seen as having a similar mind. Thus one can empathize with others without necessarily feeling as they do, something both phenomenologists acknowledge as key.

¹¹⁸ Idid 20

¹¹⁹ Ibid 36

On the surface then, it appears that empathy is necessary for making ethical decisions. Bloom disagrees though. He argues,

Cognitive empathy is a useful tool, then-a necessary one for anyone who wishes to be a good person-but it is morally neutral. I believe that the capacity for emotional empathy...is actually morally corrosive.¹²⁰

Like Husserl, Bloom believes that intellectual empathy is valuable for interacting with others. On some level, one must acknowledge the other as like to herself. She must understand how her actions affect others and act accordingly. If an action will only bring short-and long-term misery to those around her, then one should rethink her actions. The same though, cannot be said of emotional empathy.

Unlike Stein though, Bloom does not believe emotional empathy can be the basis of morality. He believes that bringing emotions into ethical decisions distorts, not enhances, our ability to relate to others. Bloom goes so far as to say,

If you are struggling with a moral decision and find yourself trying to feel someone's pain or pleasure, you should stop. The empathetic engagement might give you some satisfaction, but it's not how to improve things and can lead to bad decisions and bad outcomes.¹²¹

A father who relates to his child's sadness at not receiving a candy bar may give into her demands and give her the sweet. This could have detrimental consequences though. First, the child learns that if she cries, she will obtain whatever she desires. Second, it will be more of a struggle to teach her healthy eating habits than if she had been denied. In this way, empathy may lead to a poorer outcome than if the morality of the situation had been approached more rationally.

¹²⁰ Ibid 38-39

¹²¹ Ibid 39

In order to demonstrate that emotional empathy is too fallible to serve as the basis of an ethical system, Bloom uses the following experiment performed by C. Daniel

Batson:

He [Batson] told his subjects about a charitable organization called the Quality of Life Foundation that worked to make the final years of terminally ill children more comfortable. The subjects were then told that they would hear individual children on the waiting list for treatment. Subjects in the low-empathy condition were told, "While you are listening to this interview, try to *take an objective perspective toward what is described....*" Those in the high-empathy condition were told, "Try to imagine how the child who is interviewed feels about what has happened and how it has affected the child's life."¹²²

For many people, organizations can lack empathy, especially if they view their potential clients as numbers. Some believe organizations such as charities should be more empathetic towards others. This empathy has consequences, which the experiment explored.

The experiment went as follows:

The interview was with a girl named Sheri Summers—"a very brave, bright ten year old." Her painful terminal illness was described in detail... Subjects were then asked whether they wanted to fill out a special request to move Sheri up the waiting list. It was made clear that if this request was granted it would mean children higher up in priority would have to wait longer to get care.¹²³

Sheri Summers was no longer a number, but a person. The choice was between the named Sheri Summers, who they had come to know by name, and a few anonymous children.

The results of the experiment reflected how the subjects were told to consider the situation. Bloom explains, "three-quarters of the subjects in the high-empathy condition

¹²² Ibid 86

¹²³ Ibid

wanted to move her up, as compared to one-third in the low-empathy condition.”¹²⁴ By making Sheri Summers a person, only her suffering was taken into account, not the suffering of others. This is problematic though when one considers that the children passed over for her were people as well. All of them had struggles and stories similar to that of Sheri, and in some cases may have had more heartbreaking stories. Rather than considering the possible suffering of the other children on the list, though, they chose to give funding to the girl they knew.

The ability of empathy to draw attention to one’s suffering is akin to shining a spotlight on an object. Bloom explains,

This sort of effect takes us back to the metaphor of empathy as spotlight. This metaphor captures a feature of empathy that its fans are quick to emphasize-how it makes visible the sufferings of others, makes their troubles real, salient, and concrete.¹²⁵

Empathy draws attention to one’s pain or suffering. It is through the “spotlighting” that we begin to relate to others, and possibly determine our next course of action.

By now it should be clear that empathy is not always a positive act when spotlighting is involved. Bloom argues, “A spotlight picks out a certain space to illuminate and leaves the rest in darkness; its focus is narrow.”¹²⁶ When one empathizes with a group or person, then everything else falls to the wayside. For instance, when one hears a student’s lament at a bad grade, oftentimes the student becomes the focus of attention. Little thought is given to why the professor gave her the grade he did, or other

¹²⁴ Ibid

¹²⁵ Ibid 87

¹²⁶ Ibid

factors such as how little the student actually studied for the exam or if she did all the required assignments. Instead only the pain is emphasized; only the student's face is seen.

The problem with spotlighting has wider spread real world implications than a student upset over a grade. As noted by Bloom,

If our concern is driven by the thoughts of the suffering of specific individuals, then it sets up a perverse situation in which the suffering of one can matter more than the suffering of a thousand.¹²⁷

The spotlight distorts our sense of the importance of the multitude. For instance in 1932, America was caught up in the hysteria surrounding the Lindbergh baby kidnapping. In that same year, millions were dying as a result of Josef Stalin's Five Year Plan.

Lindbergh's baby was a face people could identify, whereas thousands of Ukrainians were too abstract to consider. The media spotlighted the baby. Americans felt empathy for the Lindberghs' pain, whereas the starving Soviets warranted little attention. In this way, empathy shone the spotlight onto one person instead of millions.

This distortion has major consequences for our policy. Bloom admits that certain cases are difficult to adjudicate, such as which war torn country deserves more media attention. Not every case is as murky though. He argues,

But some cases aren't hard at all, such as when concerns about adorable creatures-like oil-drenched penguins or, in 2014, a dog with Ebola that cost the city of Dallas \$27,000 to care for-sap money and interest which could be better used to save lives.¹²⁸

While the responsibilities of people towards animals is an issue of spirited debate, most agree that one dog's life should not mean more than those of ten people struggling to

¹²⁷ Ibid 89

¹²⁸ Ibid 94

make ends meet because they need to pay off an outstanding medical bill. Still, the animal is cuter than a single mother working two jobs, hence the former receives more consideration. Empathy leads us to care for the animal which captures our heart instead of considering the other uses of that much money.

At this juncture, one could argue that while spotlighting is problematic, one can expand her horizons in order to take on a more neutral outlook. The key would be to empathize only with those worthy of empathy. By only empathizing with those deemed worthy of it, one can make more sound ethical decisions. This is a naive assumption. Bloom explains, "It's a lot easier to empathize with someone who is similar to you, or someone who has been kind to you in the past, or someone you love. . . ." ¹²⁹ Often it is the way one has treated the other which becomes the basis of empathy. It might be easier for a woman to relate to the one who has helped her fix a flat tire than it is for her to relate to the one who has rear-ended her. In this way, empathy is limited.

The problem of spotlighting goes deeper than how others are treated though. Bloom argues, "We are constituted to favor our friends and family over strangers, to care more about members of our own group than people from different, perhaps opposing, groups." ¹³⁰ It is easier to empathize with a member of one's community than it is to empathize with someone on another continent, just as it is easier to empathize with someone sharing one's religious beliefs than someone of a different faith. This leads to

¹²⁹ Ibid 94

¹³⁰ Ibid

some people receiving consideration, and others being ignored. As a result, the pain someone is experiencing may be overlooked in order to cater to one's similar to oneself.

It is here that we can begin to see the problem with modern phenomenology's views on empathy. While Husserl believed empathy should remain only an explanation of how others are viewed, other phenomenologists have used empathy as the basis for ethics and self-consciousness. This may lead to faulty judgments, such as how to allocate resources or who should receive consideration for aid. It could also lead to favoring certain groups over others, which could in turn lead to oppression. This idea will be explored in the proceeding section.

Section III: The Effects of Spotlighting

Since emotional empathy is inherently biased, it is important to examine how these biases can manifest themselves. An instance of spotlighting one group over another is in racial oppression which relies on one over-identifying with members of his race to the detriment of others. One person who analyzes this process is Franz Fanon, who claims that his blackness is seen before his humanity. He argues that philosophy must account for this, especially when discussing intersubjectivity.

Another issue which can arise is empathizing with groups who may share little in common. Although Hilary Putnam's Super Spartan experiment was initially used as a counterargument to behaviorism, it could apply to empathy as well. The Super Spartans are a race of people who do not display pain stimuli. They feel pain, but do not show it in their facial expressions. This mirrors another group, namely the Autistic, who can feel pain differently than non-Autistic people. Since a non-Autistic person has difficulty

relating to someone who feels pain differently than them, it can be hard for them to form an empathetic bond.

Franz Fanon begins his analysis of racial tension by using the words others have directed towards him, namely, ““Look, a Negro!””¹³¹ In this case, one does not see a face with which one can empathize. Instead, she sees a black man. His blackness comes before his emotional state can be recognized. They see Fanon’s skin color, not his humanity

Fanon elaborates upon this by stating, “As long as the black man is among his own, he will have no occasion, except in minor internal conflicts, to experience his being through others.”¹³² Fanon can see himself in the other and forge his own identity through the other, provided both are black. With a skin color similar to himself His self is defined not by race, but by his interactions as a human with another human.

This ability to see oneself in the other does not translate to Fanon interacting with those of a different race, though. He claims:

And then the occasion arose when I had to meet the white man’s eyes. An unfamiliar weight burdened me. . . . In the white world the man of color encounters difficulties in the development of his bodily schema. Consciousness of the body is solely a negating activity. It is a third- person consciousness.¹³³

An encounter between two black men is different from an encounter between a black man and a white man. In the first, Fanon feels a shared sense of selfhood. The other black man does not question Fanon’s personhood, nor do they see race in each other. The meeting

¹³¹ Fanon 82

¹³² Ibid

¹³³ Ibid 83

between Fanon and a white man is different, though. The white person sees blackness first, not a person similar to herself. Although the white person does not deny Fanon's humanity, he is seen as a living *black* body, not merely a living body. The white man does not see Fanon's rage at being called the n-word, but rather a black person who just so happens to be cringing.

This lack of empathy not only strips the black person of his humanity, but also strips him of his individuality. Fanon argues, "I was responsible at the same time for my body, for my race, for my ancestors."¹³⁴ The black man is seen as part of a collective, not as an individual. This is in stark contrast to the way a white person is viewed. An American white woman of German descent is not held responsible for the horrors of Nazism, nor does one consider the deplorable treatment of Native Americans at the hands of other white people when looking at her. The black man, on the other hand, is seen as the descendent of Africans. When discussing black history, the horrors of slavery are often emphasized. Little consideration is given to the fact that today, many African Americans are descended from immigrants who came to the United States willingly, nor is it considered that not all black Americans will agree with each other on certain political issues. They are often treated as a monolithic group.

The problem of the African American in white society goes deeper than simply an assumption about one's ancestors though. Many times, the black person must endure stereotypes about members of his race. According to Tracy Jan,

¹³⁴ Ibid 84

Major media outlets routinely present a distorted picture of black families — portraying them as dependent and dysfunctional — while white families are more likely to be depicted as sources of social stability....¹³⁵

When an African American is interviewed by the news, it is often because of some issue which affects those of a lower class or a crime has been committed. The poverty of the black person's neighborhood may be emphasized along with how dilapidated the buildings in said neighborhood appear. If the story in question involved a domestic dispute, then the dysfunction will be emphasized. By contrast, if a white person is interviewed, it is often because of some charitable action or they are leading an organization dealing with a community issue. Whereas the white person has little racial baggage, the black man is not afforded such a luxury.

Race clouds all relationships a black person has with his white peers. Fanon concludes, "When [white] people like me, they tell me it is in spite of my color. When they dislike me, they point out that it is not because of my color."¹³⁶ The ability to see one as a peer and accept her into the community is not determined by facial expressions or a similar humanoid appearance, but boils down to race. A white person interacting with Fanon must defend herself against the accusations of racism, often by claiming she is not racist. She must justify her reason disliking Fanon in the context of race, not in the context of other factors such as dissimilar interests. Fanon is not treated as a person, but as a black person.

¹³⁵ Jan, Tracy "News Media Offers Consistently Warped Portrayals of Black Families, Study Finds" *The Washington Post* December 13, 2017

¹³⁶ Fanon 88

Another issue with modern phenomenology's views of empathy is the emphasis on facial recognition. If being able to recognize the emotions of others from their facial expressions is necessary for the process of empathy to progress, then people should be within some type of norm. This may not always be the case. It is conceivable that a society could be so far outside the norm that one cannot empathize with its members. One potential example of such a society was proposed by Hilary Putnam in his "super Spartans" thought experiment. He begins,

Imagine a community of 'super-spartans' or 'super- stoics'- a community in which the adults have the ability to successfully suppress all involuntary pain behavior. They may, on occasion, admit that they feel pain, but always in pleasant well-modulated voices -even if they are undergoing the agonies of the damned. They do not wince, scream, flinch, sob, grit their teeth, clench their fists, exhibit beads of sweat, or otherwise act like people in pain or people suppressing the unconditioned responses associated with pain¹³⁷

Putnam's super Spartan shows *no* trace of pain regardless of the circumstance. If she shatters her tibia, she speaks to the doctor as if she is ordering from a fast food restaurant. When one looks at her, she exudes calmness and rationality. Still, according to the Super Spartan, she does feel the pain. The phenomenologist would not deny that the Super Spartan is in pain, though it would be impossible for her to see pain in the Spartan's eyes.

One way around this conundrum would be to note that in the community of Super Spartans it is only the adults which suppress their pain response. Children, on the other hand, are able to exhibit pain. In this way, one can empathize with the Super Spartan since she is at least capable of demonstrating that she is in pain. Putnam himself acknowledges this possibility, yet claims that even the children may be incapable of involuntarily expressing pain. He argues,

¹³⁷ Putnam, Hilary 29

Specifically, let us take our 'super spartans', and let us suppose that after millions of years they begin to have children who are born fully acculturated. They are born...sharing the dominant spartan beliefs about the importance of not evincing pain (except by way of verbal report, and even that in a tone of voice that suggests indifference).¹³⁸

In this highly evolved super Spartan culture, even the children are aware that they should not exhibit pain. Perhaps the children understand how secretive their culture is, and in order to preserve their way of life they cannot express pain under torture, or perhaps they believe expressing pain is only for the weak. Regardless, they behave as their parents do. In this society, nobody exhibits pain, nor is there any way of determining that they are in pain.

At first, this thought experiment seems irrelevant to phenomenology, until one considers that there are people akin to super Spartans, namely the Autistic.. Like the Super Spartan, Autistic people often feel pain differently than Non-Autistic people. According to Tony Attwood, "The child or adult with Asperger's Syndrome may appear very stoic, and not flinch or show distress in response to levels of pain that others would consider unbearable."¹³⁹ This inability to show pain can become quite alarming for their relatives, who fear for the Autistic person's safety. It is also disconcerting since an Autistic should feel pain in certain circumstances, yet they do not.

In a twist on the Super Spartan example, it is sometimes difficult to empathize with the Autistic because they do not feel pain when one would believe that they should. One Autistic woman, Lynne Soraya, recalls being hit by a car. She states,

¹³⁸ Ibid 29

¹³⁹ Soraya, Lynne "Asperger's, Pain Perception, and Body Awareness" *Psychology Today* September 12, 2010 <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/aspergers-diary/201009/aspergers-pain-perception-and-body-awareness>

In the first few moments after the impact, I felt pain -- then it dissipated. In later years, I would describe it as being similar to bashing your shin or funny bone...in fact it was so similar, that I attempted to handle it the same way.¹⁴⁰

In a twist on the Super Spartan experiment, within a few moments of the impact Soraya felt no pain. She recalls attempting to stand up because she believed she had simply undergone a few scratches. It was confusing that anyone would be concerned for her wellbeing.

Just as interesting as Soraya's predicament is the way people reacted towards her. She continues by discussing the reactions of the paramedics who arrived on the scene.

She looked at the blood and broken bones, and came to the conclusion that I must be in massive pain. She refused to believe me when I said I wasn't. "It's alright," she kept saying, "You can cry. I won't think badly of you." Of course, I was confused. Why would I cry if I wasn't feeling any pain? It made little sense to me.¹⁴¹

Soraya and the paramedic were unable to empathize with each other. The paramedic could not envision not being in pain, whereas this was exactly how Soraya felt. Because Soraya's experience was so foreign to the paramedic, the latter pushed her experiences onto the former. The paramedic believed that if I would feel pain in your situation, then you must be in pain. Since this was not the case, emotional empathy could not develop between the paramedic and the crash victim.

Breakdowns in empathy occur far more frequently than many wish to acknowledge. Fanon argues that he is seen not as a human person, but as a black body. His race comes before him, calling into question whether humanity is always the first feature one takes note of when looking at the other.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid

¹⁴¹ Ibid

Race is not the only aspect which could lead to a breakdown in empathy. Hilary Putnam performs a thought experiment with a race of Super Spartans who do not display pain in a typical way. Although this thought experiment was initially meant to be a counterargument to behaviorism, it can apply to Autistic people. A non-Autistic person may find it difficult to relate to an Autistic person since the latter does not display pain in a typical manner. The non-Autistic person may wonder why the Autistic person does not cry when they have a broken bone. Since it is difficult to relate to the Autistic person, empathy can break down, an issue which will be explored in more depth in the following chapter.

Conclusion

Empathy has always been an important component of phenomenology. Husserl emphasized its importance, but only gives a barebones theory of empathy. Instead, he leaves the work of fleshing out empathy to his followers. One student who did so was Edith Stein. According to Stein, the process of empathy need not end at simply acknowledging the other as a lived body. She argues that one recognizes the other as similar to oneself through facial expressions. One does not see tears, but rather sadness. If one wants to progress past this stage, one must also understand why the other feels the way he does. In this way, the bonds of empathy can be formed. In turn, these empathetic bonds form the basis of ethics.

Jean-Paul Sartre agrees with Husserl and Stein that one must acknowledge the animate body, and emphasizes the ability of one to read the other's emotions. He focuses on the gaze of the other. It is only through looking at others and making eye contact that

one can begin the process of empathy. In the look, one realizes that the other is an important component not only of the world, but of herself as well. Through this look, empathy becomes the basis for self-consciousness.

At this point, it seems that empathy is an inherently positive trait. Since empathy is important for building interpersonal relationships and being recognized as a subject, there seems to be little downside to empathy. Paul Bloom disagrees, though. He argues that empathy is neutral at best, and damaging at worst. He uses the phenomenon of spotlighting to demonstrate his point. In spotlighting, one person or group is empathized over others. As with a spotlight, however, other people and aspects of the situation remain in the dark and are not emphasized. In this way, some groups are ignored, and may be oppressed in favor of one's friends and family.

One can see the effects of spotlighting in the phenomenon of racism. Franz Fanon discusses how he is not seen as a body, but as a black body. Instead of being acknowledged as a fellow human, he is acknowledged as a black human. This leads to oppression and a distorted sense of self-consciousness.

Perhaps most damaging of all is the case of how to empathize with those who atypically display their emotions. While phenomenologists never make the claim that one's ability to read facial expression is infallible, it is difficult to empathize with those whose sensations differ wildly from one's own or who express emotions in an unconventional manner. In the case of the Super Spartans, one does not see pain in their facial expressions, regardless of the torture they may have undergone. Although a phenomenologist would never deny that the Super Spartans are in pain, it does strain the

ability to empathize with them. This strained ability to relate to others who have too radical of a sensation from oneself is also seen in the case of the Autistic, a group which often does not express sensations such as pain or emotions such as sadness in a way similar to those of the Non-Autistic.

In the next chapter, a phenomenology of Autism will be discussed. The diagnostic criteria for Autism will be explained, as will as how these issues affect their daily lives. Then, the idea that Autistic people lack empathy will be explored. After this analysis, it should be clear why a new view of empathy is needed, one which could be spearheaded by phenomenology.

Chapter III Phenomenology and Autism

Now that empathy and the problems it poses has been examined, it is time to turn our attention to Autism and its implications for empathy. Autism is a pervasive neurological disorder which affects sensory perceptions. One of the most well-known instances of sensory issues is florescent lights. Many non-Autistic people are not bothered by artificial lights, but many Autistic people complain that they buzz and/or are too bright. While some Autistics simply find this buzzing annoying, others find it excruciating.¹⁴² This creates a disconnect between the Autistic and the non-Autistic person though since the latter cannot relate to the experiences of the former. Both groups can perceive basic facts about a florescent light, but the Autistic person perceives it as a source of pain whereas a non-Autistic person does not. Because of this, it can often be difficult for the two groups to empathize with each other.¹⁴³

Compounding the problem is that many Autistic people have difficulty in deciphering nonverbal cues.¹⁴⁴ For instance, an Autistic person may not understand that when someone is backing away, it means they want to end the conversation. Thus the Autistic person may continue talking and move in closer instead of saying, “Good bye.” This problem is exacerbated by the fact that many Autistic people do not make eye

¹⁴² Pence, Sacha T., Wagoner, Reginna, and Claire S. St. Peter “Blue Light Covers Increase Stereotypy and Decrease On-Task Behavior for Students with Autism” *Behavioral Analysis in Practice* 12(3) 2019, 632-636; 632

¹⁴³ Dant, Tim “In Two Minds: Theory of Mind, Intersubjectivity, and Autism” *Theory and Psychology* Vol. 25(1) 2015, 45–62

¹⁴⁴ Center for Disease Control and Prevention *Diagnostic Criteria for 299.00 Autism Spectrum Disorder* April 26, 2018 <https://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/autism/hcp-dsm.html>

contact. Some Autistic people report that eye contact is painful while others report that it is meaningless.¹⁴⁵ Oftentimes, this means that the Autistic person looks at someone's mouth and listens to the other's words for social cues. Thus an Autistic person will often miss the flash of anger in one's eyes, or may not understand that their conversation partner's eyes are glazing over in boredom. Because the Autistic person cannot understand nonverbal social cues and seems to ignore them, he is seen as lacking empathy. Thus, Autism strains the schools of thought in phenomenology which argue that reading nonverbal cues is necessary for empathy.

This perceived lack of empathy has major ramifications for philosophy. Philosophers such as Deborah Barnbaum have claimed since Autistic people lack in empathy, they have difficulty being moral agents.¹⁴⁶ Without empathy, one cannot participate in the moral community. While she argues that the Autistic person must be treated ethically and should be held to certain ethical standards, their struggles in participating in the ethical community should not be ignored.

The most damning indictment against the Autistic person comes from school of thought in phenomenology though. As Kathleen Haney points out, if one cannot empathize, then she has a deficient lifeworld.¹⁴⁷ If she cannot empathize with others, her humanity is in question. *Since Autistic people are seen as lacking empathy, then they have no lifeworld and are not fully human.*

¹⁴⁵ Reyes, Philip "Eye Contact" *Faith, Hope, and Love...With Autism* Last modified January 24, 2015. <http://faithhopeloveautism.blogspot.com/2015/01/eye-contact.html>

¹⁴⁶ Barnbaum, Deborah R *The Ethics of Autism: Among Them, but Not of Them* Indiana University Press, Bloomington, IN 2008; 109-144

¹⁴⁷ Haney 35-54

The implication is unacceptable for many contemporary phenomenologists such as Tim Dant. They have sought ways to create a more inclusive view of empathy, which can account for the Autistic experience. Tim Dant, a contemporary phenomenologist, have claimed that so long as an Autistic can have shared experiences with a non-Autistic person, then they are still subjects with a lifeworld.¹⁴⁸ The similarities should be emphasized, not the differences. Still, this solution leads to “passing,” which is when an Autistic person pretends to be a member of the non-Autistic community. Passing can have serious psychological effects, such as depression and anxiety, making it an untenable long-term solution.¹⁴⁹

This chapter will explore the problems phenomenology faces when examining Autistic women. In Section I, I will analyze the diagnostic criteria for Autism and the effects it has on the Autistic person’s perception of the lifeworld. In Section II, I will argue that contemporary views of empathy fall short of explaining the Autistic experience. By the end, I hope to demonstrate the need to create a more inclusive view of empathy.

Section I: Defining Autism

In order to understand why Autistic people are accused of lacking empathy, it is important to understand what Autism is. The diagnosis for Autism is based on exhibiting symptoms from two clusters. Cluster A deals with abnormal social interactions while

¹⁴⁸ Dant 53-56

¹⁴⁹ Strauss, Jane “Jane Strauss Speaks To Passing – Denying One’s Identity And The Damage It Does” *The Art of Autism* November 15, 2014 <https://the-art-of-autism.com/jane-strauss-speaks-to-passing-denying-ones-identity-and-the-damage-it-does/>

Cluster B deals with abnormal behaviors in other areas of an Autistic person's life. In addition to exhibiting behaviors from Clusters A and B, three other conditions must be met in order to warrant a diagnosis of Autism: the symptoms cannot be the result of another disorder such as Fragile X Syndrome, the symptoms must be disruptive to the person's life, and the symptoms must last a lifetime.¹⁵⁰

This section will explore the criteria one must meet in order to be diagnosed as Autistic. It will first examine the ways Autism affects one socially (Cluster A). After that, it will discuss other areas of life affected by Autism (Cluster B). Finally, the three conditions outside of Clusters A and B will be discussed. Once Autism is well-defined, it will be possible to discuss why the condition garners attention from philosophers.

Unlike disabilities such as deafness which only affect one sense, Autism affects the entire body. This is because Autism is best described as a neurological disorder.

According to The National Institute of Neurological Disorders and Stroke (NINDS)

Autism spectrum disorder (ASD) refers to a group of complex neurodevelopment disorders characterized by repetitive and characteristic patterns of behavior and difficulties with social communication and interaction. The symptoms are present from early childhood and affect daily functioning.¹⁵¹

A Deaf person may have difficulty communicating because she is unable to hear others. Still, with accommodations such as texting and sign language, the Deaf can communicate just as effectively as any hearing person. Autism is not like this though. Inherent in the disorder is a difficulty in communicating nonverbally. Thus even with accommodations,

¹⁵⁰ Center for Disease Control and Prevention *Diagnostic Criteria for 299.00 Autism Spectrum Disorder* April 26, 2018 <https://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/autism/hcp-dsm.html>

¹⁵¹ National Institute of Neurological Disorders and Stroke *Autism Spectrum Disorder Fact Sheet* March 13, 2020 <https://www.ninds.nih.gov/Disorders/Patient-Caregiver-Education/Fact-Sheets/Autism-Spectrum-Disorder-Fact-Sheet>

an Autistic person will have difficulty interacting with others with the same ease a non-Autistic person does.

In order to better understand Autism, it is vital to discuss the criteria one must meet in order to be diagnosed with the condition. Although every Autistic person is unique, there are certain behaviors and characteristics which indicate that one has the condition. These symptoms are divided into two clusters: one which deals with how one socially interacts with others (Cluster A) and one which discusses sensory perceptions (Cluster B).

According to the DSM-V, Cluster A consists of:

- A Persistent deficits in social communication and social interaction across multiple contexts, as manifested by the following, currently or by history...:
 - 1 Deficits in social-emotional reciprocity, ranging, for example, from abnormal social approach and failure of normal back-and-forth conversation; to reduced sharing of interests, emotions, or affect; to failure to initiate or respond to social interactions.
 - 2 Deficits in nonverbal communicative behaviors used for social interaction, ranging, for example, from poorly integrated verbal and nonverbal communication; to abnormalities in eye contact and body language or deficits in understanding and use of gestures; to a total lack of facial expressions and nonverbal communication.
 - 3 Deficits in developing, maintaining, and understand relationships, ranging, for example, from difficulties adjusting behavior to suit various social contexts; to difficulties in sharing imaginative play or in making friends; to absence of interest in peers.¹⁵²

The Autistic person may not display emotions, or if he does they are displayed in an abnormal way. For example, an Autistic person may give a hearty laugh when under extreme stress or give a blank look when trying to understand a concept. Because of this, it can be difficult to gauge how an Autistic person is feeling, which could lead to miscommunication.

¹⁵² Center for Disease Control and Prevention *Diagnostic Criteria for 299.00 Autism Spectrum Disorder* April 26, 2018 <https://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/autism/hcp-dsm.html>

One hallmark of Autism is that many Autistic people have difficulty initiating social interactions. One Autistic mom describes her daughter's symptoms as follows:

Each time the teacher or head teacher uses the word “shy” about my daughter, I answer, “no she’s not shy, she’s autistic, she’s experiencing a sensory overload, you should see her in her comfort zone shrieking at the top of her voice”, but today we were out and bumped into a kid who was in nursery with my daughter last year and said ‘oh she’s shy’ (even a bloody kid, get her !!!!) to her nanny when my daughter hid behind me when she saw her. People don’t understand that my daughter hides behind me/daddy as a way to protect herself from the outside world when experiencing sensory overload or in a playful way when she’s excited, depending on the situation and the frown or big smile on her face.¹⁵³

An Autistic person often has difficulty initiating conversations, which is why many of them are written off as “shy.” Still, a non-Autistic shy person can discern the social cues of another person, whereas an Autistic person cannot. A shy person knows that when a person’s eyes are glazing over, she does not want to hear about dinosaurs anymore. An Autistic person does not understand how to read these cues though, exacerbating the problem.

Compounding the problem of socializing is the fact that many Autistic people cannot decipher nonverbal cues. They may not understand what certain gestures mean, or be unable to decipher expressions. The most famous symptom is an inability to make eye contact. While many reasons have been proposed as to why this is the case, one proposal is that eye contact is too overwhelming for an Autistic person. According to Philip Reyes, an Autistic blogger:

Most people seem to need to have to look long and hard to make sense of a picture. I can take in a whole picture at a glance. Each day I see too many little petty details. I look away to not get overwhelmed by a lot of little bits of information....This helps me concentrate on what I should be focusing on.... I am assessing many sounds too. I have

¹⁵³ Michel, Louise “She’s Just a Very Shy Little Girl...No Dear, She’s AUTISTIC” *Ambitious About Autism* February 16, 2015 <https://www.ambitiousaboutautism.org.uk/talk-to-others/2015-04-09/shes-just-a-very-shy-little-girl-no-dear-shes-autistic>

to erase some stimuli to access my answers to people's questions and meet their demands. That is why I don't make eye contact.”¹⁵⁴

While it is important for someone to focus on what is being said, much of what someone means lies in nonverbal communication. This puts the Autistic person in a bind: he can either focus on what is being said and participate in the conversation, or he can attempt to understand what is being unsaid and be too overwhelmed to communicate effectively. Either way, this lack of being able to pick up on cues is frustrating for both parties.

Aside from the issues in forming relationships with others, Autism is characterized by certain types of repetitive behaviors. The DSM-V defines this as:

Restricted, repetitive patterns of behavior, interests, or activities, as manifested by at least two of the following, currently or by history (examples are illustrative, not exhaustive; see text):

- 1 Stereotyped or repetitive motor movements, use of objects, or speech (e.g., simple motor stereotypes, lining up toys or flipping objects, echolalia, idiosyncratic phrases).
- 2 Insistence on sameness, inflexible adherence to routines, or ritualized patterns of verbal or nonverbal behavior (e.g., extreme distress at small changes, difficulties with transitions, rigid thinking patterns, greeting rituals, need to take same route or eat same food every day).
- 3 Highly restricted, fixated interests that are abnormal in intensity or focus (e.g., strong attachment to or preoccupation with unusual objects, excessively circumscribed or perseverative [sic] interests).
- 4 Hyper- or hyporeactivity to sensory input or unusual interest in sensory aspects of the environment (e.g. apparent indifference to pain/temperature, adverse response to specific sounds or textures, excessive smelling or touching of objects, visual fascination with lights or movement).¹⁵⁵

Many Autistic people perform behaviors known as self-stimulation, more casually referred to as stimming. These behaviors can range anywhere from finger snapping to rocking. For an Autistic person, these repetitive behaviors may be relaxing, even if they seem odd to an outsider. Still, they can be off-putting to a non-Autistic person, especially one who does not understand the context in which they are performed.

¹⁵⁴ Reyes

¹⁵⁵ Center for Disease Control

Repetition is not only found in bodily motions, but in speech patterns as well.

Some Autistic children learn language by repeating long phrases, often taken out of context, in conversations. This is called echolalia. As stated by LisaJo Rudy,

Many children with autism do use words (sometimes very complex and adult words)—but their words are said in the same order, and usually in the same tone, as those they've heard on a TV show, in a book, from their teacher, or from some other source.¹⁵⁶

Echolalia is a normal part of child development, but the Autistic child will grow out of it later than a non-Autistic child, if they grow out of it at all. An example of echolalia would be a mother attempting to communicate with her four year old Autistic child. She may ask, “What would you like for breakfast?” The child may respond, “For score and seven years ago, our fathers brought forth, on this continent, a new nation.” This makes communicating with some Autistic people difficult. Some Autistic children do outgrow this phase though, making this one of the few symptoms which can fade with time without undergoing therapy.

Perhaps one of the most well-known symptoms associated with Autism is the insistence on a rigid schedule. While most people prefer routine to chaos, an Autistic person could become distraught if a routine is disrupted. As noted by Patricia Howlin:

Reality to an autistic person is a confusing, interacting mass of events, people, places, sounds and sights... Set routines, times, particular routes and rituals all help to get order into an unbearably chaotic life. Trying to keep everything the same reduces some of the terrible fear.¹⁵⁷

¹⁵⁶ Rudy, Lisa Jo “Why Does My Child With Autism Echo Words and Sounds?” *Very well Health* March 19, 2019 <https://www.verywellhealth.com/why-does-my-child-with-autism-repeat-words-and-phrases-260144>

¹⁵⁷ Howlin, Patricia *Autism and Asperger syndrome: Preparing for Adulthood* Routledge and Kegan Paul Abingdon-on-Thames UK 2004; 137

The Autistic individual lives in a social world which is often beyond their comprehension. She cannot understand why people sometimes grow irritated with her or why others socialize more easily than she does. As a response, she clings to routine because it helps make sense of the world. So missing the 5:00 PM news may not be devastating for a non-Autistic person, but it could be earth-shattering for an Autistic person since it disrupts the daily routine, the one thing which brings order to her world.

Often, the Autistic person will have a few things which interest him. While many people have interests and favorite topics of conversation, Autistic people have an intensity that is not shared by non-Autistic people. As Rudy Simone explains,

Her [the Autistic person's] obsessions may border on the obscure, or impractical. Maybe to you they are just plain weird. It might be anime, it might be insects. She may have the largest selection of clothing tags you'll ever see. She might be able to recite the dialogue of her favorite films by heart. These are things that make her happy.¹⁵⁸

An Autistic person may use these interests to become an expert in the field he chooses, such as someone with an extreme interests in cars becoming a mechanic. While many people become experts in their fields and enjoy discussing them, the Autistic person is much more intense in their ardor towards them than the typical non-Autistic expert. These interests may take up a majority of the conversation because the Autistic person takes so much pleasure in them. They may also be discussed at inappropriate times. The Autistic mechanic may discuss the latest Mustang model at their grandmother's funeral, even though the deceased never took an interest in vehicles. When a non-Autistic person attempts to engage the Autistic person in another topic, the latter may immediately return

¹⁵⁸ Simone, Rudy *22 Things a Woman with Asperger's Syndrome Wants Her Partner to Know* Jessica Kingsley Publications Philadelphia, PA 2012; 71

the topic to cars, or leave the conversation because it does not interest him. This can be frustrating for the non-Autistic person, especially if she has heard this information several times before or needs to convey other information.

Perhaps one of the most puzzling aspects of Autism though is the sensory issues associated with it. Sensations which most people would not give any thought to would bother an Autistic person. One such stimulus is florescent lights. Susan Dominos illustrates this problem when he discusses an office run by and for Autistic people:

At the Culver City office, overhead lights bothered one or two colleagues so much that everyone agreed to work without artificial lights, so that often, by the end of the day, they are all working in pitch darkness, rectangles of soft, bright light from their computers illuminating their faces.¹⁵⁹

While most people give little thought to florescent lights, some Autistic people claim they buzz. In addition to this buzzing, the artificial light can give some Autistic people headaches. Thus in order to perform at their best, the Autistic person needs a workstation where such stimulus is not distracting.

Autistic sensations are not limited only to buzzing headache inducing lights though. Other senses are affected, such as touch. Emmalia Harrington, a biracial Autistic person, discusses her white mother combing her hair. She writes, “The next time the comb would make me wail, mom [sic] would lecture me on how loose hair equals pain. My screams are evident that I can’t be trusted.”¹⁶⁰ To some non-Autistic people, loose hairs may be more painful than brushing, but not to Harrington. By continuing to comb

¹⁵⁹ Dominus, Susan “Open Office” *The New York Times Magazine* February 12, 2019 <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2019/02/21/magazine/autism-office-design.html>

¹⁶⁰ Harrington, Emmalia “Portable Shame” *All the Weight of Our Dreams: On Living Racialized Autism* eds. Brown, Lydia X. Z., E. Ashkenazy, and Morénike Giwa Onaiwu DragonBee Press Lincoln, NE 2017; 33

her hair with little regard for her feelings, Harrington's mother downplayed her daughter's experiences because they were too foreign from her own.

The final cluster of Autistic symptoms describes what Autism is not as well as its duration. The DSM-V concludes,

C Symptoms must be present in the early developmental period (but may not become fully manifest until social demands exceed limited capacities, or may be masked by learned strategies in later life).

D Symptoms cause clinically significant impairment in social, occupational, or other important areas of current functioning.

E These disturbances are not better explained by intellectual disability (intellectual developmental disorder) or global developmental delay. Intellectual disability and autism spectrum disorder frequently co-occur; to make comorbid diagnoses of autism spectrum disorder and intellectual disability, social communication should be below that expected for general developmental level.¹⁶¹

Autism must be present from childhood in order to receive a diagnosis. While symptoms could be attributed to shyness or anxiety initially, a clear life pattern must develop in order to receive the diagnosis.

It is important to keep in mind that Autism is a spectrum disorder. Some Autistic people such as Liane Holliday Willey are married and have close friends whereas some Autistic people are unable to care for themselves.¹⁶² Because Autism is a spectrum, there are various levels of functioning.¹⁶³ This can make it difficult to diagnose the condition since there are many others which mimic its symptoms. Some Autistic people may have

¹⁶¹ Center for Disease Control

¹⁶² Holliday Willey, Liane *Pretending to be Normal: Living with Asperger's Syndrome (Autism Spectrum Disorder) Expanded Edition* Jessica Kingsley Publishers Philadelphia, PA 2014

¹⁶³ There is a debate as to whether or not it is appropriate to label an Autistic person as "high" or "low" functioning. This is in large part because Autism may affect an area of one's life more severely than others. For instance, an Autistic man may be able to form close friendships, but may scream when he hears a siren and may have difficulty with coordination.

co-morbid conditions such as ADHD¹⁶⁴ and Fragile X Syndrome¹⁶⁵, making it difficult to determine which condition is causing which symptom.¹⁶⁶ For instance, in the case of

Fragile X Syndrome:

Although symptoms of Fragile X and autism spectrum disorders overlap, FXS is characterized by intellectual disability and developmental delays while autism is defined by challenges with social interaction and language impairment. Since some individuals have both disorders, the line between signs of FXS and autism can be blurry.¹⁶⁷

Because of this, a competent psychologist will need to explore all options before diagnosing a patient with Autism, or at the very least understand how different conditions can create different symptoms.

Autism is a neurological condition which is divided into two clusters of symptoms. The first cluster deals with issues in maintaining relationships. While some Autistic people have close friends and family members they may have difficulty forging new relationships with strangers. Due to this, the Autistic person may prefer to be alone. When he does socialize, he may monopolize the conversation or discuss things which are inappropriate in the current context. Compounding the problem is the fact that the Autistic person has difficulty reading nonverbal cues, such as the look in someone's eyes.

¹⁶⁴ Children's Doctor "Autism's Clinical Companions: Frequent Comorbidities with ASD" Children's Hospital of Philadelphia <https://www.chop.edu/news/autism-s-clinical-companions-frequent-comorbidities-asd>

¹⁶⁵ Fragile X Syndrome is a genetic disorder which results in the brain not producing a protein needed for normal development. This often leads to cognitive and behavioral difficulties. CDC *Fragile X Syndrome, FXS* <https://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/fxs/facts.html> October 23, 2020

¹⁶⁶ Norton and Elaine Sarnof Center for Jewish Genetics *Similarities and Differences in Fragile X Syndrome and Autism* July 25, 2017 <https://www.jewishgenetics.org/cjg/Blog.aspx?id=442891&blogid=417241>

¹⁶⁷ Ibid

This problem is exacerbated by the fact that the Autistic person does not often make eye contact, meaning he often misses nonverbal cues.

The second cluster discusses repetitive behaviors as well as sensory issues. An Autistic person may engage in stimming when overwhelmed. He may also insist on a rigid routine. If this routine is disrupted, it could lead to a meltdown. Multiple sensory issues is another aspect of Autism. Sounds which may not bother non-Autistic people could cause a splitting headache in an Autistic person.

In order to be diagnosed with Autism, symptoms from both clusters must be present. Symptoms must also have begun in childhood, and inhibit in one's ability to function. Finally, Autism cannot be the result of some other issue such as Fragile X Syndrome. If there is a condition comorbid with Autism, it must be somewhat clear which syndrome is causing which symptoms.

Section II: Autism, Empathy, and Personhood

Cluster A discusses the difficulties in socialization one must exhibit in order to receive a diagnosis of Autism. These difficulties have led some to believe that Autistic people lack empathy. If one has at least some difficulty in reading nonverbal cues, then perhaps they cannot relate to others. Some have gone as far as to claim that Autistic people have a limited Theory of Mind, meaning they cannot attribute intentional states to others. This is extremely problematic for phenomenology though, which argues that empathy is vital for one to become human. Because of this, some phenomenologists such as Kathleen Haney have argued that the Autistic person may lack a complete lifeworld. Others have tried a softer approach in saying that the Autistic person does have a

lifeworld. Still, in order to account for Autistic empathy, they often emphasize that the Autistic person must pass as non-Autistic in order to be a full member of the community.

This section will explore the idea that Autistic people lack empathy. First, it will explore what a Theory of Mind is and why some scholars claim an Autistic person lacks one. Second, it will move onto some philosophical ramifications for this perceived lack of empathy, specifically what implications it has for phenomenology. Third, it will propose an alternate theory of intersubjectivity, namely radical empathy.

One of the key concepts in phenomenology is the idea of intentionality. In order for one to be a person, one must have intentional states. According to Deborah R.

Barnbaum,

According to Franz Brentano, intentionality is the defining criteria for something to be mental.... Intentionality encompasses not merely the mental phenomena of intentions, but also beliefs, desires, loves, hates, hopes, and fears.¹⁶⁸

All acts are directed towards something. This something could be an object in the world such as an oak tree, or hating an abstract concept, such as racism This intentionality is not only directed towards thoughts, but emotional states as well. One does not merely hope for nothing. They hope for a specific event to occur or may experience hate towards a specific person. Thus, mental states are directed towards something in the world.

The fact that mental states are about something entail certain implications.

Barnbaum continues,

First, some intentional states, such as beliefs, have truth-values-what you believe can be true or false....Since intentional states are about things in a way that baskets or boxes are not, they are semantically evaluable.¹⁶⁹

¹⁶⁸ Barnbaum 3

¹⁶⁹ Ibid

The sentence “it was raining in Winchester, Kentucky on July 3, 2019 at 4:48 PM EDT” can be evaluated as true or false. One could do so by consulting weather reports, asking those who were there, or perhaps via some other verification method.¹⁷⁰ Even if the statement is false though, the intentional state still pertained to a state of the world.

The second implication is that one can hold an inaccurate belief. Barnbaum continues,

Second, while an agent can believe something to be true, it may be the case that the belief itself is false....Thus, a person who ascribes an intentional state to another person, S, is able to recognize that in some cases it is true that S believes something that is false.¹⁷¹

Just because somebody makes an inaccurate claim does not mean that this person is being deceptive. Someone could say that it was not raining in Winchester, Kentucky on July 3, 2019 at 4:48 PM EDT without meaning to deceive anyone. Rather, they may not have had all the necessary data to verify their statement, they may have misremembered the event, or may have made an inaccurate guess. Still, communication does not break down once an incorrect statement is made. It is the belief that people can sometimes be wrong which allows us to communicate effectively with each other.

This leads to a third implication, namely that intentional states have consequences. Barnbaum explains, “Third, intentional states including beliefs, desires, fears, or wants have causal powers: they can cause agents to perform actions.”¹⁷² If on July 3 at 4:48 PM EDT a woman was in Winchester, Kentucky and believed it was

¹⁷⁰ For the record, the rain statement is true.

¹⁷¹ Ibid

¹⁷² Ibid

raining, she would adjust her behavior accordingly. She may bring an umbrella outside, or reevaluate her decision to have an early July 4 fireworks celebration later in the evening. The belief that it is raining has consequences which influence behavior.

This ability to attribute mental states to others is called Theory of Mind, or mentalizing. In Autism studies, the term Theory of Mind is not a philosophical concept, but is a way to describe the way people interact with each other.¹⁷³ According to Uta Frith, “Mentalizing is a verb used to describe an automatic and deeply unconscious activity. It is what we do to attribute mental states to others to predict their behavior.”¹⁷⁴ In order for communication to be effective, one must be able to predict the actions of the other. If one believes that it is raining, then certain behaviors can be predicted, such as wearing a raincoat or bringing an umbrella. These predictions can change the better one knows the other person as well. A person may enjoy the wet, so this person would be expected to behave differently than someone who despises soaked clothes. Hence in light of certain facts, one can typically predict the other’s behavior.

So far, it does not seem as if the humanity of an Autistic person should be called into question. Nobody denies that Autistic people have mental states, they can sometimes hold inaccurate beliefs, and they act based on their beliefs. The issue is that it is thought that Autistic people do not ascribe these beliefs to others. Barnbaum explains,

One explanation of the fundamental deficit facing persons with autism is the failure to attribute independent mental states to others. In other words, most persons with autism do not have a functioning "Theory of Mind."¹⁷⁵

¹⁷³ Frith, Uta *Autism: Explaining the Enigma* Blackwell Publishing 2nd Ed 2003

¹⁷⁴ Ibid 80

¹⁷⁵ Barnbaum 2

Some Autistic people may be unable to understand that other people have intentional states. An Autistic person might have trouble determining what another person would do if it was raining outside. He may believe that someone who walks outside in the rain without an umbrella is stupid instead of one who enjoys being wet, or may be surprised that one would carry an umbrella at all. Because the Autistic person allegedly has difficulty attributing mental states to others, he lacks a theory of mind.

The basis for this claim comes from an experiment performed by Simon Baron-Cohen. The test subjects included non-disabled children, children with Down Syndrome, and Autistic children. The experiment is described as follows:

With the help of two dolls, Sally and Anne, he [Baron-Cohen] acted out a little scenario: Sally has a basket and Anne has a box. Sally has a marble and she puts it into her basket. She then goes out. Anne takes out Sally's marble and she puts and puts it into her box while Sally is away. Now Sally comes back and wants to play with her marble. At this point we ask the critical question: "Where will Sally look for her marble?"¹⁷⁶

The test measures how one can foresee what one will do when one is under a false belief. Deception is a common occurrence. People may act upon the lies of another, or tell lies in order to elicit some kind of action. The key then, is to understand that Sally has a false belief as to where the marble is and that she will act upon it.

The results of the study were intriguing. According to Frith, "most of the young and Down children gave the correct answer, that is, they pointed to the basket. In contrast, all but a few of the children with Autism got it wrong."¹⁷⁷ Unlike the normal and Down children, the Autistic subjects believed Sally would look into the box, where the

¹⁷⁶ Frith 83-84

¹⁷⁷ Ibid 84

marble actually was. It was assumed that she knew the truth when in reality, there was no way for Sally to be privy to this information. They could not understand that Sally would act upon a false belief.

Similar experiments have been performed on Autistic children with similar results. One such test is the pencil in the candy box. Frith explains:

A candy container (a tube) which is well known to all British children was used in the test. All the children tested expected Smarties(candy much like M&Ms) to be inside the box, and all were disappointed when a horrible little pencil fell out. Now the children with autism knew that there was a pencil in the box. When they were asked what a new child, who had just come to be tested for the first time, would say, they wrongfully replied "a pencil."¹⁷⁸

Now the children experienced the deception themselves. They understood that they held a false belief, and could infer that based on the information they have another may be mistaken in their belief as well. Still, the children with Autism did not claim that others would be wise to the deception. Instead, they believed that anyone else would instantly know the truth of there being a pencil in the box rather than the candy.

The inability to predict the actions of others has massive ramifications for Autism. This inability to mentalize is called "mind blindness." If one is mind blind, then there is a fundamental issue in how they socialize with others. This issue is so severe it may inhibit empathy altogether. In turn, this means that they may not be human. One proponent of this view is Peter Hobson. According to Barnbaum,

Hobson believes that among the essential properties of humans is that humans recognize that other humans have minds and enter into relationships with other humans that reflect this understanding: they participate in "mutual interpersonal transactions," they demonstrate "affective readiness" as well as "understanding of other persons as individualized centres of consciousness with their own psychological orientations towards the world" (Hobson 1993,1)¹⁷⁹

¹⁷⁸ Ibid 85

¹⁷⁹ Barnbaum 90

As with phenomenology, Hobson argues that we see the other as a being like ourselves. We form bonds based on our ability to see others as having minds and being animate bodies. We know that the other is like ourselves in their behavior. Thus a community is formed.

For most people, seeing others as living bodies is unproblematic. For one population though, this may be an issue. Barnbaum explains, “[T]he person lacking theory of mind fails to meet one of the qualities that Hobson considers essential to participate in a human form of social life.”¹⁸⁰ Since the Autistic person does not attribute mental states to others, he cannot fully participate in social life. If he cannot fully engage in a wider social life, then it is unclear if he can be truly intersubjective, something phenomenology considers necessary to be a person.

It is not only the Autistic person’s ability to empathize which is called into question. It is theorized that Autistic people may view others as mere objects instead of people like themselves. Barnbaum continues,

To know what it is for others to be persons, we need to know that we do not treat people as mere things. Thus, the interrelation between people is an essential part of what it is to know that there are actual people.¹⁸¹

As phenomenology asserts, the person views and treats the Other differently than they would an object. A person who does not recognize others as having mental states may have difficulty differentiating people from things though. This means that a person who sees others as objects is lacking in empathy.

¹⁸⁰ Ibid

¹⁸¹ Ibid

If a group is lacking in empathy, then this poses a problem for phenomenology, which argues that people are by nature empathetic. Kathleen Haney is one phenomenologist who analyzes these implications. She begins,

Perhaps hyper or hypo sensitivities to hyletic data in one or more sensory strata or inability or limitations in coordinating sensory fields or maybe even deficits in passive reciprocity itself (what Stein calls the “life force”) inhibit Autistic consciousness from recognizing the other as autonomous and talking to him or sharing “objects” with him.¹⁸²

The Autistic person is bombarded with so much sensory data they may have difficulty distinguishing which entity in the world is a person and which entity is an object. They may see the other as an object amongst many others. This can make it difficult to communicate with others, especially in cases where emotional reciprocity is required.

Due to these hyper sensitivities, the Autistic person maybe only be focus upon himself. According to Haney, “Even the term ‘autism,’ from the Greek ‘auto’ suggests an unnatural preoccupation with the ‘self,’ unnatural since, as both Stein and Husserl recognize, the human *telos* is other.”¹⁸³ The Autistic person is introverted because he is turned inward, instead of outward like many non-Autistic people. He may be aware of his own perceptions, but has difficulty attributing inner states to others due to the focus on himself. Since the non-Autistic person is turned outwards, this creates a gulf between them.

At this point, it is worth asking what the Autistic view of the other is. If the other is an object, it is fundamentally different than the way phenomenology argues most people view the other. According to Haney:

¹⁸² Haney 40-41

¹⁸³ Ibid 41

The symbiotic union that [Autistic] spectrum people establish with others have to do with performing functions, although the typical sharing of ego is not evident. The 'other' is useful to the autistic child to turn on a faucet or to reach cookies on the shelf.¹⁸⁴

If there is little sharing of egos, then the Autistic person is lacking in an essential aspect of intersubjectivity. There is no pairing with the other, which is problematic which is necessary to be empathetic with the other. This presents phenomenology with the problem of how an Autistic person can participate in the intersubjective community if they are unable to pair with others.

It is important not to make a caricature of Haney's position. She is not saying that Autistic people stare at a wall and have no connection to others. Still, according to Haney, these bonds are not as mature as those formed between two non-Autistic people. She explains,

Behavioral evidence will not allow us to believe that autistic persons of self-feelings or of deep relationships to others. Yet, insofar as persons on the spectrum lack empathy, they remain related to the relationship, to mother, father, sibling, grandma, to the other person in one of those roles, rather than to a real other who is more than any of its roles.¹⁸⁵

The Autistic person may not see his mother as having a life outside of motherhood. Instead, he sees her as the woman who tends to him. The woman who nurtures him is a mother and has few functions outside of that role. This relationship is more akin to how a young child, rather than an adult, would see their parent.

One reason for this inattention to relationships formed later in life is that the Autistic person is an outsider who has difficulty empathizing. She explains,

Communities of higher orders are likewise shared meanings, based on acts of empathy, so even the high functioning person on the ASD Spectrum remains the outsider, the observer

¹⁸⁴ Ibid 46

¹⁸⁵ Ibid

who lacks social skills and cannot comprehend most non-verbal cues. When we say that the person on the ASD Spectrum lacks empathy, we mean that he lacks a solid grasp of the personalistic world even though he has language and maybe excellent skills in computers or in mathematics.¹⁸⁶

The Autistic person's inability to read social cues entails that they lack the empathy necessary to be fully integrated into the community. If they cannot be fully integrated into the community, they may not be able to form empathetic bonds. Their lifeworld will always be less full than that of the non-Autistic person.

This inability to recognize the other as a fellow human extends not only to how the Autistic person allegedly thinks of others, but affects his behavior as well. One such behavior is bumping into people. Haney explains, "Low-performing Autistic children routinely walk into other people, although their vision may be within the typical range according to ordinary testing measures."¹⁸⁷ At first blush, one may wonder if the issue is poor motor coordination or an inability to accurately judge where one is standing within space. The reason for this bumping into things has more to do with empathy than lack of depth perception. She continues, "The autistic child's intention, however fleeting and impulsive, occupies his consciousness. He has not made 'room' for others in a world of self and others."¹⁸⁸ The Autistic person's world may be so narrow that even objects are not taken into consideration when moving about.

This leads Haney to the conclusion that Autistic people will never be able to join fully into the lifeworld. She argues, "People with Autism Spectrum Disorder remain on

¹⁸⁶ Ibid 49

¹⁸⁷ Ibid 47

¹⁸⁸ Ibid

the spectrum until they join into the intersubjective constitution of the personalistic world.”¹⁸⁹ Given that per the diagnosis, Autism is a lifelong condition, there is little hope for the Autistic person to develop empathy. *If a phenomenologist follows this line of thinking, then she must admit that the Autistic person is not truly a person because he lacks empathy.*

Haney’s outlook may be the bleakest, but other phenomenologists offer hope for the Autistic person. Tim Dant seeks to create an account of empathy which is inclusive of Autistic people, and argues they can become a part of the larger community. He begins by acknowledging the difficulties in Autistic and non-Autistic interactions:

The conscious minds of people with autism have a different orientation, an intentionality that is difficult to “pair” with those who are not autistic. There is a considerable degree of apperception and embodied co- experience between people with autism and those without, but finding sufficient common ground for empathy such that the life-world of the other person becomes appresent, is clearly more difficult.¹⁹⁰

One of the main aspects of Autism is sensory differences, some of which can lead to sensory overload. It is difficult for someone who cannot hear the buzzing of a florescent light to relate to someone who gets a headache from the sound. While this is a minor difference, several more of these sensory issues-sensitivity to whistling, pain from sunlight, and a perceived lack of pain-make it difficult for Autistic and non-Autistic people to relate to each other. Since Autistic people are a minority, it is tempting to blame them for all problems in a relationship. Dant does not accept this as the only explanation though. Instead he wants to explore how both parties contribute to the breakdown of empathy.

¹⁸⁹ Ibid 43

¹⁹⁰ Dant 55

Dant notes that Autism is not the only reason people may struggle to empathize with each other. There are groups of non-Autistic people who have difficulty relating to each other. He notes:

[L]ife experiences must vary between people, and factors that shape the potential for intersubjectivity must include: biological characteristics, age, class, gender, religion, nationality, and cultural background....If these variables affect just how easily intersubjectivity can be established between two minds, people with autism have a further barrier to do with how they experience the world.¹⁹¹

One of the main barriers in empathy can be culture. For instance, in Russia smiling can indicate foolishness or dishonesty, whereas in the United States smiling is considered to be friendly.¹⁹² Thus a Russian may distrust a smiling American when she is only trying to be friendly. Conversely, the American may distrust the Russian, or find him cold. This can lead to difficulties in empathizing with each other, which could in turn lead to other consequences such as a business deal falling through. If cross cultural differences between people without sensory issues can lead to a breakdown in empathy, then it seems likely that two people with different sensory perceptions could also have difficulties empathizing with each other.

Despite these differences, it is possible for Autistic people are clearly able to form bonds. He notes,

What seems clear from the accounts of people with autism—for example on the *Wrong Planet* internet forum—is that they have conscious minds and do engage with other people intersubjectively despite difficulties in sustaining communication and finding a common perspective on the life-world.¹⁹³

¹⁹¹ Ibid 53

¹⁹² Solomon, Charlene “The Cross-Cultural Implications of Smiling” *Culturewiz* <https://www.rw-3.com/blog/the-cross-cultural-implications-of-smiling>

¹⁹³ Ibid

This creates a conundrum for phenomenology. On the one hand, the Autistic seemingly lacks a theory of mind and cannot empathize with others. Yet, on the other hand the Autistic person is able to engage socially with others. Thus it is not enough to say that Autistic people lack empathy and can never be a part of the lifeworld, or should not be considered people. There needs to be an account of empathy which can account for how an Autistic person can relate to others despite their perceived mind-blindness.

One answer to this conundrum is radical empathy, a concept Dant borrows from Matthew Radcliffe. He explains:

Matthew Ratcliffe explores the potential for “radical empathy” as a strategy to connect with people despite apparent variations in how they experience the life-world: “empathising with others involves suspending, to varying degrees, a world of norms, roles, artefact functions and various other contents. Phenomenologically speaking, this ... is to stop presupposing aspects of what is more usually given as *our world*” (2012, p. 478)¹⁹⁴

Oftentimes it is easy to overlook just how different ways of living can be. For instance, a middle class white woman may assume that her lifestyle is similar to that of a lower class African American woman. The former may overlook prejudices and other factors which affect the African American community. This could make it difficult for both women to empathize with each other. In order to reach an understanding then, the white woman must set aside her preconceived notions about race and listen to what the African American woman says about the issues affecting her community. This is how she can engage in radical empathy.

Radical empathy is not only necessary for the Autistic person, but for the non-Autistic person as well. Dant explains:

¹⁹⁴ Ibid

From both directions an approach of “radical empathy” would increase the capacity to engage in intersubjectivity more successfully. It is in effect what those people with autism who “get by” successfully in the social world do as they learn by a conscious effort to accept the world as others see it.¹⁹⁵

Non-Autistic people are just as responsible for maintaining an interaction as Autistic people are. It is important that both parties attempt to understand each other despite their differences. In this way, an empathetic bond can form.

Because Autism is a condition which affects social interaction, it has captured the interests of philosophers. This interest is heightened by the research which indicates that Autistic people lack a Theory of Mind, meaning they do not attribute mental states to others. This has led some philosophers such as Kathleen Haney to argue that Autistic people have a deficient lifeworld. This makes it questionable whether or not the Autistic person could be considered fully human. Tim Dant takes a more moderate approach. He claims that it is the responsibility of both Autistic and non-Autistic people to empathize with each other. He borrows Matthew Ratcliffe’s idea of radical empathy to show how groups with such varying experiences can relate to each other.

On the surface, radical empathy seems to be a good solution to the problem of Autistic people supposedly lacking empathy. In the next section though, it will become clear that this is simply a way of “passing” and does not get to the root of the problem, namely that Autistic people supposedly have no theory of mind. The next section will argue against the notion that Autistic people have no theory of mind and propose alternative explanations to the research which

¹⁹⁵ Ibid 54

indicates this to be the case. By the end it should be clear that Autistic people do have a sense of intersubjectivity, though it may appear differently than that of others.

Section III: Autism and Personhood

On the surface, it seems that phenomenology cannot adequately account for Autistic empathy. This is not entirely accurate though. Phenomenologists such as Tim Dant argue that Autistic people should be considered human if they learn how to socialize in the same way a non-Autistic person can. So long as they appear to empathize with others, they are unquestionably human. Current therapies seem to support this reasoning. Applied behavioral analysis focuses on suppressing Autistic behaviors. The hope is that once these behaviors are eliminated, the Autistic person's social skills will improve. This in turn should make it easier for them to empathize.

At first glance, this solution seems appealing for the non-Autistic person. Still, it does not address the problem that an Autistic person allegedly has no Theory of Mind. Instead, the Autistic person merely passes as being non-Autistic. Originally a term used in racial studies, "passing" refers to a member of a minority group successfully identifying as a member of a majority group.¹⁹⁶ For instance, a light skinned African American may live out her life as if she was born white. Provided that others who are aware of her roots in black culture kept quiet, she may be able to succeed in her endeavor, at least for a time. In this way, she can enjoy the benefits of belonging to the majority without race holding her back. This practice is not without its drawbacks though. Passing

¹⁹⁶ Hobbs, Allyson *A Chosen Exile* Harvard University Press Cambridge, MA 2014

is known to have psychological side effects such as exhaustion and depression because the person is always watching her back, lest she be exposed.

Since passing can be psychologically damaging, arguments regarding Autistic personhood should address the fact that Autistic people have a theory of mind. Many Autistic people have put forth theories as to why they answered the psychiatrists' questions incorrectly. Some argue that the language was confusing and that it was difficult to follow the psychiatrists' directions. Others point out that the older and Autistic person gets, the more likely they are to answer the question correctly, meaning that at some point Autistic people learn how to pass effectively. These views should make it clear that Autistic people can empathize, though it may appear differently than the type of empathy displayed by a non-Autistic person.

As explained earlier, Dant's views of Autism relies on radical empathy. If one can place himself in another person's shoes, then an empathetic bond can form. In order to do this though, the Autistic person must be able to socialize in an acceptable manner. As Kathleen Haney explains, "Some behaviors, although expressive of the autistic child's feelings, inhibit his ability to initiate or even respond to exchanges of meaning with the not-I."¹⁹⁷ A child bashing his head against the wall is not easily approached by others. There is too much of a gap between what is considered acceptable behavior and this action. Due to this, the Autistic person must receive help in socializing.

One method of helping an Autistic person socialize is Applied Behavioral Analysis (ABA). This therapy is the most prevalent in Autism treatment because it seeks

¹⁹⁷ Haney 43

to eliminate behaviors which would make an Autistic person less than approachable. Elle

Johnson explains:

ABA [is] a scientific approach to evaluating and changing behavior that is backed by years of research and analysis. ABA focuses on improving behaviors of social significance to a meaningful degree; it is rooted in the principles of behavior such as positive reinforcement and extinction, and systematically utilizes behavior change tactics derived from those principles; it targets behaviors that are observable and measurable, and is driven by data; and, it is generalizable, striving to have outcomes that last over time.¹⁹⁸

ABA focuses not on how one empathizes with others, but on how one behaves. A

negative behavior is identified, and the goal is to eliminate it. This is done through both positive and negative reinforcement.

Initially, ABA relied on negative association. If a behavior was seen as destructive, then a child would be penalized for behaving in that way. As explained by

Elizabeth Devita-Raeburn:

His [Lovaas, one of the founders of ABA] approach discouraged — often harshly — stimming, a set of repetitive behaviors such as hand-flapping that children with autism use to dispel energy and anxiety. The therapists following Lovaas' program slapped, shouted at or even gave an electrical shock to a child to dissuade one of these behaviors. The children had to repeat the drills day after day, hour after hour. Videos of these early exercises show therapists holding pieces of food to prompt children to look at them, and then rewarding the children with the morsels of food.¹⁹⁹

Today, most therapists find these methods highly unethical. Still, the basic idea of the therapy remains unchanged; through some type of reinforcement, a behavior such as hand flapping which is seen as undesirable can be eliminated.

¹⁹⁸ Johnson, Elle Olivia *The Parent's Guide to In-Home ABA Programs : Frequently Asked Questions About Applied Behavior Analysis for Your Child with Autism* Jessica Kingsley Publishers Philadelphia, PA 2013; 18

¹⁹⁹ Devita-Raeburn

The above example highlights how negative reinforcement was at one point used in ABA. Most therapies today focus on a more positive approach. As Elle Johnson explains,

Watch carefully, and you will see how the therapist easily intersperses tasks into play....The ABA therapist, just like an actor in a play, can present and re-present the same material repeatedly, but each time it seems like new.²⁰⁰

A good ABA therapist will create a relaxed atmosphere for the child and turn the therapy into a game. The therapist will speak in a calm voice, and will allow the child to take breaks when he is becoming overwhelmed. This way, the child can grasp what the therapy is meant to teach and apply these skills to his daily life.

At this juncture, it is important to understand what a typical modern ABA session would look like. The first step of the therapy is to observe the patient and determine which goals would be appropriate. Johnson explains,

Before the ABA program begins, the program supervisor will meet with you as part of the assessment process. They will ask detailed questions on every aspect of your child's life, gaining information regarding feeding, eye contact, play and social skills, toileting, compliance, and much more. The program supervisor will also observe your child, and may accompany you on an outing. From these observations and interviews, they will develop a preliminary plan for programming.²⁰¹

To use the example of hand flapping, a therapist would assess how often the child flaps his hands and the disruptions this behavior causes in his life. The therapist may take note of how the parents react to the behavior as well as how the child's peers perceive it. From this, a plan can be formed to eliminated the behavior.

²⁰⁰ Johnson 34

²⁰¹ Ibid 66

Because each child is unique, the goals of each ABA therapy session will be different. Still, the basic principles each therapist employs are the same. Johnson gives an example of how one such session may appear:

John, an ABA therapist from Chicago, is working with Annie, a non-verbal two year old. John sits in front of Annie, dips a wand into bubble solution, and, while making eye contact with Annie, says “One, two, ...” When Annie makes eye contact, John says “Three!” and blows the bubbles. Annie loves this game and soon learns that after John says “One, two”, she will need to make eye contact to make John say “Three!” and blow the bubbles. Notice that the therapist holds off on blowing the bubble wand until Annie has made eye contact. In time, John will require more and more of Annie before blowing those bubbles. Soon, John will encourage Annie to make any kind of vocalization before he will blow the bubbles. As Annie gains these skills in vocalizing, John will shape her vocalizations into the word “Three”, by reinforcing her closer and closer attempts at the word.²⁰²

There are two main skills John is attempting to teach her. First, she needs to make eye contact with him if she wants to see the bubbles. As the sessions continue, he may ask her to make eye contact with him for longer periods of time. Over a period of months he may want her to make eye contact with him when he counts up to three, and keep looking at him until he says, “Five.” Second, he is teaching her to vocalize. In the future if she wants to see the bubbles, then she will need to make some type of vocalization. Once she becomes more proficient at vocalizing, she will be asked to make actual words. In this way, John can teach multiple skills all while appearing to play a game with Annie. Since Annie is relaxed, she is better able to absorb his teachings.

Given how widely used ABA is to treat Autism, it is worth asking how effective it is. Given how prevalent ABA therapy is, it seems like the data should skew in its favor. This is not necessarily the case though. Most evidence for the effectiveness of ABA

²⁰² Ibid 67

comes from individual clients and may only pertain to one set of skills. According to David Amaral, Geraldine Dawson, and Daniel Geschwind:

According to this perspective, single-case experiments offer little more than anecdotal information, and other methodologies — particularly RCTs — are necessary to establish an intervention as evidence-based.²⁰³

Despite ABA's claim to adhere to scientific principles, little has been done as far as a long-term study. This creates a problem though since it is so widely used. It seems that if ABA is to be the standard therapy, there should be overwhelming that it works for all skill sets. This does not appear to be the case though.

David Amaral et. al are not quick to discount ABA entirely. Instead, they are reluctant to claim it is always superior to other forms of treatment. They claim,

Single-case studies are best suited for evaluating the immediate effects of a specific intervention on a particular behavior for an individual participant. As such, they often suffice for testing interventions such as procedures to teach a new self-help skill. However, they may need to be followed by RCTs if it is important to look at more long-term and global outcomes, test combinations of interventions or compare alternate interventions, or evaluate outcomes across large groups of participants.²⁰⁴

Often, ABA therapy cannot eliminate all undesirable behaviors from an Autistic child. This could be because eliminating all undesirable traits could prove too overwhelming, or a child may quit therapy too soon for it to be entirely effective. Still, for individual behaviors it can be effective, though its overall efficacy is in question.

ABA is not only controversial because of the lack of research surrounding it: it is also debatable whether the social skills it teaches are useful in one's daily life. Michael

²⁰³ Amaral, David, Dawson, Geraldine, Geschwind, Daniel *Autism Spectrum Disorders* Oxford University Press, Oxford 2011; 1041

²⁰⁴ Ibid

Powers, a former therapist, discusses his experiences with teaching Autistic people how to make eye contact. He explains,

“Five seconds. That was one skill we were trying to establish, as if that was the pivotal skill,” he says. But it was artificial: “The last time I looked someone in the eye for five consecutive seconds, I proposed.”²⁰⁵

Someone who gazes into someone’s eyes for five seconds at a time could appear intimidating or awkward. Because of this, staring at someone could be socially more problematic than not looking at someone. Since the timeframe of five minutes is artificial and not used often in real life, it seems that ABA could in certain circumstances *inhibit* one’s social skills instead of enhancing them.

More interestingly for phenomenology is the idea that there is little evidence that ABA resolves the problem of having no empathy. Empathy is not simply mimicking behaviors but of a connection between two people. There seems to be support for this concern. Lisa Quinones-Fontanez tells a story of her son, who has undergone ABA therapy.

Sometimes Norrin will approach friendly people on the street and say, “Hello, what’s your name?” as he’s been taught, but not wait around for the answer, because he really doesn’t understand why he’s saying it. “He just knows to do his part.”

Norrin is not interested in forming a relationship with the other person. Instead, he is mimicking what he is taught in therapy without understanding why a behavior is encouraged. Because of his alleged lack of interest in his conversation partner, a phenomenologist such as Haney would argue that he is still incapable of empathy.

²⁰⁵ Devita-Raeburn

The other just as problematic issue for ABA is that it can lead to psychological issues for the Autistic person. In order to socialize with others, the Autistic person must imitate a non-Autistic person and hope they are successful enough for a connection to form. In other words, they must “pass” as non-Autistic. The term “passing” has its roots in racial studies. Sinéad Moynihan claims,

The term [passing] is believed to be derived from the written pass given to slaves so that they might travel without being taken for runaways...For a mixed race slave, white skin could function as an additional kind of pass, enabling them to escape more easily with less risk of detection.²⁰⁶

The key to passing was that an African American was able to portray herself as white, thus blending in better with the racial majority. This concept could be used by other ethnic groups as well. For instance, a pale Hispanic might be able to pass as white, thus avoiding scrutiny from others.

Passing does not only apply to a racial minorities, but can be used to describe any minority attempting to come off as a member of a majority. In a discussion about *The L-Word* Moynihan analyzes two characters, Bette and Yolanda. Bette is black whereas Yolanda is white. Bette argues,

I would never define myself exclusively as being white any more than I would define myself exclusively as being black. I mean, really, why is it so . . . wrong for me . . . to move more freely in the world just because my appearance doesn't automatically announce who I am?²⁰⁷

To which Yolanda responds, “Because it is a lie.”²⁰⁸

²⁰⁶ Moynihan, Sinéad *Passing Into the Present : Contemporary American Fiction of Racial and Gender Passing* Manchester University Press, Manchester 2010; 5

²⁰⁷ Ibid 1

²⁰⁸ Ibid

Bette and Yolanda have different views on their identities. The former sees no issue in passing, and believes that so long as she can reap the benefits of her lighter skin, then she is not doing anything immoral. Yolanda believes this is dishonest and that Bette should embrace her blackness. This conversation demonstrates the tension in passing, namely how honest it is to imitate being the member of another group.

Bette is not only biracial, but also a lesbian who is involved with Yolanda.

Initially Yolanda was reluctant to come out to Bette, a fact which the latter notes.

Moynihan argues,

Equally, the conversation Bette and Yolanda have reveals the contiguity of apparently distinct categories of identity and, by extension, the possibility that multiple types of passing – race, gender, sexual, religious – intersect and impinge upon one another.²⁰⁹

A lesbian could pass herself off as straight if she only dates men, if she chooses to remain single, and/or she avoids lesbian events. Because of this, she may avoid public scrutiny and in some cases advance her social standing. While this may appear to be dishonest to some, the woman may feel that her sexuality is nobody's business but her own. So long as she can live her life in relative peace, a lesbian may decide to pass as straight.

On the surface, passing may seem to be a benign phenomenon. If an individual wishes to be identified as a member of another group, then it seems as if they have a right to do so, provided they do not harm anyone else in the process. The decision to pass is not so individualistic though. As Karen Grimsby Bates points out, “[P]assing was not a solitary act. It required other people who were willing to keep your secret, and a

²⁰⁹ Ibid 3

community that was willing to let you go and look the other way, even when it hurt.”²¹⁰ A homosexual passing as straight must either avoid having a same sex partner, or must swear their same-sex lover to secrecy. A homosexual may even go so far as to marry someone of the opposite gender in order to pass, hoping that they can suppress their urges for life. This could cause strife in certain situations though. A same-sex lover may not appreciate being a secret, nor may an opposite sex spouse appreciate knowing their partner does not find them sexually attractive. In this way, passing can be damaging for relationships.

Passing is not exclusive to race and sexuality though. Through age, an Autistic person can learn to mask her symptoms, even without therapy. As the Center for Disease Control notes in their diagnosis, “Symptoms...may be masked by learned strategies in later life.”²¹¹ Through experiences and perhaps therapies, Autistic people can learn to successfully pass as non-Autistic. They may follow social norms such as making eye contact not because they are intuitive, but because that is what they are expected to do. This could make it appear as if the Autistic person is non-Autistic, which would constitute passing.

An Autistic person does not always learn social skills on his own, but may need therapy in order to do so. This is where ABA comes into play. As explained by Jane Strauss, “With respect to disability, specifically Autism, the norm in treatment (especially

²¹⁰ Grigsby Bates, Karen “A Chosen Exile: Black People Passing In White America” *NPR* October 7, 2014

²¹¹ Center for Disease Control *Diagnostic Criteria*

for “social skills”) seems to be teaching us to pass for non-Autistic.”²¹² ABA therapy does not aim at helping an Autistic person develop radical empathy with others or understand things from a non-Autistic perspective. Instead, its goal is to make the Autistic person appear non-Autistic. Thus the problem of an Autistic person empathizing with others is not resolved.

More importantly though, passing takes a personal toll because there is always the fear of being discovered. As Jane Strauss notes,

One is always “on guard,” lest a slip be made that could lead to discovery. And the fear of “what if?” you are discovered feeds on itself and can, in the end, paralyze. It can even result in one of the “comorbid” so-called, to Autism – which is called anxiety disorder. Passing is also a euphemistic term for death. And every time one denies core identity, the result is a little bit of death, cumulative over time, lessening energy, often resulting in depression. Tiny deaths mount up and can lead to suicidality. If society wants my core to die, why not help it along?²¹³

For an Autistic person to pass, he must deny that he has sensory issues. So, if florescent lights give him a headache he must pretend they do not, even if he can barely focus from the pain. He must pretend to be interested in small talk even though it bores him. The Autistic person is always on guard to make sure he is socializing in a socially acceptable manner. If he fails to adhere to social norms, then he could be discovered as Autistic. In philosophical terms, *if he cannot pass, then he may be seen as less than empathetic, calling his ability to be intersubjective into question.*

At this point, one could argue that passing is necessary because there are certain social norms which must be adhered to. For instance, there are times when it is

²¹² Strauss

²¹³ Ibid

inappropriate to discuss one's love of anime or wear sunglasses in a public area. Strauss acknowledges that norms should be followed but argues:

Teaching rules is one thing, putting higher expectations on the “special education” student and grading on how well they can fake it, an entirely different kettle of fish. I often wonder how children brought up with the emphasis on fitting in even survive, why they are not crushed by the weight of living as another.²¹⁴

Few Autistic people believe their behavior should always be condoned because of their condition. Still, it seems extreme to ask an Autistic person to ignore all sensory issues and force them to engage in certain social practices such as always making eye contact. This becomes especially problematic when one considers that the non-Autistic person need not be concerned with empathizing with the Autistic person. So long as the Autistic person appears to be non-Autistic, then a non-Autistic person does not need to be concerned with empathizing with their issues. In this way Tim Dant's views of Autism are naive: the Autistic person is asked to do all the empathizing, whereas the non-Autistic person is not required to empathize. It also does not resolve the problem of how an Autistic person could have a Theory of Mind.

As noted in the previous section, one reason the Autistic are thought to lack a theory of mind is because they incorrectly answer the Sally/Anne test; namely they think Sally will look for the marble where it actually is, not where she last placed it. One theory as to why Autistic people fail this test is set forth by Nick Pentzell, an Autistic man. He discusses being bombarded by sensory perceptions, such as the feel of one's clothing, the movements of those in the room, sounds such as coughing, and the brightness of the light. Then, he explains how these could prove distracting to an Autistic person. He states:

²¹⁴ Ibid

The more you are aware of all this sensory stimulus, the more you are probably feeling uncomfortable, irritated or upset, nervous, or out of control of the environment and situation, and too overloaded to hold onto thought. Amplify this sensitivity several times over and you might withdraw “into your own world,” develop odd behaviors like rocking or fidgeting with an object as a means of calming yourself or blocking out stimulus, echo words or phrases as a mantra, or become to all appearances autistic.²¹⁵

Many of the above arguments against Autistic personhood-especially those proposed by Hobson and Haney-do not take sensory input into account. This is an issue for phenomenology though, which is in part dedicated to discussing how one perceives the world. If phenomenology does not take how one perceives the world into account, then the theory seems incomplete. Starting from these perceptions then, one can begin to piece together why one may appear to lack a theory of mind when this may not be the case.

The fact that these Autistic perceptions are so different from the norm is noted by Pentzell. He continues:

It doesn't surprise me that many autistic children, even those who can speak or have Asperger's, flunk theory of mind tests. At age four I was too lost in sensation to respond to, let alone pass or fail, such a test.²¹⁶

For Autistic people like Pentzell, the test does not measure theory of mind, but how well one can overcome their sensory issues and pay attention. If one cannot focus long enough to understand the story of Sally and Anne, then they only have a fifty percent chance of answering the question correctly. Since the last thing they saw of the marble was that it was in the box, then they will answer that Sally will look for it in the box because that is all they can focus upon.

²¹⁵ Pentzell, Nick “I Think Therefore I Am. I Am Verbal, Therefore I Live” *The Philosophy of Autism* (eds. Jami L. Anderson and Simon Cushing) Rowman and Littlefield Publications Plymouth, UK 2013; 104-105

²¹⁶ Ibid

The fact that the world is so different is another reason the Autistic person may appear to lack a theory of mind. Pentzell continues, “It seemed, somehow, everyone else was different from me; they weren’t so crippled by the world around them.”²¹⁷ For Pentzell, empathizing with another non-Autistic person was like a non-Autistic person empathizing with a slug. Their ways of living seemed too radically different to find common ground. Because of this, it was difficult for Pentzell to view the world from another’s person point of view, thus making it difficult to empathize.

It is also worth noting that the linguistic development of an Autistic person matters when these tests are taken. Pentzell claims, “[A]lthough in trials 50-80 percent of Autistic subjects failed theory of mind tasks, the ability to pass these tests is linked with an individual’s linguistic development.”²¹⁸ Whether a child is Autistic or not, the chance of them succeeding at a theory of mind test increases as they age. Linguistic ability also increases. Thus it is not unimaginable that perhaps linguistic development could be what the test actually measures, not empathy.

Another issue that faces Autistic people is the order in which events occur. While an Autistic person may understand what order events occurred in, they may have difficulty unpacking them. Pentzell explains,

[T]he question in the theory of mind test-What will Jesse think is inside the box before I open it?-has three parts: what Jesse thinks, before the box is opened, and the opening of the box. These are not arranged in the order in which they occur.²¹⁹

²¹⁷ Ibid

²¹⁸ Ibid

²¹⁹ Ibid 107

The box not being opened comes first, then Jesse thinks about what is in it, and then the box is opened. While most minds can rearrange this order without much reflection, an Autistic person has difficulties focusing on what is being said. Thus it is more difficult to rearrange to ideas. Due to this, it is difficult to piece together what Jesse may be thinking, which could lead to them getting the test wrong.

The fact that these steps are out of order contributes to how the Autistic person may fail to properly answer the question. Pentzell explains,

Without my visual/touch indicators, with which I arrange these actions sequentially, it is possible that I would answer that he thinks “pencils” NOT because I believe this is the answer but because this is the last image in my mind...”before I open it.” You open the box and I see pencils! In a second I will realize that my mind has retrieved the wrong information, but the image is strong and has jumped impulsively to the forefront.²²⁰

The issue is not a lack of connecting with others then, but of using language. When given the proper resources, an Autistic person could correctly answer the theory of mind test.

Since no resources are given though, they struggle and ultimately fail the test.

Pentzell’s ideas seem well-supported by data. According to Tim Dant,

One of the problems with ToM was that at an average verbal mental age of 5 years 5 months, a fifth of children with autism could successfully pass the “false belief” test but when it was repeated with older children even more were successful.²²¹

Once one better mastered language, one could reorder the ideas so that they formed a more coherent story. In this way they were able to demonstrate that they understood the story from Sally’s perspective and were no longer bogged down by the language.

Another thought is that with age, Autistic people were better able to master social cues, thus making it easier to relate to others. Dant explains,

²²⁰ Ibid

²²¹ Dant 56

They had learnt how to spot social cues and become better at interactions because communication is, for all humans, a way of sharing experiences and increasing the mutual understanding that constitutes intersubjectivity.²²²

Once the Autistic person was better able to understand that most people do not perceive the world as he does, then he could begin to observe how they do view the world. This allows empathetic bonds to form. So, the issue does not seem to be that an Autistic person lacks a theory of mind, but that the Autistic person is thrown into a world in which he does not understand the sensations around him. Thus an Autistic person has a theory of mind, which is further developed as they grow. Therefore, *the Autistic person's ability to empathize should not be called into question.*

Autistic people are capable of empathy. The only question under debate is how they are best able to display empathy. One way therapists have proposed to help Autistic people better empathize is to train them to act more like their non-Autistic peers. Applied Behavioral Analysis Therapy (ABA) seeks to train the Autistic person to behave more like a non-Autistic individual. While ABA initially relied upon negative reinforcement, today therapists use positive reinforcement and relaxed play to encourage desired behaviors. These desired behaviors could range anywhere from making eye contact to not stimming. While more research must be done to test the overall effectiveness of ABA therapy, it is the most trusted therapy for Autistic people.

On the surface, this therapy seems to resolve the problem of Autistic empathy. After all if the Autistic person is behaving like a non-Autistic person then they are more approachable. This allows a non-Autistic person to form an empathetic bond with them.

²²² Ibid 56-57

Still, this comes at a great personal cost to the Autistic person. The Autistic person who wants to be socially successful needs to know how to “pass” as non-Autistic. The notion of passing originated within racial studies, when lighter colored skinned African Americans would pretend to be white in order to receive certain privileges and avoid certain prejudices. Today, passing refers to any minority group attempting to emulate a majority group, including an Autistic person acting as if he is non-Autistic. In order to be successful, the Autistic person must follow the rules of the non-Autistic world. This can lead to increased anxiety and depression. More problematic for phenomenology, passing does not resolve the issue of the interior life of an Autistic person. They may behave as if they have empathy even though they do not.

In order to make a success argument that the Autistic person is empathetic, one must understand possible reasons that an Autistic person would fail a theory of mind test. One reason put forth by Nick Pentzell is that the Autistic person often lacks the language to express their viewpoint. They may be too overstimulated to pay attention to the entire scenario of Sally’s marble, and may only focus on the last thing they saw. Even if they know Sally would look for the marble where she last placed it, they do not have the words to organize the story properly. Because of this, they give the wrong answer. Thus the issue is not that the Autistic person does not have empathy, but that they do not have the language to express it.

Conclusion

Autism is a neurological disorder which affects one’s sensory perceptions as well as ability to read nonverbal cues. The diagnosis for Autism is divided into two clusters

with certain other criteria which must be met for a diagnosis. Cluster A deals with an Autistic person's ability to socialize. If one socializes abnormally and/or cannot decipher nonverbal cues, then they may receive a diagnosis of Autism. Cluster B deals with repetitive movements and abnormal fixations. In order to receive a diagnosis of Autism, symptoms must not be caused by another condition such as Fragile X Syndrome, and must be present from childhood.

Due to the issues Autistic people have with reading nonverbal cues, some scholars have questioned their ability to empathize. Deborah Barnbaum argues that Autistic people do not have a Theory of Mind, meaning they may not be able to attribute mental states to others. This is based on the Sally/Anne test, in which an Autistic person is asked where Sally will look for the ball Anne has moved. Since some Autistic people say Sally will look for the ball where Anne put it, scholars have argued that the Autistic person does not have a Theory of Mind.

The implication that an Autistic person has no Theory of Mind has not been ignored by phenomenologists. Kathleen Haney argues that Autistic people are too inwardly focused to have an intersubjective lifeworld. Because of this, they are unable to empathize. Tim Dant is more optimistic, saying that Autistic people can empathize by pretending they are non-Autistic when interacting with a non-Autistic person.

Dant's theory seems to have support from common Autistic therapies. Perhaps the most prevalent Autistic therapy is Applied Behavioral Analysis. ABA therapy seeks to identify a behavior, then encourage or discourage it with positive reinforcement. In this way, the Autistic person acts less Autistic.

This therapy has consequences for Autistic people though. Some Autistic people argue that ABA therapy forces them to pass as non-Autistic. Passing was a term initially used in racial studies which referred to a light-skinned black person posing as a white person. It can now be applied to any minority member acting as if they are a member of the majority, such as an Autistic person acting as if they are non-Autistic. Passing has psychological ramifications though, such as causing depression and anxiety in the person passing.

One way of resolving this issue is to argue that the Autistic person does have a theory of mind. Nick Petzell argues that the reason some Autistic people may not pass the Sally/Anne test is because they lack the linguistic skills to understand the complexity of the problem. Their last image may be of where Anne put the ball, meaning they say that instead of where Sally would look for the ball. Still, many Autistic people do pass the test when they are older, meaning they do have an ability to empathize.

Since Autistic people are accused of lacking empathy, it is important that phenomenology examines their experiences. The next section will be devoted to a phenomenological analysis of Autistic empathy. This approach will be based not off the work of Edith Stein or Jean-Paul Sartre, but of Martin Heidegger.

Chapter IV

A Heideggerian Analysis of Autism

Since Autistic people have difficulty deciphering non verbal cues, they are often accused of lacking empathy. Still, many Autistic people do form meaningful relationships. Thus, a philosophical account of how Autistic people empathize with others is necessary. Such an account must not only include how an Autistic person empathizes with others, but also how empathy breaks down when an Autistic person interacts with a non-Autistic person. Phenomenology could provide such an account, but it would need to expand on the work of Edmund Husserl. Although Husserl provides the framework for how empathetic bonds can form, his project is not to explore how breakdowns in empathy occur. He leaves that task to other phenomenologists.

Martin Heidegger is one phenomenologist who analyzes in depth how empathetic bonds can form between two people. He also argues that these bonds can become oppressive, leading them to deteriorate.²²³ Heidegger begins his analysis by claiming that the person is a *Dasein*.²²⁴ Literally translated as “there-being,” *Dasein* always already finds herself in a world she must navigate. Unlike other entities though, Being is an issue for *Dasein*. In order to understand Being though, one must understand “who” *Dasein* is.²²⁵ The “who” of *Dasein* lies in the world she shares with Others, or *Mitsein*. Through

²²³ Heidegger *Being and Time* 163-168

²²⁴ Ibid 27

²²⁵ Ibid 149

Mitsein, *Dasein* dwells among others and makes meaning with them.²²⁶ The Other is vital for *Dasein's* Being, thus putting Heidegger in line with other phenomenologists who argued for the importance of intersubjectivity.

Heidegger goes beyond Husserl's analysis though and claims that Others can become problematic for *Dasein* and her project of understanding Being. *Dasein* is under pressure to conform by Others. He calls the Others who put pressure on *Dasein*, *das Man*, sometimes translated as "the they". *Das Man* is nobody and everybody. They ask *Dasein* to conform to norms, but cannot explain where such conventions originated or why they are followed. *Das Man* tells *Dasein* what to be interested in, what to recoil in horror from, and what kinds of opportunities are realistic for her. Thus *Dasein* forgets Being and thoughtlessly adheres to the norms set by *das Man*.²²⁷

The way *das Man* levels *Dasein's* world down can be found in two phenomenon, idle talk and curiosity.²²⁸ "Idle talk" is not meant as a disparaging term. Instead, it is meant to denote the everyday way *Dasein* communicates. Idle talk is groundless though, often involving unfounded interpretations of works and events. It can include gossip and rumors, though is not outright deception. It distorts reality and distracts *Dasein* from her life projects.

While not synonymous, small talk is a type of idle talk. This has implications for the Autistic person. Some Autistic therapies involve teaching the Autistic person how to

²²⁶ Ibid 154-163

²²⁷ Ibid 163-168

²²⁸ Ibid 171-172

engage in small talk while ignoring the difference in communication styles between the two groups.²²⁹ Non-Autistic people engage in small talk to form bonds whereas Autistic people often want a topic of mutual shared interest in order to build a bond.²³⁰ Since the latter is the majority, the Autistic are forced to conform to their norms.

Curiosity is another aspect Heidegger examines. In curiosity, *Dasein* seeks what is novel and exotic. She has a fleeting interest in topics, but does not go in depth with any of them. Thus curiosity proves distracting from the projects *Dasein* is meant to engage in. Curiosity is also connected to idle talk. Idle talk makes curiosity possible by providing the language to convey the topic, while *das Man* dictates what one will find of interest. Still curiosity is fleeting, making life pleasant without making a pleasant life.

There are implications for Autistic people in Heidegger's analysis of curiosity as well. Autistic interests are often referred to as obsessions.²³¹ Unlike a non-Autistic person who may be engaged in fleeting fads, the Autistic person needs the interests to interpret her world in various ways. These obsessions can provide order to one's life by giving the Autistic person something considered stable to focus upon.²³² Certain obsessions such as movies could help an Autistic person view social situations, making it easier for her to

²²⁹ Maich, Kimberly, Hall, Carmen L. Van Rijn, Tricia Marie, and Kim Squires "Investigating Stay, Play, & Talk: A Peer-Mediated Social Skills Intervention for Young Children with Autism Spectrum Disorder and Other Social Challenges" *Exceptionality Education International* 28 (2) 82-104; 2018

²³⁰ Hearst, Caroline "What Autism and Small Talk are Polar Opposites" *Autism Matters* July 7. 2017 <https://www.autismmatters.org.uk/blog/why-autism-and-small-talk-are-polar-opposites>

²³¹ Laber-Warren "The Benefits of Special Interests in Autism" *Spectrum* May 12, 2021

²³² Ibid

interact with others. They could also provide a relief from the non-Autistic world. In short, obsessions may be necessary for an Autistic person's conception of Being.

This chapter will explore Martin Heidegger's views and their implications for understanding the relationship between Autistic and non-Autistic people. Part I will examine Martin Heidegger's views on *Dasein* and *das Man*. Part II will explore idle talk and its implications for Autistic people. Finally, Part III will examine the notion of curiosity and how it relates to Autistic obsessions. At the conclusion of the chapter, it will be clear that Heidegger's phenomenological views on intersubjectivity can be used to analyze the Autistic experience.

Section I: An Analysis of Das Man

Since Husserl only discusses how empathy is experienced in ideal circumstances, an account of how individuals engage in conflict is necessary. Martin Heidegger presents such an account. He uses the concept of *Dasein* to discuss how the human interacts with the world. *Dasein*, translated as "there-Being," is meant to convey that the person is always already in a world.²³³ Heidegger argues that one is always amongst others, a phenomenon he calls *Mitsein*.²³⁴ *Mitsein* presents *Dasein* with opportunities for comporting herself to the world, and makes certain potentialities available. Still, *Mitsein* can become oppressive, a phenomenon Heidegger calls *das Man* or in some translations, the they.²³⁵ *Das Man* oppresses *Dasein* by leveling possibilities and encouraging

²³³ Heidegger *Being and Time* 27

²³⁴ Ibid 155

²³⁵ Ibid 163-168

conformity. *Dasein* becomes lost in *das Man*, thus losing her sense of Being.²³⁶ The tension between *Dasein* and *das Man* will prove valuable when analyzing the relationship between Autistic and non-Autistic people.

In order to understand Heidegger's views on *Dasein*, one must understand what *Dasein* means. According to Mark Wrathall, "Taken literally, *Dasein* means being-there (from the German *Da*, 'there', and *Sein* 'being')." ²³⁷ *Dasein* is an entity that exists in a particular place and a particular time. She is always already in a world.

In order to understand the kind of relationship *Dasein* has with other beings, it is important to note the way *Dasein* uses equipment. Heidegger begins, "Equipment is essentially 'something-in-order-to...A totality of equipment is constituted by various ways of 'in-order-to,' such as serviceability, conduciveness, usability, manipulability."²³⁸ *Dasein* interacts with equipment on a daily basis in order to accomplish certain tasks. For instance, the average person in the Western World knows what a hammer is. She knows that it is used to drive objects such as nails into objects such as wood. In this way, the hammer is used for projects such as building a doghouse or hanging a picture on the wall.

Equipment does not appear on its own, but is always tied into a wider project.

Heidegger explains,

Equipment can genuinely show itself only in dealings cut to its own measure...but in such dealings an entity of this kind is not *grasped* thematically as an occurring Thing, nor is the equipment-structure known as such even in the using.²³⁹

²³⁶ Ibid 164

²³⁷ Wrathall, Mark *How to Read Heidegger* Granta Publications New York 2005; 11

²³⁸ Heidegger *Being and Time* 97

²³⁹ Ibid 98

Dasein does not need to guess what a hammer is as she's using it. Instead, she knows that a hammer is best at driving nails into a wall to hang a picture. The hammer is used in conjunction with a project. By using the hammer, *Dasein* understands how it fits into her wider projects, allowing her to accomplish her tasks.

Heidegger has a name for equipment which is usable, namely ready-to-hand. He states, "The kind of Being which equipment possesses-in which it manifests itself in its own right-we call *readiness-to-hand* [*Zuhandenheit*]"²⁴⁰ A ready-to-hand hammer is available for use at the moment. Its use is known to *Dasein*, and it can immediately be used in a project. In this way, the object is "handy."

Not every object falls into this category. Heidegger uses the example of a missing object to discuss objects which are present-at-hand. He claims,

Anything which is un-ready-to-hand in this way [having gone missing] is disturbing to us, and enables us to see the *obstinacy* of that which we must concern ourselves in the first instance before we do anything else. With this obstinacy, the presence-at-hand of the ready-to-hand makes itself known in a new way as the Being of that which still lies before us and calls for our attending to it.²⁴¹

Unlike a ready-to-hand object, one which is present-at-hand is not handy. The object is viewed theoretically since it is absent from a larger project. Present-at-hand is not a natural way of viewing objects though since objects are always part of wider projects. In this way, ready-to-hand and present-at-hand are part of *Dasein's* wider worldview.

Now that a preliminary analysis of how Heidegger views objects has been accomplished, it is time to see how *Dasein* views her world. Like Husserl and other

²⁴⁰ Ibid

²⁴¹ Ibid 103-104

phenomenologists, Heidegger does not use the term “subject” because he does not believe it captures what it means to be human. As Hubert L. Dreyfus explains, “... Heidegger argues that a human being becomes something non-Subject-like (.i.e., a *Dasein*) when dealing skillfully with familiar things and people in familiar situations.”²⁴² When a trucker is driving a semi, she may not dwell on how the leather of the steering wheel feels on her hand or what movements she needs to make to keep the vehicle on the interstate. She does not dwell on how her body differs from the semi, or the fact that she is a separate entity from the other drivers. These sensations could prove distracting to her task of hauling materials from one area to another. In order to perform her task, she is absorbed in her world.

While it is important to know how *Dasein* interacts with objects, this is not Heidegger’s only interest. In order to understand what kind of being *Dasein* is, one must examine her more in depth. Heidegger begins,

We shall approach this phenomenon by asking *who* it is that *Dasein* is in its everydayness. All the structure of Being which belong to *Dasein*, together with the phenomenon which provides the answer to the question of “who,” are ways of its Being.²⁴³

The way *Dasein* interacts with the equipment surrounding it help constitute its Being, but this is not the entire picture. In addition to how *Dasein* interacts with equipment in the world, it is necessary to explore how *Dasein* identifies herself, especially in her day-to-day life.

²⁴² Dreyfus, Hubert L. “Being-With-Others” *The Cambridge Companion to Heidegger’s Being and Time* Cambridge University Press New York (2013) 145-156; 145

²⁴³ Heidegger *Being and Time* 149

The who of *Dasein* lies not in a series of attributes that *Dasein* uses to identify herself. Heidegger explains, “The answer to the question of “who” of everyday *Dasein* is to be obtained by analyzing that kind of Being in which *Dasein* maintains itself proximally and for the most part.”²⁴⁴ Unlike philosophers such as Descartes who only look at a singular subject to analyze human experience, Heidegger wants to analyze *Dasein*'s ontological structure. He believes she cannot be separate from the world, but is always a part of it. Thus, *Dasein* can only be understood in the kinds of ways she lives her daily life.

The world consists of more than objects though. Others inhabit *Dasein*'s world as well. Heidegger argues,

In our “description” of that environment which is closest to us—the work-world of the craftsman, for example—the outcome was that this along with the equipment to be found when one is at work [in Arbeit], those Others for whom the “work” [“Werk”] is destined are “encountered too.”²⁴⁵

When the woman is driving the semi then, she interacts with others in the loading and unloading of her material. Other *Dasein*'s share the road with her, forcing her to take them into consideration when she performs actions such as changing lanes. She may also wave to pedestrians on the street if she knows them. Thus others play a role in the task the semi driver is attempting to perform.

Without the Other, one cannot begin to make sense of objects. Heidegger continues,

The Others who are thus “encountered” in a ready-to-hand, environmental context of equipment, are not somehow added on in thought to some Thing which is proximally

²⁴⁴ Ibid 153

²⁴⁵ Ibid

present-at-hand; such “Things” are encountered from out of the world in which they are ready-to-hand for Others—a world which is always mine too in advance.²⁴⁶

Anytime an object is used, it bears the mark of the other. Other people on an assembly line produced the semi the driver used to perform her task. She is only able to drive the semi because she received a commercial driver’s license from an agency, and was subsequently hired by a company.

At this juncture, it is important to define the concept of Other. Because of the connotations of “other” one could fall under the impression that the other is a stranger whom *Dasein* may never encounter. This would be inaccurate though. Heidegger claims,

By “Others” we do not mean everyone else but me—those over against what the “I” stands out. They are rather those from whom, for the most part, one does *not* distinguish oneself—those among whom one is too.²⁴⁷

In the case of the semi driver, the Other may be the people who work at a gas station she frequents, or the members of her trucking organization. In other cases, the Other could be a prominent community member or members of one’s own family. In this way, the Other becomes a part of *Dasein*’s Being.

This has ramifications for the way *Dasein* views her world. As Lee Braver argues,

In my average everyday going about my business I don’t experience myself as a distinct separate entity, cut off from others with whom I need to establish some sort of contact. Certain events can introduce a separation, but this is just a temporary suspension of the usual ongoing flow of direct contact.²⁴⁸

Barring some severe brain injury, one does not constantly reintroduce oneself to others.

Rather, one is aware of who the Others are who surround her. These relationships give one her identity, one she maintains even when the Other is not in close proximity to her.

²⁴⁶ Ibid 154

²⁴⁷ Ibid

²⁴⁸ Braver, Lee *Heidegger* Polity Press Malden, MA 2016; 44

While under quarantine, one will admit to being a member of a family and having neighbors. In her spare time, the person may watch a television show which is produced by others or could read a book she bought from the store. In this way, *Dasein* builds an identity stemming from her connection to Others.

At this juncture, it could be tempting to agree that the Other is part of the world, but they are viewed as another object instead of a fellow *Dasein*. This fear is unfounded. Mark Wrathall explains, “In addition, as we go about our everyday affairs, we encounter other people as *Daseins*, with their own ways of understanding and interpreting things, their own possibilities, identities, and moods.”²⁴⁹ *Dasein* is aware that others are different from objects as well as from herself. Still she also acknowledges that she shares a world with them. She is one *Dasein* amongst others.

Heidegger can now answer the question of who *Dasein* is. He concludes,

By reason of this *with-like* [*mithaften*] Being-in-the-world, the world is always the one I share with Others. The world of *Dasein* is a *with-world* [*Mitwelt*]. Being-in is *Being-with* Others. Their Being-in-themselves within-the-world is *Dasein-with* [*Mitdasein*]²⁵⁰

Without the Other, *Dasein* has no way of understanding the world. She has no way of deciphering the purpose of the objects around her, or be able to make plans to perform task. Thus the Other is an integral part of who *Dasein* is.

The Other does not only inhabit the world, but exerts an influence almost every decision *Dasein* makes. Mark Wrathall explains,

Before we ever really begin thinking or making decisions for ourselves, the people with whom we live have introduced us to a particular understanding of ourselves and the world around us. This means I am never in a position to decide for myself how I will

²⁴⁹ Wrathall 51

²⁵⁰ Heidegger *Being and Time* 155

understand things from the ground up, or to invent my own way of being in the world independently of any relationship to other human beings.²⁵¹

Heidegger goes beyond Husserl and explores the way the Other presses conformity onto *Dasein*. Because Others permeate *Dasein's* Being, she becomes defined by her interactions with them. Although this allows her to make sense of her world, it can also stifle the search for her own Being.

Heidegger continues his analysis of how the Other encourages conformity by discussing *das Man*, or as it is sometimes translated, the they. He begins,

But this distanciality which belong to Being-with, is such that *Dasein* as everyday Being-with-on-another, stands in *subjugation* [*Botmässigkeit*] to Others. It itself *is* not; its Being has been taken away by the Others.²⁵²

Because *Dasein* is never independent of Others, she is restricted in how she views herself and her projects. She must always analyze herself and her Being through the lens of the Other. Although Husserl does not wish to analyze the issues associated with this conformity, Heidegger makes this a focal point of his philosophy.

At this juncture, it may be tempting to give a strict definition of Other. It could be claimed that the Other is a family member, a friend, a leader of one's culture, or even a celebrity. The Other is undefinable though. Heidegger claims, "These Others, moreover, are not *definite* Others. On the contrary, any Other can represent them."²⁵³ The Other could refer to *Dasein's* father, or it refer to all members of the local PTA. In some cases, it

²⁵¹ Wrathall 52

²⁵² Heidegger *Being and Time* 164

²⁵³ Ibid

could even refer to everyone within *Dasein's* culture. So long as another person is in *Dasein's* world, that entity can be referred to as Other.

He argues, “The ‘who’ is not this one, not that one, not oneself [man selbst] not some people [einige], and not the sum of them all. The ‘who’ is the neuter, *the they* [*das Man*].”²⁵⁴ *Das Man* is all around *Dasein*, impossible to distinguish from her own Being. They include everyone from family members, coworkers, members of organizations, and anyone else with whom *Dasein* identifies.

The fact that *Dasein* loses her Being in *das Man* is problematic. Heidegger argues,

This Being-with-one-another dissolves one’s own *Dasein* completely into the kind of Being of ‘the Others,’ in such a way, indeed, that the Others, as distinguishable and explicit vanish more and more.²⁵⁵

One example of this absorption with Others can be seen at a sporting event. Many people wear similar colors and jerseys to represent a connection with their favorite team. When a team scores, the fans roar as if they are one. If one looks into the stands, it is difficult to determine one fan from another, or to distinguish one voice from the others. In this way, *Dasein* loses her own Being and individuality in the conformity of the Other.

It is not only at sporting events where one can see the domination the other holds over *Dasein*. Heidegger continues,

In this inconspicuousness and unascertainability, the real dictatorship of the ‘they’ is unfolded. We take pleasure and enjoy ourselves as *they* [*man*] take pleasure; we read, see, and judge about literature and art as *they* see and judge; likewise we shrink back from the “great mass” as *they* shrink back; we find “shocking” what *they* find shocking.²⁵⁶

²⁵⁴ Ibid

²⁵⁵ Ibid

²⁵⁶ Ibid

In the age of social media, examples of how *das Man* dictates one's perception are prevalent. A meme of a woman yelling at a cat can go viral and linger on Facebook timelines for months. It is not clear who began this meme or why it captures so many imaginations, but others are amused by it. Because of this, an American *Dasein* may find it amusing too. There is no one person who declares it amusing, but because several people find it entertaining it enters the public consciousness and become a phenomenon.

Das Man is not only concerned with dictating *Dasein's* tastes though. Instead, *das Man* wants to level others down until all reach an average. Heidegger explains,

The "they" has its own ways in which to be. That tendency of Being-with which we have called "distantiality" is grounded in the fact that Being-with-one-another concerns itself as such with *averageness*....²⁵⁷

Das Man is interested in conformity. They want to create shows which appeal to the greatest amount of people, sell products which will appeal to most, and put out material which is understandable to most. When following *das Man*, *Dasein* seeks to become the most like others as she can.

Das Man is not only interested in appealing to the most people though. One of the most insidious aspects of *das Man* is that in this averageness, anything extraordinary is leveled. Heidegger explains,

In this averageness with which it prescribes what can and may be ventured, it keeps watch over everything exceptional and thrusts itself to the fore. Every kind of priority gets noiselessly suppressed. Overnight, everything that is primordial gets glossed over as something that has long been well-known. Everything gained by struggle becomes just something to be manipulated. Every secret loses its force.²⁵⁸

²⁵⁷ Ibid

²⁵⁸ Ibid 165

If someone accomplishes a great feat, *das Man* may react with accusations. *Das Man* may belittle the one who accomplished this feat and claim anyone could have done it given the right circumstances. In the way, success is diminished until it is meaningless. *Das Man* seeks to make everyone similar until there is no distinction in personality. Everyone can accomplish the same tasks because everyone is average. No *Dasein* is special, only average.

At this juncture, it seems as if *Dasein* should rebel against *das Man* in order to reach her full potential. If she decides to behave in a way contrary to how *das Man* believes she can act, then she might be able to leave their dictatorship. This is a mistaken belief though. Richard Polt explains,

If I rebel by adopting a counter-cultural hairstyle, body markings, and clothes, I am still basing my personal look on the “they”-I still depend on the “they” as a guideline (a negative guideline) for how I should behave.²⁵⁹

A teenager rebelling by wearing gothic clothing must depend on determining how other teenagers dress in order to create his own style. He must buy clothes from places where the more popular teens do not shop, and must take interests in activities he feels other more popular teens may shun. In short, he uses others his age as a guide for how to behave. He is not free of *das Man*, only subjugated to them in a different way than the teenager who follows every fashion trend. Thus, it is more difficult to escape the dictatorship of *das Man* than *Dasein* may initially believe.

Perhaps most disturbing about *das Man* is that it removes accountability from *Dasein*. Heidegger argues,

²⁵⁹ Polt, Richard *Heidegger: An Introduction* Cornell University Press Ithaca, New York 1999; 62

The 'they' is there alongside everywhere [ist überall dabei], but in such a manner that it has always stolen away when *Dasein* presses for a decision. Yet because "they" presents every judgment and decision as its own, it deprives that particular *Dasein* of its answerability.²⁶⁰

Das Man is the one who presents *Dasein* with possibilities. Still, when deciding what to do, *das Man* vanishes into the background. Instead one is subjected to whatever *das Man* believes is possible and what they prescribe. There is no accountability for *Dasein's* actions, only an ambiguous outline of what can be accomplished.

So far, *das Man* has been described as if it was a single entity. This is only partially true. *Das Man* is somebody, but also nobody. Heidegger explains,

It can be answerable for everything most easily, because it is not someone who needs to vouch for anything. It 'was' always "they" who did it, yet it can be said that it has been "no one." In *Dasein's* everydayness the agency through which most things come about is one of which we must say that "it was no one."²⁶¹

There is no clear answers for why certain social norms are so prevalent. When an American Autistic person asks an American non-Autistic person why eye contact is necessary, there is nobody for the latter to appeal to. In American society one makes eye contact because that is how it has always been done. Still not every culture makes eye contact, meaning there is no scientific reason an American must make eye contact. Because of this, the non-Autistic person has no ready answers for why an Autistic person must make eye contact. Everyone does it, yet nobody instituted the practice. It is everybody's responsibility for upholding the norm, yet it is nobody's fault that the norm began in the first place.

²⁶⁰ Heidegger *Being and Time* 165

²⁶¹ Ibid

After exploring the concept of *das Man*, Heidegger is now able to explain who *Dasein* is. He concludes,

Everyone is the other, and no one is himself. The “*they*,” which supplies the answer to the “*who*” of everyday *Dasein*, is the “*nobody*” to whom *Dasein* has already surrendered itself in Being-among-one-another.²⁶²

Dasein is an entity which is absorbed in others. Still, the other *Daseins* she appeals to for how to decipher her world are everyone around her. Yet, nobody can account for how the majority of people behave. Thus *Dasein* is caught between appealing to everyone and no one.

Like Edmund Husserl, Martin Heidegger believes that the person is not a subject, but an entity which is absorbed in the world. Heidegger calls the human *Dasein*, translated as, “there-Being.” This is meant to designate that one always exists in a world. *Dasein*’s world does not only include objects, but Others as well. Through an analysis of *Dasein*, Heidegger concludes that the Other is a vital part of her Being. Others always already inhabit the world in which *Dasein* dwells. Unlike Husserl who only wants to give a descriptive overview of how the person interacts with the world, Heidegger problematizes *Dasein*’s dwelling with others. *Dasein* can become too absorbed with others. This often occurs when *Dasein* is amongst *das Man*. *Das Man* determines what *Dasein* enjoys, how she reacts to certain situations, as well as what possibilities are open to her. Making everyone average is a concern of *das Man*, as is making the extraordinary seem commonplace. While rebellion may be an appealing notion in order to overcome the dictatorship of the they, non-conformity still requires *das Man* as a baseline for how

²⁶² Ibid 165-166

to behave. Still *das Man* is not a single person or societal group: they are everyone and no one. There is nobody held accountable in *das Man*, meaning that it is impossible to explain norms authoritatively.

This analysis has ramifications for the Autistic community. If *das Man* seeks to make everyone average, then differences will need to be leveled out. Anyone acting against the norm needs to be brought back into line, which makes it difficult for the Autistic person to thrive in a non-Autistic world. The next section will explore one aspect of how *das Man* communicates, namely idle talk. Through an analysis of idle talk and how it relates to certain therapies, it will become clearer how the non-Autistic person pushes the Autistic person towards conformity, often to the latter's detriment.

Section II: Autism and Idle Talk

By nature, *das Man* levels down all possibilities. They attempt to make everything average and relatable. One way of doing this is to make language accessible to all. Idle talk entails that *Dasein* uses deficient language to convey an idea instead of getting to the heart of the matter. Although not inherently deceptive, idle talk often distorts the truth by leveling it down or providing incomplete interpretations. This can often be found when one gossips, or passes the word along. In certain cases, rumors can be attributed to everyone yet no one in particular. In this way, idle talk is the language most often used when communicating with *das Man*.

Unlike many non-Autistic *Daseins* who can easily engage in idle talk, the Autistic *Dasein* has difficulty with it. An Autistic person often has developmental speech issues. Difficulties with language are often the most problematic for Autistic people though.

Some Autistic people do not use words which are age appropriate, if they use language at all. They often have difficulty with small talk as well. This can lead to numerous therapies aimed at trying to get the Autistic person to engage in small talk, regardless of how interesting she may find the topics discussed.

This has implications for the Autistic person. Non-Autistic people use small talk to form bonds with each other. Autistic people prefer to find a topic though and form a bond by discussing that topic. If an Autistic person engages in small talk, it is because she cares about the conversation partner, not because she is merely curious about the weather. Most therapies do not take this difference into account. This can lead to the Autistic person's language becoming stilted, and creates more anxiety because she is unclear if she is violating any social norms. Thus the language issues for Autistic people can be exacerbated, not helped, by certain therapies.

In order to understand how the Autistic *Dasein* differs linguistically from her peers, it is important to understand how Heidegger views language. As Hubert L. Dreyfus explains, "Language by its very structure leads *Dasein* away from a primordial relation to being and to its own being, thus making possible *Dasein*'s slide from primordially to groundlessness."²⁶³ There is a type of language which allows *Dasein* to understand her Being, that which gets to the heart of the matter. In everyday life though, *Dasein* lives amongst *das Man*, who insist on leveling down possibilities. One way of doing so is by making language average via idle talk.

²⁶³ Dreyfus, Hubert L *Being-In-The-World A Commentary on Heidegger's Being and Time Division I* Massachusetts Institute of Technology Cambridge, MA 1991; 229

Heidegger discusses idle talk as a way of explaining how *Dasein* can abandon the project of analyzing her Being. Dreyfus explains,

The resulting movement is described in Heidegger's discussion of idle talk and again in his discussion of how *Dasein* is essentially in the untruth. *Dasein* in making activity intelligible to itself and others must lose its immediate relation to the world and to itself. It may then yield to this structure necessary in order to uproot its understanding of itself and its world.²⁶⁴

One can discuss holding a rat and the soft gray sheen of its fur. These words create an image in the listener's head which only somewhat relate to the rat itself. Even the person discussing the rat may only be able to give an incomplete picture of the rodent because she may not directly experiencing the animal at the moment. In this way, language is by nature divorced from the phenomenon it attempts to illustrate.

Unlike true discourse, idle talk is the language of the masses. Duane Williams writes,

Consequently, what we see is the more authentic *Rede* as interpretive discourse becomes inauthentic, superficial, and approximate. Rather than respond to the address of one another's project of meaning in a common life-world, we merely correspond to the faceless group of public opinion.²⁶⁵

A newscaster does not know his specific audience. His viewers could include anyone from a young child waiting for the weather to an elderly grandparent waiting on a sports score. Thus, the newscaster uses simplistic language, and only gives a brief overview of the stories covered. A story about a murder may only discuss the suspect's skin color and motive. It is rare for a news story to discuss the socio-economic factors which led to the crime, or how racial factors may influence what kind of legal representation the suspect

²⁶⁴ Ibid 229-230

²⁶⁵ Williams, Duane *Language and Being Heidegger's Linguistics* Bloomsbury Publishing New York 2017; 52

will receive. Instead, the story focuses on the horrific nature of the crime and sensationalizes how high the crime rate is in certain neighborhoods.

It is important to note that Heidegger sees idle talk as a natural phenomenon for *Dasein*. He states,

The expression 'idle talk ["Gerede"] is not to be used in a disparaging signification. Terminologically, it signifies a positive phenomenon which constitutes the kind of Being of everyday *Dasein's* understanding and interpreting.²⁶⁶

Heidegger does not want *Dasein* to discard certain kinds of language because it is intrinsically divorced from experiences. Rather he wants to note the pitfalls of everyday language and how it can distort *Dasein's* relation to her Being. In this way, one can better understand who *Dasein* is when in the mode of they-self.

In everyday life, *Dasein* must interact with *das Man*. Since experiences differ though, there must be a commonality which allows ideas to be expressed clearly. This results in common terms which can be understood by a majority of a society's members.

Heidegger explains,

In the language which is spoken when one expresses oneself, there lies an average intelligibility; and in accordance with this intelligibility the discourse which is communicated can be understood to a considerable extent, even if the hearer does not bring himself into such a kind of Being towards what the discourse is about as to have a primordial understanding of it.²⁶⁷

A listener may never have been to Tahiti and may not have access to pictures of the island. Still he can hear *Dasein* discussing it through the use of common terms. Both parties have a general idea of how a sandy beach may appear or how a palm tree may

²⁶⁶ Heidegger *Being and Time* 211

²⁶⁷ Ibid

sway in the breeze. Even though the listener has had no experience of Tahiti then, he can still experience it vicariously through *Dasein* and their shared language.

Although this averageness is necessary for communication, the issue can get distorted over the course of a conversation. Mihai Ometitã explains, “Interpretive idle talk involves the interpreter’s relating improperly to the interpreted issue, or amounts to his or her lacking a proper relation to the issue.”²⁶⁸ A *Dasein* discussing Tahiti may never have been to the island and is only conjuring a picture of how she believes it appears. She may have no intention of visiting the island or learning about its local inhabitants. Thus, she does not have the proper knowledge to discuss the issue, yet discusses it anyway.

When discourse is no longer rooted in Being or in the thing itself, it deteriorates into idle talk. Heidegger states,

And because this discoursing has lost its primacy relationship-of-Being towards the entity talked about, or else has never achieved such a relationship, it does not communicate in such a way as to let this entity be appropriated in a primordial manner, but communicates rather by following the route of *gossiping* and *passing the word along*.²⁶⁹

Tabloids make millions of dollars a year discussing the latest celebrity breakups and marriages. The reporter may have no insight as to whether or not the celebrity couple is engaged, but if a well-known actor wears a ring an engagement speculation will be splashed upon the papers. It is not only in Hollywood where this problem is faced though. Two men may discuss how a mutual friend appears ill, even if neither party is his doctor. Even though neither person has insider knowledge of the alleged health issue, the rumor is spread.

²⁶⁸ Ometitã, Mihai “Hermeneutic Violence and Interpretive Conflict: Heidegger vs. Cassirer on Kant” *Studia Phaenomenologica* 29 (2019) 175-192; 184

²⁶⁹ Heidegger 212

Idle talk would be harmless if it did not distort facts and treat them as truth. Heidegger argues, “What is said-in-the-talk as such, spreads in wider circles and takes on an authoritative character. Things are so because one says so.”²⁷⁰ Rumors begin despite originating from questionable sources. A woman may claim a friend’s husband is cheating on her despite flimsy evidence to suggest such an affair is occurring. The consequences can be damaging nonetheless. The wife may grow distrustful of her spouse, or become irate with the gossiper. The husband’s reputation may be tarnished as well as members of his community shun him for his alleged indiscretion. In this way, the consequences create destruction even if they are not rooted in any truth.

While one speaker may appear authoritative on a subject, the ultimate interpretation of the topic may be more open to debate. Ometitã explains,

The lack of appropriation is just another facet of the impersonal character of communication by way of gossiping and passing the word along. For the very word that is passed from one to another in an interpretive milieu belongs to nobody in particular, or to everybody generically.²⁷¹

Just as norms are dictated by everyone and no one, so authority may rest on everyone and no one. For example, one childhood superstition states if one says, “Bloody Mary” three times into a mirror around midnight, a ghost will appear in place of one’s reflection. There is little scientific basis in this urban legend. It is unknown who started this rumor, but several people have passed it along. In this way, the urban legend belongs to everyone and no one. It is owned by society, and will disappear when society discards the urban legend as mere superstition.

²⁷⁰ Ibid

²⁷¹ Ometitã 185

The effects of idle talk are not only that we cannot attribute facts to accurate sources. It also creates a groundlessness which makes it difficult to get to the heart of the issue. Ometitã explains,

In addition, the more interpretive gossiping and passing the word along flourish in an interpretive milieu, the less is communication rooted in the actual ground (Boden) of the interpreted issue. The issue is interpreted while not being anchored; it ails around, from “here” to “there,” in the interpretive milieu.²⁷²

A non-philosopher discussing Plato may not understand the complexity of the terms he uses. She may not read or understand ancient Greek or ancient Athenian culture, making her interpretations suspect. Still to someone who has not read *The Republic* her views may seem authoritative. In this way, Plato is uprooted from his actual meaning and is made average by his readers. His meaning is lost in the chatter of idle talk.

It should be noted that Heidegger is not discussing deception when he analyzes idle talk. He argues,

Idle talk does not have the kind of Being which belongs to *consciously passing off* something as something else. The fact that something has been said groundlessly, and that gets passed along in further retelling, amounts to perverting the act of disclosing [Erschliessen] into an act of closing off [Verschliessen].²⁷³

In many ways, idle talk is more insidious than deception. In deception, *Dasein* can usually trace the lie back to a deceiver. Idle talk may not have a single source though. *Dasein* immediately knows that a lie distorts the truth, but it is not immediately clear how idle talk distorts the truth. The truth of a statement in idle talk is covered amidst the retelling of rumors until it is difficult to separate reality from interpretation.

²⁷² Ibid

²⁷³ Heidegger 213

Heidegger's analysis of language is not only useful in illuminating how the average *Dasein* conforms to *das Man*'s standards. It can also explain one of the key differences between Autistic and non-Autistic *Dasein*, namely how each uses language. One of the major ways Autistic people differ from their non-Autistic peers lies in how each focuses their attention. Laura Grofer Klinger, Mark R. Klinger, and Rebecca L. Pohling explain,

For example, we know that people with ASD [Autism Spectrum Disorder] have difficulties disengaging and shifting their attention (Casey et al. 1993; Townsend, Courchesne and Egaas 1996). That is, they tend to get 'stuck' on a particular object or topic and have difficulty refocusing their attention.²⁷⁴

An Autistic person could become obsessed with a Doberman he saw on the way to school. Even hours after seeing the dog, he may talk about how short its tail was or how it barked at him as his mom was driving. It could be difficult to divert the Autistic person's attention from this memory, or get him onto another topic such as the math problems before him.

This is not the only development area in which Autistic people may lag behind.

Klinger et. al explain,

We also know that individuals with ASD have a weak central coherence (Frith and Happe 1994; Jolliffe and Baron-Cohen 1997). That is, they tend to focus on specific aspects or parts of the situation without recognizing the 'bigger picture.' For example, a child with ASD may focus on a person's mouth instead of their eyes during a social interaction (Kling et al. 2002).²⁷⁵

An Autistic person may view Matthias Grunewald's *The Crucifixion* and only focus on the lamb at the foot of the cross. The Autistic person may focus on the lamb because it is

²⁷⁴ Klinger, Laura Grofer, Klinger, Mark R. and Rebecca L. Pohling "Implicit Learning Impairments in Autism Spectrum Disorders Implications for Treatment" *New Developments in Autism The Future is Today* Jessica Kinglsey Publishers London 76-104 2007; 78

²⁷⁵ Ibid

not a human face. Unlike the people in the picture, the lamb's expression is neutral, meaning the Autistic person will not be overwhelmed with emotions by looking at it. Because they are only focusing on the lamb, the Autistic person may not understand the impact of the painting or why so many people find it moving.

The inability to analyze a situation is not limited to faces though. It can be seen in how an Autistic person views inanimate objects as well. Donna Williams reports,

I discovered the air was full of spots. If you looked into nothingness, there were spots....My attention would be firmly set on my desire to lose myself in spots, and I'd ignore the gabble, looking straight through this obstruction [other people] with a calm expression, soothed by being lost in spots.²⁷⁶

The world for Donna is not seen as a coherent whole. Instead, she must piece the world together through the spots. The spots are non-threatening, though, leading her to focus more on them instead of the person who is ready to slap her.²⁷⁷

Difficulty in shifting attention and a weak central coherence are not the only developmental issues an Autistic person may face. Klinger et. al continue,

Finally, we know that persons with ASD have impairments in executive function (Ciesielski and Harris 1997; Ozonoff and Jensen 1999; Ozonoff and McEvoy 1994). That is, they have impaired problem solving, particularly in their ability to think flexibly when trying to solve a dilemma.²⁷⁸

Autistic people are known as rigid thinkers. If someone deviates from the rules, the Autistic person becomes upset. As a result, an Autistic person may not be able to interact with the other alleged rule breaker, which could lead to a severed relationship. This

²⁷⁶ Williams, Donna *Nobody Nowhere* HarperCollins New York 1992; 3

²⁷⁷ Ibid 3-4 She is abused numerous times throughout the book by her mother, including a particularly violent beating where she has a dissociative episode. Thus it is unclear how much of her experiences are because she is Autistic, or if they are a result of being an abused Autistic child.

²⁷⁸ Ibid

inability to relate to peers and accept that sometimes social norms are violated cause them to lag behind their peers.

Still, the area where Autistic people lag behind most noticeably is in the realm of language. Cheong Ying Sng, Mark Carter, and Jennifer Stephenson explain,

It has been widely reported that people with autism tend to engage in developmentally naive responses during conversations despite possessing language capabilities that would allow more sophisticated exchanges.²⁷⁹

An Autistic person may use words inappropriately. For instance, they may use the word “discomfit” to mean being upset instead of actively causing someone else to become upset. This could lead to confusion on the end of the conversation partner, which could lead to frustration on the end of an Autistic person. In this way, his language skills are immature in relation to his peers.

Perhaps the most famous way in which the Autistic person lags behind his peers is in the acquisition of language. Many times, Autistic people use language inappropriately, if at all. The National Institute on Deafness and Other Communication Disorders explains,

Often, children with ASD who can speak will say things that have no meaning or that do not relate to the conversations they are having with others....Or a child may continuously repeat words he or she has heard—a condition called echolalia.²⁸⁰

If someone asks an Autistic child if he wants ice cream, he may ask about the makeup of the treat or babble. He may take a phrase he heard from a television show and repeat it

²⁷⁹ Sng, Cheong Ying, Carter, Mark, and Jennifer Stephenson “A Systematic Review of the Comparative Pragmatic Differences in Conversational Skills of Individuals with Autism” *Autism & Developmental Language Impairments* Vol 3; 1-24 (2018) 2

²⁸⁰ National Institute on Deafness and Other Communication Disorders *Autism Spectrum Disorder: Communication Problems in Children* October 2016 <https://www.nidcd.nih.gov/health/autism-spectrum-disorder-communication-problems-children>

inappropriate situations as well. For instance, at a funeral he may run to others and ask, “What’s up doc?” These differences are sometimes too great to ignore, which can create social difficulties for the Autistic person.

The difficulty in conveying what an Autistic person wants can lead an Autistic person to avoid conversing with others. Even if an Autistic person does have a mastery of language, there are aspects of conversation she may not appreciate, such as small talk. Caroline Hearst explains, “I’ve heard the idea that autistic people hate small talk, repeated countless times by both autistic and non-autistic people.”²⁸¹ This is a stark difference from non-Autistic people, who may find small talk to be an essential aspect of forming relationships. Thus this dislike of small talk can create a gulf between Autistic and non-Autistic people.

After analyzing idle talk, it can now be applied to the Autistic experience. One of the many therapies for Autistic people involve learning how to make small talk via methods such as social observation and conversation cards. Elizabeth Sautter, a speech and language pathologist, makes the following suggestions for teaching Autistic children how to engage in small talk. She begins,

When you’re out in the community, ask your child to observe other people and try to infer what the person might be interested in or how people are related or connected to one another. Learning to make guesses about others helps in finding good topics of conversation.²⁸²

²⁸¹ Hearst

²⁸² Sautter, Elizabeth “Small Talk Can Loom Large: Teaching Your Child the Flow of Conversation” *Autism Awareness Centre Inc.* <https://autismawarenesscentre.com/small-talk-can-loom-large-teaching-child-flow-conversation/>

It should be noted that the parent is not to ask what a specific person's interest is. Rather, the child is to observe society as a whole. The observation could come from two people discussing a TV show, or it could come from a magazine which is displayed on an airport newsstand. Regardless, the ambiguous *das Man* is being observed, not a specific person. The Autistic child is to focus on everyone, but no one in particular.

The second piece of advice Sautter gives is to take the observations and brainstorm what can be discussed. She suggests,

Help your child make a list of topics that most people like to talk about in shorter conversations (e.g., the weather, learning what the person is doing at school, work or in other activities, asking questions about what is going on in their life, a new pet or sport, etc.).²⁸³

Although the topics such as “a new pet” may be specific to one person, the majority of the topics are general to everyone. Still, narrowing the focus makes it easier to engage in conversation with specific people, though whether the topic is of interest to the Autistic person continues to be irrelevant.

Perhaps the most intriguing therapy Sautter advocates is conversation cards. She writes,

Create cards with open-ended questions like, “What was the best (or worst) part of your day?” or “What’s your favorite movie and why?” Place them in the middle of the dinner table and take turns picking up a card and posing a question. Practicing at home will make it easier to converse with people who are less familiar.²⁸⁴

The conversation cards could unintentionally teach an Autistic person poor communication skills. Very few people are going to tell a child they barely know, the worst part of their day. This could create awkwardness as a conversation partner dances

²⁸³ Ibid

²⁸⁴ Ibid

around the topic and tries to change it. Because the Autistic person does not understand the purpose of small talk though, he could become confused or offended that his question is not answered. This strains communication since nobody wants to get to the heart of the matter; namely why people do not want to discuss upsetting topics with a child.

For a less rigid conversation, Sautter gives tips on how to ask deeper questions. She advises, “‘Wh’ questions (who, what, why, etc.) are good conversation starters. Make a visual cue or prompt to remind your child of these words and practice using them at home during family meals.”²⁸⁵ This rehearsal is perhaps the biggest problem with Sautter’s suggestions: the conversation is no longer about communication, but about fulfilling a set of social norms. The child may have little interest in who Christian Laettner is or why Aunt Sally dyed her hair blue. Still, by convention they are encouraged to engage in these types of conversations regardless of their views on the matter.

Communicating in an artificial way becomes problematic for the Autistic person though because it highlights her difference. It makes her more conscious of herself instead of less so. Still, this is not the role it plays for the non-Autistic person. Richard Kearney states,

In Idle Talk words become strategies for escaping ourselves; we cease to communicate decisively on the basis of our own lived experience. The challenging strangeness of the world is thus covered over with a film of convenient familiarity. Our existence is no longer lived *by us*; it is lived *for us* by the impersonalized ‘They’ who make decisions on our behalf.²⁸⁶

Das Man dictates how communication will occur and with whom. The topics of conversation are dictated by others, not by the Autistic person’s own experience or

²⁸⁵ Sautter

²⁸⁶ Ibid 54

interests. *Das Man* demands that an Autistic person converses a certain way in order to conform to certain standards. Those who successfully do so are considered great at passing, whereas those who cannot are considered social outcasts.

At this juncture it is worth asking what an authentic form of Autistic communication would look like. Caroline Hearst examines the differences in Autistic vs. non-Autistic forms of communication by stating the following:

It seems that for many NT's (neurotypical or non-autistic people) connection comes before content, so they connect with contentless conversation and if that works they will move on to sharing meaningful content. As well as establishing connection in contrasting ways it seems that the average NT probably wants more superficial connection with other humans than the average autistic person, and they signal the desire to connect by sharing inconsequential information.²⁸⁷

This is why Heidegger does not disparage idle talk: when done correctly it can lead to a deeper connection between people. It has a vital and meaningful function in *Dasein's* everyday life, one which cannot be discarded or ignored. For the non-Autistic person then, mastering idle talk is somewhat necessary.

If non-Autistic communication involves idle talk, then Autistic people may communicate on a different level. Hearst claims, "For most autistic people however, the point of a conversation is the content. If the content is engaging they will connect, content leads to connection."²⁸⁸ The desire to connect over a topic does not mean that an Autistic person does not engage in idle talk. Two Autistic people can engage in a conversation about Plato with a limited understanding of his theories and the conclusions they reach may be superficial. Still, the key is that the Autistic person wants to

²⁸⁷ Hearst

²⁸⁸ Ibid

communicate to broaden his understanding of a topic, not share trivial facts which may bore her.

Despite the fact that the Autistic person can engage in a type of idle talk, many conversations seek to gain a deeper understanding of the world. Hearst notes,

Most of us autistics want language to be used to mean what it says not as a backdrop to an invisible social signal. So when NT's use random thoughts to try connect with another person it can work well with fellow NT's but tends to fail with autistics as we need meaningful content and can get stressed by a feeling that we are expected to share meaningless trivialities (added to which we have no idea what is acceptable to say and what could trigger an adverse reaction, we feel that we're being invited into a minefield). Before we speak we need to either be interested in the subject we are speaking about or the person we are talking to.²⁸⁹

For an Autistic person, language must have a deeper point to be meaningful. The Autistic person does not want words to be watered down or engage in exhausting language games. Instead, the focus needs to be on what is being said and the topic at hand, not in navigating a socially complex situation which could result in hurt feelings or rage.

In addition to not wanting to discuss trivialities, the Autistic person has little interest in conversing with anyone who is merely a part of *das Man*. Instead, Autistic people may seek communication with specific individuals. Hearst argues,

So while in an autistic setting (or any setting where they feel safe) many autistic people will ask after someone else's family or discuss how travel arrangements, because they are genuinely interested and connected. This can give the impression of being small talk, but in fact it's meaningful because of the prior connection of the participants. The conversation does not create the connection; it happens because of it.²⁹⁰

Autistic people understand that language deepens relationships. What can be difficult to grasp though is that for non-Autistic people idle talk creates connections. Thus the Autistic person does understand the purpose of language, but they seek a form of

²⁸⁹ Ibid

²⁹⁰ Ibid

communication which goes beyond idle talk; or at least a form of idle talk which goes beyond a passing interest in the weather.

The insistence upon a certain type of idle talk does not only force the Autistic person to communicate inauthentically, but it can lead to *more* difficulties in communication than necessary. Hearst concludes,

If we repeat stock phrases because we've been taught that's what you're supposed to do it's likely to feel unnatural, appear stilted and require lots of effort and energy leaving us feeling depleted and unable to actually listen and respond to the other person's reply. Masking causes disconnection rather than connection so shouldn't really be considered a social skill.²⁹¹

By forcing an Autistic to pass as non-Autistic by communicating in a certain way, the Autistic person is unable to use language for what it is intended for—namely sharing experiences. Instead too much time is focused on what is being said. In this way *das Man* forces the Autistic person into an inauthentic communication style, and inhibits his ability to form significant meaningful relationships.

Dasein is always comparing herself to *das Man*. This is especially true in the case of the Autistic *Dasein*, who may have developmental differences from her peers. These differences can include linguistic difficulties. Autistic people may struggle to speak on an age appropriate level. If they do use words above their age range, they may use them incorrectly. Perhaps the most distinctive linguistic difference between Autistic and non-Autistic communication though is the former's disdain for small talk. Non-Autistic people see small talk as a way of forming social bonds, and can find it disconcerting when one will not engage in it.

²⁹¹ Ibid

Heidegger does not only discuss how *Dasein* compares herself to Others, but also how *das Man* shapes how she interacts with her world. While he does not use the term “idle talk” disparagingly, Heidegger admits that it avoids the heart of the matter. It passes along information with no source. *Das Man* seeks to conform the Autistic *Dasein* to this way of communication. Instead of discussing an Autistic *Dasein*'s interests, *das Man* seeks to force her into small talk. This is most often done through the aforementioned therapies, which seek to help *Dasein* engage in small talk through the use of therapies such as asking certain questions. This ignores the way Autistic people communicate though. Autistic people tend to want a topic to discuss and bond over that, not attempt to find common ground through idle talk.

Idle talk is not the only type of everyday phenomenon Heidegger explores which has implications for Autism. Curiosity is connected to idle talk. When *Dasein* is curious about a topic, she may engage in idle talk to convey her ideas on it. This has implications for Autism because Autistic people often have obsessions which differ in scope and intensity from those of a non-Autistic person. These differences provide clues for understand how an Autistic person approached Being differently than a non-Autistic person.

Section III: Autism and Curiosity

Heidegger does not conclude his analysis of *das Man*'s influence on *Dasein* with idle talk. He also gives an account of curiosity and how it is influenced by *das Man*. Curiosity is a tendency towards the novel and exotic. Yet, the information gained in curiosity is superficial. It is also a way for *Dasein* to distract herself from the world.

Although curiosity is not a disparaging term, it does cause one to see things through the lens of *das Man* and not through one's own interpretation.

While non-Autistic people often have fleeting interests, Autistic people are more intense in their obsessions. Oftentimes, an interest is a way for an Autistic person to organize her world. They are also a way for an Autistic person to understand the world. For instance an Autistic person obsessed with action movies may learn valuable social skills from the characters involved. In this way interests are a key component of how an Autistic person understands her world, and not another fleeting novelty.

Heidegger's analysis of curiosity is closely connected to his discussion of idle talk. Curiosity is not simply showing interested in a concept, but a structure of how we interact with others. Dreyfus argues, "When he is being carefully structural, he holds that curiosity as he understands it is a *tendency* not a *temptation* and thus not a psychological state."²⁹² Curiosity is a part of everyday life amounts *das Man*. Like idle talk, curiosity is a neutral concept, and is often superficial.

Like idle talk, curiosity is a variation on a structure of Being. Instead of language though, curiosity is associated with understanding. Heidegger begins,

Our conception of "sight" has been gained by looking at the basic kind of disclosure which is characteristic of *Dasein*- namely, understanding, in the sense of genuine appropriation of those entities towards which *Dasein* can comport itself in accordance with its essential possibilities of Being.²⁹³

Dasein understands the world she inhabits by using the tools at her disposal for her own gain. As a carpenter, *Dasein* understands how to use hammers and saws. She is able to

²⁹² Dreyfus *Being-in-the-World* 231

²⁹³ Heidegger *Being and Time* 214

perform the mathematical equations necessary for constructing a house, and is able to lead her workers into implementing her vision. Thus she is able to manipulate her world through carpentry.

Although *Dasein* has these insights, they can be overtaken by *das Man*. Heidegger explains,

The basic state of sight shows itself in peculiar tendency-of-Being which belongs to everydayness—the tendency towards ‘seeing.’ We designate this tendency by the term “curiosity” [*Neugier*], which characteristically is not confined to seeing, but expresses the tendency towards a peculiar way of letting the world be encountered by us in perception.²⁹⁴

In curiosity, the world is not perceived by *Dasein*'s own interpretation. Instead, *Dasein* allows perception to be overtaken by *das Man*. Since *das Man* determines what is of interest, *Dasein* becomes fascinated not by her own world, but by the world of others as well. *Das Man* makes the world of Others seem exciting and exotic. Although this may be true, it still distracts *Dasein* from the interesting aspects of her world.

In order to understand how *das Man* overtakes *Dasein*'s perception, it is important to understand the history of how Western philosophy has viewed the concept of sight. Heidegger begins by quoting Aristotle, “The care for seeing is essential to man’s Being.”²⁹⁵ *Dasein* has always taken an interest in how she perceives the world. She is in wonder of the nature around her and seeks more knowledge of how certain concepts and processes work. Because of this, *Dasein* is always interpreting the world.

How *Dasein* perceives the world is not only important for philosophizing, but also in understand her Being. Heidegger continues,

²⁹⁴ Ibid

²⁹⁵ Ibid 215

Being is that which shows itself in pure perception which belongs to beholding, and only by such seeing does Being get discovered. Primordial and genuine truth lies in pure beholding. This thesis has remained the foundation of western philosophy ever since.²⁹⁶

True inner sight involves meditating on one's world. In order to understand Being, *Dasein* must reach her own interpretation of the world. She must behold the world through her own eyes and not dictated by the interpretation dominated by others.

Although the Other is an aspect of *Dasein*, she must contemplate Being on her own. Only in this project can *Dasein* engage in true philosophy.

In order to interpret the world, *Dasein* must be concerned with a project. Since *Dasein* is always concerned with her world, this comes naturally. Heidegger explains,

Being-in-the world is proximally absorbed in the world of concern. This concern is guided by circumspection, which discovers the ready-to-hand and preserves it as thus discovered. Whenever we have something to contribute or perform, circumspection gives the route for proceeding with it, the means of carrying it out, the right opportunity, the appropriate moment.²⁹⁷

If one wants to become a carpenter, she must receive the proper education in order to enter the field. She must know which tools she will use on certain projects, and the calculations she will need in order to carry out her task. The carpenter needs to know how much her supplies will cost so she can give an accurate payment estimate to her clients. Her ability to be a carpenter is not only contingent on her education and materials though. She must live in a society where it is acceptable for a woman to be a carpenter. If women cannot become carpenters, then it will be difficult or outright impossible to have that career.

²⁹⁶ Ibid

²⁹⁷ Ibid 216

While circumspection can allow one to complete important tasks, it can take a different form. Heidegger argues,

Care becomes concern with the possibilities of seeing the 'world' merely as it *looks* while one carries and takes a rest. *Dasein* seeks what is far away simply in order to bring it close to itself in the way it looks.²⁹⁸

In curiosity, *Dasein* seeks out novelty. Instead of being concerned with how to build a house, a carpenter may take interest in a celebrity's mansion and the landscaping. She abandons herself to the world and loses focus of her task of carpentry.

In curiosity, *Dasein* does not seek to understand Being, but distracts herself from the situation she has found herself in. Heidegger explains,

Dasein lets itself be carried away [mitnehmen] solely by the looks of the world; in this kind of Being, it concerns itself with becoming rid of itself as Being-in-the-world and rid of its Being alongside that which, in the closest everyday manner, is ready-to-hand.²⁹⁹

Dasein seeks to lose herself in the world by adopting the interpretations of *das Man*. Instead of meditating on her situation, she diverts her attention elsewhere. Objects become of interest not because they are useful, but because they are exotic or novel.

While desiring to know more about the objects which are not necessarily part of *Dasein's* life is not problematic, it can lead to a shallower interpretation of the world. Heidegger explains,

When curiosity has become free, however, it concerns itself with seeing, not in order to understand what is seen, (that is, to come into Being towards it) but *just* in order to see. It seeks novelty only in order to leap from it anew to another novelty.³⁰⁰

²⁹⁸ Ibid

²⁹⁹ Ibid

³⁰⁰ Ibid

Beholding seeks to understand the world by meditating upon it. Curiosity seeks to leap from one topic to another. In the 1990's, an adult may have become obsessed with Beanie Babies. He may have begun collecting the plush animals and storing them hoping to resell them later. Within a few years though, the fad died. The follower may have discarded his Beanie Babies in order to collect other kinds of children's toys. In this way novelty is chased, even if it can never be obtained.

By becoming interested in what others are, *Dasein* discards and suppresses her own interests. Heidegger explains,

In this kind of seeing, that which is an issue for care does not lie in grasping something and being knowingly in the truth; it lies rather in its possibilities of abandoning oneself to the world. Therefore curiosity is characterized in a specific way of *not tarrying* alongside what is closest.³⁰¹

One example of ignoring what is closest could be reading a tabloid on a celebrity breakup. *Dasein* may not personally know either of the involved parties, and may not even know why either of them is famous. Still, she may speak as if she understands why the couple broke up instead of focusing on the world around her and the tasks she could be performing.

Curiosity by nature is never restful. It always seeks the next fad, the next exciting distraction. Heidegger explains,

Consequently, it does not seek the leisure of tarrying observantly, but rather seeks restlessness and the excitement of continual novelty and changing encounters. In not tarrying, curiosity is concerned with the constant possibility of *distraction*.³⁰²

³⁰¹ Ibid

³⁰² Ibid

A carpenter may come home after work and decide to watch a Marquette basketball game. If the team is no longer doing well, she may turn it to Duke basketball. If that game becomes boring, she may turn to the University of Kentucky. In this way, she distracts herself from what is occurring in her life and loses herself in a game which may feature schools she may never have visited. In this way the woman is distracting herself and not engaging with the world.

As *Dasein* endeavors to distract herself, she may suppress her own interests in favor of those endorsed by others. Lee Braver notes, “Instead of following out what concerns us, we withdraw from immediate interests and just follow up stray questions that happen to pop into heads and seem mildly interesting.”³⁰³ At a cocktail party, the carpenter could discuss her work and what makes it interesting, or she could focus on another person’s stamp collection. If she chooses to discuss the latter, she may have little interest in what makes Romanian stamps different from US stamps. Within a half hour she may forget everything which was stated to her, and move onto the next topic of conversation, which could be about a couple’s recent trip to Paris. In this way, the carpenter distracts herself from the world in order to chase after questions she may find insignificant.

Perhaps the best example of curiosity in the technological age is not the example of cocktail parties, but of clickbait. Braver continues,

Think of web-surfing. You might start with a focused, definite goal—you need to find out the answer to a question for class, say—but as you search, your gaze strays to links or pictures in the margins that beckon seductively. They have nothing to do with what you’re trying to find out, or really your life at all....But for the sake of looking and, to paraphrase Robert Frost, click leads on to click until you wake up two hours later having

³⁰³ Braver 61

rummaged through a lot of other people's dirty laundry, or just random bits of information, none of which actually matters to you and none of which you'll retain the moment you get up from your computer.³⁰⁴

Instead of remaining focused on the task at hand, two hours has been wasted researching irrelevant information. The *Dasein* at the computer is no closer to completing the task than when she first began. This demonstrates how easily curiosity can distract *Dasein* and divert her from the tasks she needs to perform.

Because *Dasein* is interested in others' interests and not her own, she becomes divorced from her own world. Heidegger notes,

Both this *not tarrying* in the environment with which one concerns oneself, and this *distraction by* new possibilities, are constitutive items for curiosity; and upon these is founded the third essential quality of the phenomenon, which we call the character of "*never dwelling anywhere*" [*Aufenthaltslosigkeit*]. Curiosity is everywhere and nowhere.³⁰⁵

By not focusing on the world around her, *Dasein* loses herself in Others. She loses focus on what she can do in her immediate environment and focuses on the exotic. By doing this, *Dasein's* world becomes cluttered with irrelevant concepts and interests. She stops dwelling in her own world, and becomes lost amongst Others.

Curiosity does not occur on its own. Heidegger explains, "Idle talk controls even the ways in which one may be curious. It says what one 'must' have read or seen. In being everywhere and nowhere, curiosity is delivered over to idle talk."³⁰⁶ A *Dasein* may read the *Harry Potter* books not because she is interested in British literature, but because they are popular. While she may enjoy the books, she may also only continue reading

³⁰⁴ Ibid 61-62

³⁰⁵ Heidegger *Being and Time* 217

³⁰⁶ Ibid

because she wants to understand why others like them. In this way, she falls into the curiosity of *das Man* and ignores her own Being.

It is important to note that idle talk and curiosity are part of daily life. In order to communicate effectively with Others, *Dasein* must be somewhat proficient in engaging in a discussion about the interests of others. Such conversations cannot occur though if there is not a topic which both can discuss. Because of that, Heidegger admits that both are found together. He states, “These two everyday modes of Being for discourse and sight are not just present-at-hand side by side in their tendency to uproot, but *either* of these ways-to-be drags the *other* one with it.”³⁰⁷ Since idle talk is not a disparaging term, curiosity is not necessarily a disparaging term either. Rather, idle talk about curious things helps *Dasein* form bonds with Others while in the they-self.

Perhaps the most deceptive aspect of idle talk and curiosity is the illusion of a full life they provide to *Dasein*. Heidegger concludes,

Curiosity, for which nothing is closed off, and idle talk, for which there is nothing that is not understood, provide themselves (that is, the *Dasein* which is in this manner [dem so seienden *Dasein*]) with the guarantee of ‘life’ which, supposedly, is genuinely ‘lively.’³⁰⁸

When engaging in idle talk, *Dasein* may have the illusion of forging deep friendships. In curiosity, she may convince herself that she knows more than she does. She feels as if she has a full life when the reality is her interests are dictated by *das Man* and she is distracted from the most important projects in her life. In these modes, *Dasein* is not grounded in her Being, but is fleeing from herself.

³⁰⁷ Ibid

³⁰⁸ Ibid

The notion of curiosity has ramifications for the Autistic community. In curiosity, one is only tangentially interested in a topic. This is not necessarily the case for Autistic people. One tendency of Autistic people is to hyper focus on one topic. Christian Jenkins, an Autistic woman, explains, “My intense interests are a matter of survival, not mere subjects of curiosity or recreation. When I fully engage in a pursuit, I am completely myself.”³⁰⁹ Very few people define themselves by the clickbait they discover, nor do they define themselves by a passing interest. Autistic people tend to be obsessive about their interests though. This in turn can help create a world she can navigate, a skill necessary from a Heideggerian perspective.

For a non-Autistic person, curiosity in a topic is a source of pleasure, but does not seem to have an impact on their overall Being. This is not the case for the Autistic person though. Jenkins continues, “Why do we [Autistic women] collect and even hoard? I surmise it’s a form of systematizing to create order in an otherwise chaotic world.”³¹⁰ The Autistic person is bombarded by sensory issues to which many non-Autistic people cannot relate. Someone whistling can cause extreme headaches. Social conventions may change for little reason other than a changing society. Amidst the disorder of the world, the Autistic person seeks something certain, something which she can intuitively grasp. Interests provide such stability and give structure to her world. Hence they are not a mere distraction, but a way of comporting herself to her world.

³⁰⁹ Jenkins, Christine and Renata Jurkévnythz “Intense Interests” *Spectrum Women* (eds. Barb Cook and Dr. Michelle Garnett) Jessica Kingsley Publishers Philadelphia, PA 2018 (269-283) ; 269

³¹⁰ Ibid 270

For Autistic women, interests not only provide order, but can provide life skill training. Jenkins continues,

In a way, organizing ideas or things is a rehearsal for life experience. Collecting and repeatedly reading Jane Austen books or watching movie adaptations becomes a way of emulating her characters.³¹¹

Autistic people often have difficulty deciphering social cues, and struggle to learn social skills. While Jenkins understands that we do not live in nineteenth century Britain, there are certain social skills which transcend time. For instance, a woman cannot dwell on her interests when her conversation partner is showing disinterest. Through the movies, she can decipher how a person disinterested in a conversation appears, and sees the consequences of continuing the conversation if she notices these expressions. She can apply these skills into her social life, meaning her interests allows her to integrate better into *das Man*.

Interests not only provide a way for Autistic people to learn social skills, but also serve as a way for them to decompress after overwhelming experiences. Renata Jurkévnythz explains, “[Video] Games are my safe haven. They have been a major part in sheltering and healing me in more situations than I can count and they still continue to do this on a daily basis.”³¹² There is comfort in controlling the outcome of an event, such as by choosing the right Pokémon to battle a difficult gym leader. Although many social situations are beyond the Autistic person’s understanding, games have a strict set of rules

³¹¹ Ibid 270-271

³¹² Ibid 272

which allow the player to create predictable outcomes. This gives the Autistic person the sense of stability she does not receive from the outside world.

Video games do not only provide a release, but they can also allow the Autistic person to gain the confidence she needs when facing *das Man*. Jurkévythz explains,

It has also proved with time to be amazing training for all the difficult things I need to face in the outside world. I can overcome the impossible in this fantasy world where I learned that there are no impossible tasks. Coming back to my daily world, I see every challenge as a difficult stage to traverse or a huge “boss” to defeat. It gives me strength. It motivates me in a way my brain understands and pushes me forward, facing my fears.³¹³

Heidegger’s concern was that curiosity dragged *Dasein* away from the world and made it more difficult to engage with the tasks at hand. Autistic interests do not meet these criteria though. Instead, Autistic interests allow the person to perform the tasks at hand, namely interacting with *das Man* and facing the challenges that the world presents. In this way, video games are not simple curiosity, but a tool the Autistic *Dasein* uses to interact with the world.

The Autistic *Dasein* does not only use her interests to decompress and organize her world. She also uses them to relate to Others, even if it is only to see where she stands in relation to them. A.J. Odasso, an Autistic woman, explains,

When I was a child, I tended to think of myself as a person who knew what I liked. More specifically, I thought of someone whose likes and dislikes were so pronounced that there were only two ways in which anyone my own age could possibly react to me: with a sense of almost immediate kinship, or with an attitude of cruel disdain.³¹⁴

Since *das Man* tends to view curiosities as passing interests, intense interests are discouraged. This is to the Autistic person’s detriment, though. Interests are not merely

³¹³ Ibid 273

³¹⁴ Odasso, A.J. “Being the Dictionary: On Passions, Diagnosis, and Integration” *Knowing Why: Adult Diagnosed Autistic People on Life and Autism* (ed. Elizabeth Bartmess) The Autistic Press, Washington DC 2018 20-29; 20

passing fancies, but are a way for the Autistic *Dasein* to orient herself towards the world. While idle talk and passing interests may help *das Man* build interactions amongst each other, it suppresses the Autistic person's ability to cope in the world. Instead of understanding why an interest has the prominence it does, *das Man* demands the Autistic person conform to their standards, exacerbating the Autistic situation.

Curiosity flows from idle talk. Both are everyday ways of viewing the world, and both provide superficial and sometimes unfounded information. Heidegger argues that Western philosophy began with the notion of beholding. In order to understand an object, one needed to meditate upon it. This "sight" gives structure to *Dasein*'s world and gifts her with projects. If she can understand her world, then she is closer to understanding her Being.

Das Man distracts *Dasein* from this task though by bombarding her with various pieces of information. In curiosity, *Dasein* seeks a superficial understanding of a topic which does not directly relate to her world. She becomes interested in the exotic, which in turn causes her to become distracted from the projects she is meant to engage in. Idle talk is connected to curiosity. Without idle talk, *Dasein* would not know what she could become curious about. Thus for the non-Autistic person, curiosity distracts from Being.

Autistic interests are not akin to Heideggerian curiosity. Interests allow the Autistic person to navigate her world whether it be through helping her organize her world, allow her to observe social situations for better knowledge of social interactions, or giving her a safe forum to decompress. For the Autistic person, interests provide order

in a chaotic world. By suppressing these interests, *das Man* harms *Dasein* and estranges her from her Being.

Conclusion

Like Edmund Husserl, Martin Heidegger does not believe the person is an isolated subject. Thus, he uses the term *Dasein* to discuss the human experience. *Dasein* literally translates to “there-being,” which is meant to denote that she is always already within a world. she interacts not only with the objects of the world, but with Others as well.

It is not enough to know what *Dasein* is. Heidegger also wants to know “who” *Dasein* is. In order to do this, he analyzes how *Dasein* interacts with other *Daseins*. He concludes that *Dasein* is inherently intersubjective. The Other does not stand over *Dasein*, but instead dwells with her, a phenomenon called *Mitsein*. Through *Mitsein*, translated as Other, *Dasein* learns how to interpret her world. She is presented with the opportunities and restrictions needed to understand and interact with her world.

Although the Other is necessary for *Dasein*, they can become oppressive in the phenomenon known as *das Man*. *Das Man* demands strict conformity to norms. They dictate what *Dasein* finds appealing, revolting and entertaining. *Das Man* levels down opportunities and equalizes all. There is no one person who encompasses *das Man*, yet *das Man* is everyone. Nobody can answer for these norms, yet everyone enforces them.

Das Man impacts the way *Dasein* comports herself to others. *Dasein* may also lag behind others, meaning she must catch up. One area modern behavioral therapies for Autism focus upon are the linguistic differences between Autistic and non-Autistic

people. Many Autistic people either do not speak at an-age appropriate level, or do not understand how to use words. While there are therapies which address these concerns, most focus on teaching an Autistic person how to engage in small talk. Autistic people report finding small talk tedious and unnecessary. Since non-Autistic people use small talk to build relationships though, it is taught as a necessary skill for Autistic people.

Idle Talk is a phenomenon Heidegger explored in depth. Heidegger does not mean for the term to be disparaging. Still, idle talk can distract *Dasein* from the projects in which she should be engaged. It does not focus in depth on the subject at hand, giving everyone only cursory knowledge of a topic. The word is passed along, meaning nobody is directly responsible for it. Still, *Dasein* engages in it to form relationships. This is problematic for the Autistic person since their communication style differs from that of a non-Autistic person. The Autistic person would rather focus on a topic and bond over a mutual interest in it, whereas the non-Autistic person uses small talk to engage with others to find a topic in which both find an interest. Still, the Autistic person is forced into the non-Autistic style of communication despite any misgivings she may have.

Curiosity is another facet Heidegger examines. The curious *Dasein* obtains a shallow knowledge of the topic at hand. She is interested in the world around her, but does not engage the material in a meaningful way. This differs from the Autistic person though, who often has an obsession with a with a topic. She may converse exclusively on this subject because it gives order to her life. It can also give her skills she can use in her daily life. For instance, an obsession with novels could give the Autistic person a window into how non-Autistic people behave, enhancing her social skills. Still, these interest are

often suppressed since many non-Autistic people do not share the enthusiasm the Autistic person has for the subject. This can lead to breakdowns in communication and the non-Autistic person forcing the Autistic person to behave in a way contrary to how she thinks.

Das Man does not only impact how the Autistic person interacts with their world. Numerous gender norms can harm the Autistic woman, especially given how she often cannot live up to them. The next chapter will give a feminist account of Heidegger's philosophy. Then, it will go onto discuss its implications for Autistic women, especially those who often eschew traditional gender roles.

Chapter V Heidegger and the Gendered, Autistic Body

Although Heidegger discusses *Dasein's* existential characteristics in depth, he does not spend much time discussing her embodiment. In *Being and Time*, *Dasein* has no gender, no sexual orientation, and no disability status. The absence of these characteristics was meant to give a baseline for how to examine *Dasein's* existential characteristics.³¹⁵ This did not sit well with certain feminists though, who argue our existence is inherently embodied. Without a body, we cannot interact with the world. Facing pressure on this point, Heidegger would discuss the body later in his career, namely in the *Zollikon Seminars*. Taking a cue from Husserl, Heidegger discusses the two senses in which the body is used. There is the *Körper*, which is the physical body encapsulated in skin. While the *Körper* is vital for understanding how one perceives herself, it is not the aspect Heidegger believes is of philosophical interest. Instead, he wants to focus on the *Leib*, or the living body. *Da-sein's* body extends into the world through a phenomenon called bodying-forth. Even in this type of body though, there is a lack of gender, sexual orientation, and disability status.

Despite *Dasein's* lack of gender, feminists have used Heidegger's philosophy to discuss their experiences. Dorothy Leland takes Heidegger's concepts of *Mitsein* and uses it to explore what it means to have a feminine experience in a certain culture in a certain

³¹⁵ Aho, Kevin A. *Heidegger's Neglect of the Body* State University of New York Press, Albany, NY 2009

historical era.³¹⁶ She argues that culture is not monolithic, but instead divided into several smaller subcultures based on one's identity. She uses race as an example. An African American must navigate black culture as well the dominant white culture. In order to be an authentic *Dasein*, one must create a coherent life story which takes all aspects of her experience into account.³¹⁷

Nancy J. Holland also analyzes the feminine they-self, and discusses how it relates to the psychological theory of social scripts. Scripts are roles dictated by societal norms. For instance, the role of brother requires one identify as a male and have some type of relationship with someone who shares at least one other parent. Still, this role is gendered. Thus, *das Man's* norms always assume embodiment, meaning *Dasein* already has a body as well as other aspects such as gender.³¹⁸

In order to analyze the feminine they-self, it is necessary to see how identities intersect. The Matrix of Domination is a tool many sociologists use to perform such a task. The Matrix of Domination argues that oppression is multifaceted. A person may belong to two or more minority groups, which shape how she experiences oppression.³¹⁹

For example, a straight white woman experiences oppression differently than a homosexual Latino does. Still, no minority status is more dominant than another. All

³¹⁶ Leland, Dorothy "Conflictual Culture and Authenticity Deepening Heidegger's Account of the Social" *Feminist Interpretations of Martin Heidegger* (eds. Nancy J. Holland and Patricia Huntington) The Pennsylvania University Press, University Park, PA 2001; 109-127

³¹⁷ Ibid

³¹⁸ Hollan, Nancy J. "'The Universe Is Made of Stories, Not of Atoms' Heidegger and the Feminine They-Self" *eminist Interpretations of Martin Heidegger* (eds. Nancy J. Holland and Patricia Huntington) The Pennsylvania University Press, University Park, PA 2001; 128-145

³¹⁹ Anderson, Margaret L. and Patricia Hill Collins "Why Race, Class, and Gender Still Matter" *Race Class and Gender An Anthology* Wadsworth, Engage Learning Belmont, CA 2010; 5-12

interact with each other to form a person's experience. While all Autistic people are oppressed through the norms placed on them by *das Man*, Autistic women experience it differently than Autistic men due to their gender.

The oppression of Autistic women is exacerbated by the fact that many studies feature more male subjects than females, assuming they have any females at all.³²⁰ This gives an unclear picture of Autism though since the condition can affect women differently than men. Since psychologists have a male dominated view of Autism though, they tend to miss the signs of Autism in girls. This leads to many Autistic women not receiving their diagnosis until they are adults.³²¹

Nowhere is the intersection of Autism and gender more overt than in Simon Baron-Cohen's Extreme Male Brain theory.³²² Baron-Cohen argues that there are two types of brains: masculine and feminine.³²³ The masculine brain is a systematizing brain which is more focused on logic than relationships. Conversely, the feminine brain is more interested in empathetic bonds and building relationships than in creating systems. He uses psychological tests such as the empathy quotient and the systematizing quotient to support his arguments.

³²⁰ Sohn, Emily "Righting the Gender Imbalance in Autism Studies" *Spectrum* March 13, 2019 <https://www.spectrumnews.org/features/deep-dive/righting-gender-imbalance-autism-studies/>

³²¹ Lockwood-Estrin, Georgia "Autism in Girls: Jumping Hurdles on the Path to Diagnosis" *Spectrum* February 3, 2021 <https://www.spectrumnews.org/opinion/viewpoint/autism-in-girls-jumping-hurdles-on-the-path-to-diagnosis/>

³²² Baron-Cohen *The Essential Difference* 149-151

³²³ Ibid 1

Baron-Cohen was not interested in only making statements on gender though. Instead, his work was meant to analyze the origin of Autism. He argues that Autism is caused by the Extreme Male Brain, or a brain that systematizes at the expense of relationships. According to him, an Autistic person excels in fields such as science and mathematics because they deal with concrete systems. Baron-Cohen argues these are systems which are mostly associated with men. Other fields, such as therapeutic psychology, are more difficult for Autistic people because they involve human relationships, something the Autistic brain has great difficulty comprehending. These are more feminine fields. Thus the Autistic person's brain is more associated with men than women, creating tension between her gender identity and her status as a disabled person.

This chapter will explore the pressure *das Man* exerts over the Autistic woman. Part I will focus on Heidegger's account of the body as well as feminist interpretations of his work. Part II will focus on the Matrix of Domination and how the identities of femininity and Autism intersect. Part II will explore Simon Baron-Cohen's Extreme Male Brain theory and how one determines the type of brain they have. Part IV will discuss the feminine brain and why an Autistic female cannot have one. By the end of the chapter, it will be clear that the Autistic must be able to transcend the norms set forth by *das Man* and find her own way to authenticity.

Section I: A Feminist Interpretation of Heidegger

One of the most complicated aspects of Heidegger's philosophy is that he has little to say on the body in *Being and Time*. This omission was not without reason though. Thomas Abrams argues that Heidegger's focus was not on the body, but on a neutral

experience. Heidegger's project was to explore the way *Dasein* interacts with her Being, not go in depth with gender roles. Later in his philosophical career, Heidegger does discuss the body in his *Zollikon Seminars*. He argues that the body can refer to two phenomena: the physical object encapsulated in skin, or how *Da-Sein* interacts with the world in a process called bodying-forth.³²⁴ Still, the body is neutral and asexual.

Despite the fact that *Dasein* is not meant to have a gender, many feminist thinkers have taken Heidegger's theories on *das Man* and applied them to analyzing the experiences of minority groups. Dorothy Leland argues that *Dasein* is always rooted in a certain culture. Still, culture is not homogenous. Those in racial minorities often dwell within two or more cultures. For instance, a Nigerian immigrant to the United States would carry with her her Nigerian culture, the dominant white culture of the US, as well as black culture. The intersection of these cultures can be difficult to navigate. Although Leland offers no concrete solutions, she leaves an argument which could be applicable to the feminist Autistic experience.³²⁵

Nancy J. Holland also uses Heidegger's philosophy to analyze the feminist experience. Using the idea of scripts, Holland explains that *Dasein* plays a role in society which is often predetermined by social norms. This specifics of this role are determined by *das Man*. Still, many of the roles in society are gendered.³²⁶ For instance, a lesbian tends to be a woman. Since the norms set by *das Man* are determined by factors such as

³²⁴ Heidegger, Martin *Zollikon Seminars* (trans. Franz Mayr and Richard Askay) (ed. Medard Boss) Northwestern University Press Evanston, IL 2001; 80-92

³²⁵ Leland

³²⁶ Holland

gender, sexual orientation, and disability, *Dasein* is always embodied, which resolves the issue of how to embody the disembodied *Dasein*.

Before one can explore how Heidegger's philosophy can be applied to the feminine, Autistic experience, one must examine Heidegger's views on the body. This is more difficult than it may appear to be at first glance. Thomas Abrams states, "Heidegger did not say much about the body in *Being and Time*."³²⁷ There is no discussion of the differences between men and women, nor the differences between those of different racial groups. Although *Dasein* interacts with objects outside of the world, Heidegger does not discuss the feeling of a hammer in *Dasein's* hand. Instead, a discussion of the body is tabled.

Although this neglect of the body in *Being and Time* is noticeable, it is not an inexplicable oversight. Abrams explains,

In *Being and Time*, Heidegger's goal is to provide a fundamental ontology of human *Dasein*, to present an account of how the human way of being in the world is *possible*. The problem of the body is a secondary concern, because it is derivative of this more pressing issue.³²⁸

Like Husserl, Heidegger wants to create a baseline for further exploration. His project is to explore structures of Being, not specifics such as race, gender, and disability. The overall human experience needs to be explored, not individual aspects of it.

Although Heidegger is silent on the body in most of his work, his *Zollikon Seminars* provide some insight into how he views the body. Given between 1959-1969,

³²⁷ Abrams, Thomas *Heidegger and the Politics of Disablement* The Palgrave Pivot Toronto, Ontario 2016; 23

³²⁸ Ibid 24

the seminars discuss various topics which Heidegger felt needed to be addressed in light of other critiques, one of which was the body. He begins,

The *Da- Sein of the human being* is spatial in itself in the sense of *making room* [in space] [*Einräumen von Raum*] and in the sense of *the spatialization of Da-sein in its bodily nature*. *Da- Sein* is not spatial because it is embodied. But its bodiliness is possible only because *Da- Sein* is spatial in the sense of making room.³²⁹

Dasein exists amongst physical objects which she manipulates as tools. In order to use a hammer, one must be in the vicinity of the tool. If she wants to use the hammer to build a house, she must be near an object which needs to be struck into another object, such as a nail and a board. Through navigating space, *Dasein* expresses her sense of Being.

Since the body is spatial, it is always in a here. Heidegger continues, “I am surely ‘here’ at all times somewhere. Therefore, ‘I am here at all times’ means I always live in a here.”³³⁰ Like Husserl, Heidegger notes that *Dasein* is always in a location. Still, this does not mean that the body is confined to a physical location. This would imply that there was a split between the mind and body, which Heidegger rejects.

This is not to say that Heidegger is arguing against a physical body. Rather, he is drawing a distinction between a corporeal [*Körper*] and bodily thing [*Leib*]. In order to draw this distinction, he explains the physical body. “The corporeal thing stops with the skin. When we are here, we are always in relationship to something else. Therefore, one might say we are beyond the corporeal limits.”³³¹ When a woman says “I and from and currently live in Milwaukee, Wisconsin,” she is in relation to a location north of Chicago

³²⁹ Heidegger, Martin *Zollikon Seminars* (trans. Franz Mayr and Richard Askay) (ed. Medard Boss) Northwestern University Press Evanston, IL 2001; 81

³³⁰ Ibid 85

³³¹ Ibid 86

Illinois and east of Minneapolis, Minnesota. The city of Milwaukee may have meaning to her since it is where she spends a majority of my time. She knows where the stores are located as well as where her friends live. In Milwaukee, she is always in relation with the places in which she is familiar, meaning my “here” is not confined to her apartment.

The ability to extend past the corporeal limit is called the bodily limit. He explains,

The difference between the limits of the corporeal thing and the body, then, consists in the fact that the *bodily limit* is extended beyond the *corporeal limit*. Thus the difference between the limits is a quantitative one.³³²

Recall how absorbed *Dasein* is in *das Man*. There is no limit to her personhood, nor is there a limit to her body. In this way, the body is not a strictly corporeal object, but one which extends into *Dasein's* world.

In this way, *Dasein* is always extended into her world, despite her body being a physical object. Heidegger concludes,

In any case, the body is not a thing, nor is it a corporeal thing, but each body, that is, the body as body, is in each case my body. The *bodying forth* [*Leiben*] of the body is determined by the way of my being. The bodying forth of the body, therefore, is a way of *Da-Sein's* being.³³³

The body is absorbed in everyday objects with which *Dasein* interacts. When *Dasein* performs a task such as hammering, it is as if the tool becomes a part of her body. This is how she becomes so absorbed in the world. Thus, although *Dasein* is embodied, her body extends much further into the world than the term would imply.

³³² Ibid

³³³ Ibid 86-87

Although Heidegger argues that the body extends into the world, it should be noted that this is a body without any defined characteristics. Kevin A. Aho argues,

According to Heidegger, we dwell in these structures of meaning by virtue of our being-in-the-world and these structures are “asexual” (*geschlechtslos*) or “neutral” (*neutrale*) because they are more original than the particular biological characteristics of “man” or “woman.”³³⁴

To Heidegger, gender is not a major concern in his overall project. Gender is a distraction to *Dasein* determining her Being, not an aid in uncovering aspects of one’s Being. It would fall to Heidegger’s followers to create an embodied view of *Dasein* which could be used to discuss gendered ways of Being.

Although Heidegger neglects gender in his philosophy, this does not make analyzing gender roles unimportant aspects of *Dasein*’s Being. Aho argues this should not have been the case though. He claims,

But what Heidegger does not appear to recognize is that our concrete acts and practices have a certain gender identity that is socially constructed and historically constituted, and identity that is already marked by masculinity, already privileging a particular set of habits, institutions, and languages.³³⁵

Dasein is always embedded in a historical context. The norms set forth by *das Man* pertain to gender. By not discussing gender, Heidegger does not propose a neutral *Dasein*, but a masculine one. Many feminists, then, have seen it as their task to create a more feminine *Dasein*.

One feminist who takes up the task of applying Heidegger’s philosophy to gender norms is Dorothy Leland. She begins her analysis by arguing that Heidegger’s concept of *Dasein* is communal by nature. She argues,

³³⁴ Aho 53

³³⁵ Ibid

...Heidegger's ontology of *Dasein* undercuts all forms of modern individualism. On this account, human being [sic] is inextricably bound to some historical culture and exists only as a process or activity of taking up and taking over what has already been made available in culture.³³⁶

Culture gives *Dasein* the means to construct her world. In the case of a pandemic, scientific knowledge, or lack thereof, is given by culture. In the twenty-first century, knowledge of viruses and how they function is widespread. Still, the knowledge of viruses was not available to a peasant in tenth-century France. Thus, an epidemiologist from the twenty-first century United States would behave differently than a peasant in tenth century France. While the latter may focus more on appeasing God by consulting a priest, the former may focus on self-quarantine and predicting the course of the disease from models. Culture gives its members ways of viewing the origin of the disease as well as giving its members experts on how to prevent it, such as priests in Medieval France and scientists in the twenty-first century United States.

Each profession given by society entails a certain role which goes with it. By taking up roles, one becomes familiar with one's surroundings, leads to averageness. Leland explains, "In becoming enculturated into the practices definitive of a social world, we become familiar with the 'average' or common (prevailing) significance of things."³³⁷ In addition to leveling down concepts so the average *Dasein* can understand them, culture also creates an average way of dealing with objects. On average, a hammer is used to strike an object. Usually, the object in question is a nail being driven into a board, but a hammer can be used to strike someone's head in order to injure or kill them as well. It

³³⁶ Leland 110

³³⁷ Ibid 111

would be unusual for someone to clothe a hammer or toss it through a basketball hoop.

Thus, averageness gives information on how to navigate the objects in one's world.

Although averageness can help make sense of tools, it can blind one to the possibilities offered by culture. She continues,

As conformist, *Dasein* "flees into" the realm of the familiar, attainable, and respectable, it also "falls away" from its "ownmost possibilities," including the possibility of deliberately and selectively choosing from the range of possibilities offered by one's cultural heritage.³³⁸

A student may agree to become an engineer because his parents demand him to do so. He may enjoy English and wish to analyze literature, but feels as if he is disappointing his parents if he chooses a less than lucrative career. He closes himself off to the possibility of becoming a high school English teacher in favor of a career he deems more respectable, in spite of the fact that he may not excel in mathematics and may dislike his potential career.

One implication of being enmeshed in a culture is that *Dasein* is not defined by who she desires to be or who she claims to be, but by her behavior. Leland explains,

The notion here is that we define who we are through our actions. Rather than viewing actions as the expression of some inner core of being ("self" or "person"), actions are viewed as "coming-into-being" of the self or person.³³⁹

A person cannot claim to be honest without performing actions which would be deemed honest. If a professor plagiarizes her publications, lies about courses taught on her CV, and inflates grades, then she could not be considered honest despite any definition she gives herself. Since she has gained a reputation for being dishonest, she is defined by the

³³⁸ Ibid

³³⁹ Ibid 112

trait. In this way, others in one's culture define her in light of how they perceive her actions.

Because *Dasein* is defined by her actions, she must create a coherent whole through her history. This could happen inauthentically or authentically. Leland claims,

Inauthentic life is characterized by an absorption in the demands of the present. This affects the character of one's self-understanding, which gets determined by one's immediate preoccupation, present successes and failures, assessments of feasibility and unfeasibility, and so on.³⁴⁰

When one lives inauthentically, one does not take her personal history into account. For instance, a Hispanic man may define himself by his successful realty business and how he can expand. He does not look to the past as a Mexican immigrant for answers to his current conundrums, but seeks only present pleasures and current events for answers. As much as he tries to divorce himself from his past, it is an aspect of him he should take into account when making important decisions, such as what priorities he holds or how to determine his future.

This stands in stark contrast to authentic life. Charles Guignon argues,

Where inauthentic existence is lost in the dispersal of making-present, an authentic life is lived as a united flow characterized by cumulativeness and direction. It involves taking over possibilities made accessible by the past and acting in the present in order to accomplish something for the future.³⁴¹

An authentic realtor would take his experiences as a man buying a house for the first time into account when showing houses. He could remember the feeling of being intimidated by the prices and worries about mortgages, and use them to guide him in making his clients feel more at ease through his sense of empathy. If he speaks more than one

³⁴⁰ Ibid 113

³⁴¹ Ibid

language, he could use his skills to increase his customer base. In this way, he can build a more successful future where his business can thrive.

Personal experiences do not exist in a bubble though. Instead, they are always part of a culture. Leland continues,

Guignon's alternative account of authenticity builds on what he takes to be two basic Heideggerian insights: that one's personal life story is always rooted in the wider drama of communal history, and that one's participation in public forms of life functions as an enabling condition for action.³⁴²

The diagnosis of Autism was not created in a vacuum, but was created in a certain era under certain social circumstances. A woman could not have received this diagnosis four hundred years ago because there was no concept of a neurological conditions. Once a woman receives the diagnosis of Autism though, she can choose how she will behave in light of it. She may reinterpret her past in light of the condition, thus making sense of relationships which may have crumbled because she was unable to read social cues correctly. Also, she could decide to seek counseling to help improve her social skills or tell potential partners about her condition. In this way, the Autistic woman is part of a larger cultural narrative which gives her the possibility of acting in certain ways.

Up to this point, it seems as if culture is given as a monolithic structure. This is not entirely accurate though. Leland argues,

For example, historical cultures aren't "pure": through migration, conquest, and various forms of assimilation, different histories are mingled, and the resulting mixture is not always or even usually a homogenous blend.³⁴³

³⁴² Ibid 114

³⁴³ Ibid 117

The United States consists of many cultures which have migrated willingly, such as some descendants of Europeans and Asians. Yet the path to US citizenship was not always free of coercion. Many ancestors of blacks were taken to the country against their will, just as many Native Americans were conquered in order to clear room for settlers. These different places of origin and experiences upon entering the United States have created several subcultures within the wider American cultures, such as black or Latinx culture. These subcultures may compete with each other, making it difficult for someone who is a member of several subcultures to create a self-narrative successfully.

Within most cultures there is a dominant culture which often suppresses subcultures. Leland continues, “But prevailing media of intelligibility tend to express the interpretations of dominant social groups, and these interpretations can conflict with and even suppress alternate interpretations.”³⁴⁴ In the early twentieth Century, group such as Daughters of the Confederacy that the Civil War was fought over state’s rights.³⁴⁵ This interpretation was enforced by films such as *The Birth of a Nation* and statues honoring former Confederate soldiers. If someone suggested the Confederacy fought the war to maintain slavery, they were silenced, sometimes violently. In this way, the dominant culture suppressed other viewpoints, distorting the truth in the process.

The ability of a dominant culture to suppress others leads to a more sinister version of leveling down and averageness. Leland argues,

³⁴⁴ Ibid 118

³⁴⁵ Breed, Allen G “‘The Lost Cause’: the Women’s Group Fighting for Confederate Monuments” *The Guardian* August 10, 2018 <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2018/aug/10/united-daughters-of-the-confederacy-statues-lawsuit>

When the norms articulated by *das Man* largely express the sense of what is important, what is possible, and what is permissible for dominant social groups, and when these norms conflict with or suppress alternative interpretations, leveling down also occurs as a suppression of alternatives expressed in marginalized stories and practices that contest the dominant culture.³⁴⁶

For decades, the film *Gone with the Wind* dictated how people viewed the Antebellum South. Most mainstream media did not discuss the experiences of slaves until the 1973 miniseries *Roots*. Through the tireless work of advocates then, the wider culture changed.

When two cultures collide, it can often lead to confusion on what is permissible or possible. Leland continues, “By conflictual culture I mean a culture in which there are fundamental divisions over what is important, possible, and permissible...”³⁴⁷ In the dominant non-Autistic culture, meeting someone in person is vitally important, and can be distressing when it does not occur over an extended period of time. Still, many Autistic people find in-person interaction stressful, and may prefer online communication. Under most circumstances though, the non-Autistic cultural expectation of in-person interaction prevails, though even this societal norm can change under extreme circumstances.

Conflictual cultures need not only apply to minority cultural groups. Leland explains, “Traditional Marxism... holds that at least since the inception of class society, the prevailing ‘sense of reality’ of a given society reflects the interests of the dominant class only.”³⁴⁸ Most of what is known about Ancient Greek society is known only through the lens of the ruling aristocrats. The accounts of slaves and the illiterate have mostly

³⁴⁶ Leland 119

³⁴⁷ Leland 120

³⁴⁸ Ibid

been lost to history. It was unlikely anyone took interest in preserving these viewpoints. A slave was not allowed to vote, nor was an immigrant. Due to this, they had little control over the laws their government imposed. In this way, their perspectives were ignored and lost to history whereas the viewpoints of the aristocratic Ancient Greeks prevailed.

Although Leland does not provide any concrete way in which a people can use Heidegger to fight oppression, she offers an account which could perhaps form the foundation of analyzing oppression. She concludes, “Reframed in this way, we can link authenticity to struggles over social meanings and see it as taking shape as part of a political practice.”³⁴⁹ In order to be an authentic *Dasein*, she must take control of her personal narrative. She must embrace the cultures she belongs to. If she is an Autistic black woman, she needs to embrace her racial heritage as well as her Autistic culture. In this way, she can create a life narrative which incorporates all aspects of her experience.

Dorothy Leland is not the only feminist scholar who uses Heidegger’s philosophy to discuss the feminist experience. Nancy J. Holland ties Heidegger’s ideas to strands of psychoanalysis, such as those endorsed by Eric Bearne, who proposes that society is made of several scripts. Holland explains,

In transactional analysis, games are patterns of often self-seating behavior that requires other players to fill the reciprocal roles (for example, the popular game “Alcoholic” requires a persecutor and a rescuer); scripts are life-defining configurations of roles and behaviors, including characteristic games.³⁵⁰

This transactional analysis is the system of rewards a person gains from taking on a certain role. In the game “alcoholic,” the person afflicted with the disorder is viewed as

³⁴⁹ Ibid 124

³⁵⁰ Holland 129

diseased and unable to function on her own. The rescuer, often called the co-dependent, takes it upon himself to solve the alcoholic's problems, lest he become useless. Although the specifics of how these roles are played out differ from situation to situation, they are patterns of behavior which are found in many relationships featuring an addict and a codependent. In this way, each party follows a script in how to behave.

Although Heidegger does not discuss specific social roles, he does argue that what is possible for a *Dasein* originates from those around her, namely *das Man*. Holland uses this as a launching point to tie the idea of scripts into a Heideggerian analysis. She argues,

[T]he scripts available within a given social context will be to a large extent determined by the society as a whole, and thus are the creation, not of individual psyches or individual families, but of the they-self in which they are embedded.³⁵¹

The role of alcoholic would not be feasible in a society in which alcohol was unavailable. It may also be less likely to occur in a society where divorce was not frowned upon. If a codependent could obtain an easy divorce, then the game of alcoholic might not be sustained for as long as it is in a society where divorce is considered taboo. It is *das Man* which dictates which roles one can take on, and how these roles will play out in wider society.

Like Heidegger, Holland does not believe that the best way to combat societal roles is to ignore *das Man* or break free of them. She argues,

The they-self is necessary because it provides the terms in which we can engage with other *Dasein* in mutually meaningful social interactions. The Others we encounter in

³⁵¹ Ibid 130

living out our scripts take on the appropriate reciprocal social roles, as understood in the overarching social narrative, and place us in the roles their scripts demand we play.³⁵²

Part of the way *Mitsein* makes meaning of *Dasein*'s world is by giving her roles to play.

These roles can range from a profession such as engineer, to a part of a family unit such as mother, to a member of a minority group such as Autistic person. *Dasein* cannot escape playing any role at all because they provide meaning for her world. Thus, scripts are necessary for *Dasein* to be a *Dasein*.

Although there are scripts for every role, this does not mean that all roles are acted out the same way. Holland claims,

There might be some freedom within those roles to create new meanings, and there may be some freedom to step outside those roles under certain circumstances, but to live entirely outside the they-self to make up one's own meaning in every case, would be the definition of madness.³⁵³

There is more than one way to live out the role as Autistic person. An Autistic person may be wonderful at computer programming science, or may be obsessed with horses and want to be a veterinarian. One may be able to hide her Autism with social skills learned through therapy, whereas another Autistic person may not be able to do so. In order to play the role of Autistic person though, one must meet at least some of the criteria for the diagnosis as outlined in the DSM-V. Claiming to be Autistic without meeting these criteria could be considered offensive to the wider Autistic community, and could lead to serious social consequences such as being shunned or bullied.

³⁵² Ibid 132-133

³⁵³ Ibid 133

Taking the idea of scripts and *das Man*, Holland is able to analyze the feminine experience through a Heideggerian lens. She uses the example of anorexia as an example. The Office on Women's Health explains, "People with anorexia eat so little that they have unhealthy weight loss and become dangerously thin. They may think they are overweight or fat even when they are underweight or thin."³⁵⁴ Perhaps the most interesting thing about anorexia is the ratio of women and men who have the condition. According to Erin Digitale, "[B]oys and men... make up about 10 percent of those affected by the serious eating disorder [anorexia]."³⁵⁵ Hence, roughly 90% of anorexia patients are women. Although boys and men can be afflicted with the disorder, the script is one most commonly applied to females.

Using anorexia, Holland is able to discuss how idle talk contributes to the scripts a female *Dasein* may follow in the social realm. She argues,

This [idle talk] is the medium through which scripts are infused from the social environment into specific configurations of family life, from the media fascination with abnormally slender female bodies, for instance, into a family where emotional and physical control is valued above all else.³⁵⁶

Women in the United States are inundated with photoshopped images of abnormally thin female bodies. There is also a message that body shape can be controlled. If a woman exercises for a certain amount of time each week and eats only a certain number of calories or less, she will obtain the perfect body. Note that in order for anorexia to be a

³⁵⁴ Office on Women's Health "Anorexia Nervosa" *Office on Women's Health* Last updated: April 28, 2018 <https://www.womenshealth.gov/mental-health/mental-health-conditions/eating-disorders/anorexia-nervosa>

³⁵⁵ Digitale, Erin "Stanford Researchers Expand Comparison of Males and Females with Anorexia" *Stanford Children's Health* January 11, 2017 <https://healthier.stanfordchildrens.org/en/stanford-researchers-expand-comparison-of-males-and-females-with-anorexia/>

³⁵⁶ Holland 135

feasible script, one must be obsessed with a slender body image. In a country which values heavier set people, the role of anorexic would be nonsensical. Thus, *das Man* determines how *Dasein* will morph her own body into its ideal of perfection.

These scripts affect not only how women view their bodies, but which goals they set in life. Holland uses the example of Viennese women from the time of Sigmund Freud. She argues,

As Jane Austen knew already, the traditional upper- or middle-class script for women ends with marriage and motherhood. Once that happily-ever-after is accomplished, there is nothing more for a woman to do with her life.³⁵⁷

One need only to watch almost any movie from the Hallmark channel to see how this applies to today's society. The plots of their movies are almost identical. A woman is unhappy with her career, and feels as if something is missing in her life. Then, she meets a man who, after several misunderstandings, she agrees to date, or in many cases marry.³⁵⁸ The movie ends before we see if she advanced in her career or if her new relationship ran into any serious issues within the next few years. Instead, being in love has resolved all the problems in her life. It is implied that if she runs into any further troubles, the love she has for her man will overcome them. Even today then, there is a script which states the goal of a woman is to fall in love and get married.³⁵⁹

³⁵⁷ Ibid 136

³⁵⁸ The Hallmark Channel has only recently begun to feature movies with LGBT individuals as the protagonist.

³⁵⁹ In certain circles, this type of script has been questioned. Many insist that a woman should focus more on developing a career than finding romance. While this is a great practice, the script of marriage is prevalent enough in popular media today to warrant exploration.

This lies in stark contrast to the traditional role of the man according to *das Man*. Holland continues, “A man can retain at least the illusion of meaningful projects throughout most of his life in his work, but once married, the feminine they-self no longer has any new possibilities to be realized.”³⁶⁰ Although there are many women in the workforce, it is still expected that she should at least take some time off if she has children. Many companies offer maternity leave, whereas only a few offer paternity leave. If a child is ill, it is expected that the mother stays home, or at least provides another woman to care for them. Meanwhile, the man is expected to advance in his career and financially provide for his family. While these roles are being challenged by many today, they are still pervasive.

Perhaps the most important argument Holland makes is that *Dasein* always already has a gender, even if Heidegger does not explicitly claim this. She argues,

Heidegger has been criticized for insisting on the gender neutrality of *Dasein* and on the secondary nature of sexual difference. If we see *Dasein*, however, as necessarily always already immersed in they-self, a social world of meanings, roles, games, and scripts into which it has been thrown and from which it must draw its projects insofar as they are to be recognized and valued by those around it, then the fact that the scripts and roles of any possible social context will be heavily gender differentiated will mean that gender (and in certain circumstances, race or class) cannot be phenomenologically “secondary.”³⁶¹

The role of a sister is laden with gender implications. In order to be considered a sister, one must identify as a female. While there are many ways to fulfill one’s role as a sister, the main component is that there is some kind of relationship between her and her other siblings, usually one which is based on shared experiences with someone by having at least one parent in common. *Das Man* dictates that a sister cannot have intercourse with

³⁶⁰ Ibid

³⁶¹ Ibid 141-142

someone she considers a sibling, nor should she abandon them in their time of need.

Therefore, at least some roles are tied into gender.

The most applicable point Holland makes involves *das Man*'s view of the body.

She concludes,

We do not live our bodies or any other aspect of our lives as they would be “in themselves” but only as they are understood and interpreted within a specific social context, incorporated into a specific they-self for which body, size, shape, or color may take on more or less social salience.³⁶²

A disabled body is viewed differently than a non-disabled body. There are laws concerning which spaces must be accessible and which ones may not be. For instance, a city bus must have a way to hook a wheelchair into the front, whereas a church built in the nineteenth century does not need to be retrofitted for wheelchair accessibility. The disabled body will be treated differently than the non-disabled body, even if the former is expected to conform to the norms of the latter. The idea of scripts then gives an avenue for how the disabled experience could be analyzed, namely as a way *das Man* imposes its views on the disabled *Dasein*.

Heidegger's main project in *Being and Time* was to explore Being, not discuss the embodiment of *Dasein*. In the *Zollikonn Seminars*, he argues that the here of *Da-Sein* is not a physical location. Instead, *Da-Sein* makes space in order to dwell in the world. This leads to two conceptions of the body. There is the physical aspect of the body which is bound by skin (*Körper*) and the living body which extends into the world (*Leib*). The ability of *Da-Sein*'s body to extend into the world is called bodying-forth.

³⁶² Ibid 142

Throughout Heidegger's philosophical career, he argued that *Dasein* was neutral and asexual. As Kevin A. Aho argues though, *Dasein's* actions are tied into a gender identity. One cannot discuss the norms of *das Man* without making some appeal to gender. It is from this launching point that feminists have attempted to use Heidegger's philosophy to discuss their experiences.

Dorothy Leland takes the concept of *Dasein* and discuss how it can be authentically embodied. She is able to synthesize her experiences in order to take her past, present, and future into account. A major component of *Dasein's* life story is her culture. Culture is not monolithic though. Within almost every dominant culture, there are smaller subcultures. This can make it difficult to achieve authenticity amongst *das Man*. In order to analyze political action though, this conflict must be taken into account.

Nancy J. Holland is another feminist who uses Heidegger's philosophy to analyze the feminine experience. Social interactions consist of a series of scripts, or roles a *Dasein* takes on when interacting with others. These roles are dictated by *das Man*. While there is freedom to act out these scripts, the roles must still be fulfilled in some way. These roles are reinforced through *das Man* through avenues such as mass media and everyday interactions with Others. The most important component of Holland's theories is that *Dasein* cannot be separated from embodiment. Although she used it in the context of *Dasein* always having a gender, her work can be applied to the disabled as well. The disabled body has different roles in society it must play than the nondisabled body. *Das Man* determines which spaces are accessible to the disabled and how the disabled will interact within them.

The next section will explore the gender roles expected of *Dasein* both in philosophy and psychology. It will discuss how modern psychology argues for certain gender roles. Since Autism is considered a condition which affects more men than women, many of these theories will have implications for the Autistic woman.

Section II: Autism and the Matrix of Domination

Now that a feminine interpretation of Heidegger has been proposed, it is vital to analyze how this can be applied to the Autistic experience. The Autistic woman faces oppression from two different fronts. She is disabled as well as a woman. Attention needs to be given to both characteristics of her experience. Although Nancy J. Holland gives a hint of how this could occur, her analysis only focuses on one aspect of embodiment, namely gender. Still, the Autistic woman is disabled as well, meaning a further theory is needed to synthesize her experiences effectively. One such theory is the Matrix of Domination.

The Matrix of Domination argues that oppression is tiered and multifaceted. Members of the same group may experience oppression differently. A wealthy heterosexual black woman will experience oppression differently from a lower class Asian American lesbian despite their shared gender. It would be pointless to ask which woman is more oppressed given all the variables, but the Matrix of Domination helps explain why each woman's experience is so different.

One of the most powerful applications of the Matrix of Domination is its use in analyzing the experiences of Autistic women. In Autistic research, women are severely underrepresented. Although the ratio of boys to girls being diagnosed plays a role, there

are other factors. Many of the criteria for being diagnosed as Autistic are traits which are more commonly associated with boys, such as repetitive behaviors. This leads to women being diagnosed later in life.³⁶³ Thus it is important to analyze the experiences of the female, Autistic *Dasein* in order to give voice to them.

No *Dasein* is defined by a single characteristic, such as woman or Latino. Rather, as Leland noted, people belong to several different cultures, and display many different characteristics. This must be taken into account when analyzing their experiences. One such theory which accomplishes the task is the Matrix of Domination. Proposed by Patricia Hill Collins, the Matrix of Domination argues that oppression is multi-faceted.

Margaret L. Anderson and Patricia Hill Collins begin,

Fundamentally, race, class, and gender are *intersecting* categories of experience that affect all aspects of human life; thus, they *simultaneously* structure the experiences of all people in this society.³⁶⁴

Das Man does not only cover one aspect of *Dasein*'s body. There is not one set of norms which covers a person's racial identity and another which only covers her sexual orientation. Instead, the norms a Hispanic lesbian must follow are different than those which a white lesbian must follow. What is permissible for a middle-class white man may not be permissible for a wealthy black woman. Experiences do not only pertain to one area of a person's life, but are given as a unified whole.

³⁶³ Sohn

³⁶⁴ Anderson 5-6

In order to analyze the different ways oppression affects an individual, it is important to use a structure which takes all aspects of a person's identity into account.

Anderson and Collins claim,

A matrix of domination sees social structure as having multiple, interlocking levels of domination that stem from the societal configuration of race, class, and gender relations. This structural pattern affects individual consciousness, group interaction, and group access to institutional power and privilege.³⁶⁵

A *Dasein* may not consider herself only black or only lesbian. Instead, she sees her as both. While not every lesbian will have the black experience and not every lesbian will have the black experience, both of these identities merge to form the experiences of the black lesbian *Dasein*. The *Dasein* in question may have difficulty getting access to black services since her sexual orientation may put her at odds with more conservative members of the black community. Conversely, her black experience may make it more difficult to relate to the white leaders of her lesbian community. In this way, her identities shape her past experiences, and dictate her future decisions.

The other benefit to using the Matrix of Domination is that analyzes how different interplay with each other. The authors cited above explain,

Second, studying interconnections between race, class, and gender within a context of social structures helps us understand race, class, and gender are manifested differently, depending on their configuration with others.³⁶⁶

The black experience does not only consist of what men experience, but also what black women and black disabled people go through as well. Using this perspective then, there is no single black experience, but rather there are a series of experiences which have skin

³⁶⁵ Ibid 6

³⁶⁶ Ibid

color as a common theme. If these other aspects are not explored, then the picture of what a black person goes through is incomplete.

The Matrix of Domination makes it clear that no identity should be emphasized at the expense of others. All should be examined equally. They argue, “Thus, race is not inherently more important than gender, just as sexuality is not inherently more significant than class and ethnicity.”³⁶⁷ When viewing the Autistic feminine experience, one must focus on both the Autistic aspect and the feminine one. Race, sexual orientation, and class must also be taken into account as well. This allows for a person’s full experiences to be analyzed, which in turn helps them create a coherent life story.

Now that the Matrix of Domination has been explained, it is time to examine how femininity intersects with an Autistic identity. One of the major issues involved with Autism is that more boys than girls are diagnosed with the condition, leading many to believe it is a gendered disorder. Nicholette Zeliadt states, “The most comprehensive analysis of autism’s sex ratio, published in 2017, drew on data from 54 prevalence studies worldwide. That analysis estimated about 4.2 boys with autism for every girl.³⁶⁸ Based on the rates of diagnosis, people consider the typical Autistic person to be a boy. This leads to Autistic women being overlooked, especially by psychiatrists making the diagnosis.

There are several reasons for females being diagnosed with Autism at a lower ratio than males, some of which have little to do with biology. Dori Zener explains,

Explanations for underdiagnosis and misdiagnosis include a gendered presentation of autism traits, a lack of knowledge of the female autism profile and the use of gold

³⁶⁷ Ibid 7

³⁶⁸ Zeliadt, Nicholette “Autism’s Sex Ratio, Explained” *Spectrum* June 13, 2018 <https://www.spectrumnews.org/news/autisms-sex-ratio-explained/>

standard diagnostic tools that were developed and normed for a male population that are not sensitive to the female phenotype.³⁶⁹

One example of this stereotypical behavior could be avoidance of eye contact. Girls are often socialized to look another person in the eyes, whereas this behavior is not always emphasized in socializing boys. Therefore, since a girl was socialized to do so, she may make eye contact even if it distracts her from what the other person is saying or if she doesn't know how to read nonverbal cues. Since a psychiatrist is looking for lack of eye contact, though, he could miss other symptoms his female patient exhibits such as awkward social skills or mild echolalia.

Not only are the diagnostic criteria for Autism male-centric, but it may manifest itself differently regardless of socialization. According to Dr. Susan F. Epstein,

So where the boys are looking at train schedules, girls might have excessive interest in horses or unicorns, which is not unexpected for girls. ...But the level of the interest might be missed and the level of oddity can be a little more damped down. It's not quite as obvious to an untrained eye.³⁷⁰

Stereotypically, girls have different interests than boys. A parent may see her son taking an abnormal interest in NFL statistics and wonder if he may have Autism. This may not be the case for girls though. Sometimes, it is more acceptable for a girl to have an intense interest in science than a boy, especially if her parents want her to be a scientist. They may miss the fact that she rarely discusses anything other than the elemental table or that her friends are bored of her monologues on neutrons. Due to this, a girl's diagnosis may be overlooked, or it could be attributed to normal albeit enthusiastic behavior.

³⁶⁹ Zener, Dori "Journey to Diagnosis for Women with Autism" *Advances in Autism* 5 (1) 2-13, March 2019; 2

³⁷⁰ Arky, Beth "Why Many Autistic Girls Are Overlooked" *Child Mind Institute* New York 2020 <https://childmind.org/article/autistic-girls-overlooked-undiagnosed-autism/>

Another issue is that some of the most key aspects of an Autism diagnosis may not be as obvious in girls, if a girl exhibits these characteristics at all. Beth Arky explains, “In fact, according to a 2005 study at Stanford University, autistic girls exhibit less repetitive and restricted behavior than boys do.”³⁷¹ The fact that psychologists are looking for signs such as repetitive hand motions leads to the idea that boys are more likely to be Autistic than girls. This leads to men being diagnosed at a higher rate, and women not receiving a diagnosis they need.

Social masking is another reason an Autism diagnosis may be overlooked in some girls. Dr. Wendy Nash explains, “A lot of autistic girls get ruled out because they may share a smile or may have a bit better eye contact or they’re more socially motivated. It can be a more subtle presentation.”³⁷² One can understand the impact of socialization by looking at the toys advertised towards girls versus boys. Toys aimed at girls, such as dolls or stuffed animals, are designed to teach a girl how to care for another being, such as a pet or a baby. Conversely, toys aimed towards boys encourage building or creating a system. Stereotypically, girls are taught to be caregivers, which require a certain set of social skills. Caregiving may not be as emphasized for a boy though. Since the girl is socializing though and may take an interest in being empathetic, then the parents may overlook other Autistic traits that she may be displaying.

Due to this, many Autistic women are diagnosed later in life than Autistic men. Carolyn E.B. McCormick claims, “Researchers have identified key trends in the diagnosis

³⁷¹ Ibid

³⁷² Ibid

and presentation of autism spectrum disorder. Of note, girls are diagnosed with autism an average of 1.5 years later than boys....”³⁷³ On the surface, 1.5 years does not seem to be a significant number. Still, the difference between a six-year-old and a seven and a half year old can be significant, especially in terms of making friends. If the six year old has been able to get therapy for their socialization issues, then they have an advantage over the seven and a half year old, who may be struggling to relate to others or in more tragic cases, is already the victim of bullying. The fact that Autism research revolves around men often makes it more difficult for women to receive the proper diagnosis, meaning she goes longer without understanding why she has the difficulties she does. Thus despite the shared experience of being Autistic, an Autistic female experiences oppression differently than her male Autistic peers.

Despite some women’s ability to mask their symptoms, Dr. Epstein notes that being diagnosed later can lead to difficulties in socialization.

We talk about early intervention...When the girls are identified late, they’ve missed out on a lot of social interventions that are much harder later. That’s the danger for anybody who gets a late diagnosis.³⁷⁴

An adolescent girl may not understand how to read body language, making it difficult for her to determine if a peer is being kind or snide towards her. Another girl may not know when to stop talking about her love of Jane Austen, which can lead to peers mocking her. With proper socialization strategies though, these girls could have smoother social

³⁷³ McCormack, Carolyn E.B. “Girls Diagnosed with Autism 1.5 years Later than Boys, on Average” *Healio Psychiatry* January 20, 2020 <https://www.healio.com/psychiatry/autism-spectrum-disorders/news/online/%7B9bc77569-e5a4-4e28-905e-a71053b3d25b%7D/girls-diagnosed-with-autism-1-5-years-later-than-boys-on-average>

³⁷⁴ Ibid

interactions. If they do not receive the necessary therapy though, this could lead to disastrous consequences.

One of the most serious effects of women not being diagnosed as soon as boys is mental health. Beth Arky explains, “Girls struggling with undiagnosed autism often develop depression, anxiety or poor self-esteem, and clinicians may not ‘really dig underneath to see the social dysfunction’ caused by autism.”³⁷⁵ Because Autistic people struggle to socialize with others, they can develop another mental illness due to their isolation. This mental illness can mask Autism though. A person with depression may not want to socialize with others, which could mimic an Autistic person’s desire for solitary activities. Social anxiety could be seen as a symptom of Obsessive Compulsive Disorder, or it could be caused by Autism. Since it can be difficult to determine what is a symptom of a mental illness and what is a symptom of Autism, it can be harder to diagnose either condition, which could worsen one or both of them. Thus, Autism and mental illness can create a vicious cycle from which it is difficult for a woman to emerge.³⁷⁶

The matrix of domination gives scholars a paradigm to examine oppression more thoroughly. This theory suggests that oppression is multifaceted. Traits such as race, class, gender, sexual orientation, and disability combine to form a person’s experiences. A black transgendered woman experiences oppression not only from her skin color, but from her queer and gender identity as well. Still, none of these traits should be considered

³⁷⁵ Arky, Beth

³⁷⁶ Interestingly, this leads to another aspect of oppression, namely being doubly disabled. Although this dissertation cannot cover all the intricacies of mental health upon an Autistic person, it is worth noting that the Matrix of Domination can be used to explore the intersection of Autism and a mental illness aspect as well.

more important than the others. Rather, they must all be viewed as being parts of a whole.

The matrix of domination can be used to analyze the experiences of Autistic women. Since more men than women are diagnosed with Autism, psychiatrists look for signs of Autism which typically manifest in males. Since girls are stereotypically socialized differently than boys, Autistic girls learn to mask some of their symptoms. This can lead to a diagnosis later in life, which can have severe consequences for some Autistic women. An Autistic person could develop depression or anxiety due to their inability to relate to their peers. These conditions can exacerbate Autistic symptoms, and makes it more difficult to diagnose a woman as having Autism.

Still, the fact that more men than women are diagnosed with Autism has led to certain theories which highlight the differences between them. One such theory is the Extreme Male Brain Theory. This theory illustrates how gender and disability interact with each other to create a tension between an Autistic woman's femininity and her neurological condition.

Section III: Extreme Male Brain Theory

Since the Autistic woman lies at the intersection of femininity and disability, her experiences are influenced by both aspects. Although the Matrix of Domination argues that no identity is more dominant than another, an Autistic woman's gender identity and her disability status could create tension. Nowhere is this more evident than in the theory of Extreme Male Brain (EMB). Proposed by Simon Baron-Cohen, a clinical psychologist from the University of Cambridge, EMB claims there are two types of brains: masculine and feminine. The masculine brain excels at systematizing. Someone

with a masculine brain would take an interest in train schedules. He would know when each train arrives and departs. Someone with a feminine brain excels at empathy. She is proficient at building and maintaining relationships. Since Autistic people tend to be significantly better at understanding systems than they are at empathizing, it is said that they have an extreme male brain.

One's brain type is not necessarily dependent upon their gender identity. Instead, it is measured by the Empathy and Systematizing Quotients, The Systemizing Quotient, the Reading the Mind in the Eyes Test, and the Intuitive Physics Test. The Empathy and Systematizing Quotient Test measures how empathetic vs. systemic one person is. The lower one scores on the empathy scale, the more likely one's brain is to be masculine. The Reading the Mind in the Eyes Test displays a series of eyes. The less able one is to decipher the emotion displayed in the eyes, the less empathetic they allegedly are. If one scores well on the Intuitive Physics Test, then one leans towards being more systematic. Since Autistic people tend to do well on the systematizing tests, they are said to have a masculine brain.

The masculine brain theory has been used by other psychiatrists to extrapolate that Autistic women are more masculine than their non-Autistic counterparts. This has been done with tests where others rate how masculine their faces appear, as well as the ratio of their fingers. All of this calls into question the Autistic woman's femininity, highlighting the issues she has with her embodiment.

In order to understand how these tests function, one must understand EMB. According to Missy L. Teatero and Charles Netley, "The extreme male brain (EMB)

theory of ASD is an extension of the empathizing-systemizing theory of sex differences in cognitive styles.”³⁷⁷ Extreme male brain depends upon there being an essential difference between men and women. One is either a man or a woman in how they think, though this does not necessarily reflect the gender with which one identifies.

Teatero and Netley explain that there are two types of brains: ones which empathize and ones which cannot. They claim

According to Baron-Cohen [the one who first proposed the theory] (2003), the essential discrepancy between the male and the female brain is that the former is hardwired for the drive to understand and construct systems based on if-then rules (i.e., systemizing) while the latter is more preprogrammed for the drive to understand another person’s mental state and to experience an appropriate reaction (i.e., empathizing). This phenomenon is also referred to as the S > E or type S brain.³⁷⁸

A male brain desires predictable systems. He may enjoy viewing a bus schedule and determining when each bus will stop at a certain depot. His brain is focused on systems, not deciphering the moods of other people.

Systematizing comes more naturally to some than others. Simon Baron-Cohen explains,

Systematizing is the drive to analyze, explore, and construct a system. The systematizer intuitively figures out how things work, or extracts the underlying rules that govern the behavior of a system. This is done in order to understand and predict the system, or to invent a new one.³⁷⁹

³⁷⁷ Teatero, Miss, L. and Charles Netley “A Critical Review of the Research on the Extreme Male Brain Theory and Digit Ratio (2D:4D)” *Journal of Autism & Developmental Disorders* 43(11) November 2013; 2664-2676; 2664

³⁷⁸ Ibid

³⁷⁹ Baron-Cohen *The Essential Difference* 3

Systems are necessary for society. An epidemiologist may need to understand how to create a model and analyze the patterns of previous epidemics in order to determine the best ways to keep people safe. Thus, systematizing is not inherently problematic.

It is easy to believe that systems only apply to statistics or mathematical issues.

This is not always the case though. Baron-Cohen continues,

Systems can be as varied as a pond, a vehicle, a plant, a library catalog, a musical composition, a cricket bowl, or even an army unit. They all operate on inputs and deliver outputs, using 'if-then' correlational rules.³⁸⁰

In order to argue philosophically, one should have an idea of the rules of logic. A philosopher needs to know what constitutes a logical fallacy, which points many may find compelling, and how to refute counterarguments. Philosophy becomes a system one must navigate. Thus, anything can be a system, so long as the outcomes are predictable in light of an input.

When done in moderation, systematizing can be a useful social skill. Still, some brains systematize seemingly at the expense of interpersonal relationships. Baron-Cohen explains,

These are the people (mostly men) who may talk to others only at work for the purposes of work alone or talk only to obtain something they need, or to share factual information. ...These are the people who are unable to see the point of social chit-chat.³⁸¹

One with a male brain often dislikes idle talk. They grow bored with gossip and have limited interests. This can have consequences for social interaction though. As Heidegger points out, idle talk is necessary in communicating with *das Man*, and building social

³⁸⁰ Ibid

³⁸¹ Ibid 133

relationships. Someone who could not engage in this type of conversation would be socially limited. Thus an extreme male brain which is too involved in systematizing is viewed as something which would inhibit proper socialization.

Just because one does not engage in small talk does not mean they have no interest in socializing. Instead, their minds are elsewhere. Baron-Cohen explains,

These are the people who, in the first interest, think of solving tasks *on their own*, by figuring it out themselves. The object or system in front of them is all that is in their mind, and they do not stop for a moment to consider another person's knowledge of it. These are the people with extreme male brain.³⁸²

A person with an extreme male brain takes little interest in empathizing with others. If a person is struggling to keep up with their ideas, then the person with an extreme male brain becomes frustrated and may ignore them. They cannot tell when someone is bored of the topic at hand, and may be confused at the social backlash they receive for dominating a conversation. Thus, failure to engage in a type of idle talk is a symptom of an extreme male brain.

Baron-Cohen believes that there is a condition associated with extreme male brain. He argues, "When one hits the end of the range in this way, I suggest that you are meeting Autism."³⁸³ Many Autistic people dislike casual conversations, and often hyper focus on a topic. Some Autistic people are excellent at creating systems. They may take apart toys in order to put them back together or memorize the fantasy stats of each member of the Green Bay Packers. Unlike those with a typical male brain though, the

³⁸² Ibid

³⁸³ Ibid 134

Autistic person cannot accurately read people. The Autistic person is so focused on systems that they possess an extreme male brain despite what gender they identify as.

While this theory seems to be pure conjecture, there are tests which seem to support it. Teatero and Netley continue,

Subclinical ASD characteristics are often measured with the Autism Spectrum Quotient (AQ; Baron-Cohen et al. 2001c), the Empathy Quotient (EQ; Baron-Cohen and Wheelwright 2004), and the Systemizing Quotient (SQ; Baron-Cohen et al. 2003), self-report measures for individuals of normal IQ. Tasks of the cognitive ability to empathize or systemize typically include the Reading the Mind in the Eyes Test (RMET; Baron-Cohen et al. 2001a) and the Intuitive Physics Test (IPT; Baron-Cohen et al. 2001b), respectively.³⁸⁴

In order to understand fully how the female vs male brain is measured, it is critical to go through some of these tests, namely the Empathy and Systematizing Quotients, The Systemizing Quotient, the Reading the Mind in the Eyes Test, and the Intuitive Physics Test. After examining these tests, it should be clearer how Simon Baron-Cohen is determining what characteristics are unique to the male and female brains.

The Empathy and Systematizing Quotients are questionnaires which ask one questions about one's perceived abilities to empathize and systematize. Although these tests are used to test for Autism, they are sometimes used on the general population to determine what kind of mind one may have. The Empathy Quotient consists of sixty questions, with the choices "strongly agree," "slightly agree," "slightly disagree," and "strongly disagree." A sample of three questions would include, "I prefer animals to humans," "Friendships and relationships are just too difficult, so I tend not to bother with them," and "I am quick to spot when someone in a group is feeling awkward or

³⁸⁴ Teatero and Netley 2664

uncomfortable.”³⁸⁵ If one answers positively to the first two questions and negatively to the last one, then he is less able to empathize with others than the average person.

The Systemizing Quotient on the other hand asks questions which have to do with how well one can create systems. The answers to the Systematizing Quotient contains the same four potential answers, and consists of seventy-five questions. Some of its questions include: “I find it very easy to use train timetables, even if this involves several connections,” “I like music or book shops because they are clearly organised.” and “When I read something, I always notice whether it is grammatically correct.”³⁸⁶ If these questions are answered affirmatively, then one is a good systematizer, and may be more apt and understanding systems than relationships. This would indicate that one has a male brain.

The Reading the Mind in the Eyes Test is a test which consists of a snapshot of eyes without any other facial features. The respondent is given four emotions and asked to guess which emotion the eyes are displaying.³⁸⁷ Autistic people tend to score fairly low on this test due to the fact that they struggle to decipher nonverbal cues. Thus, some argue this inability to read the eyes indicates a difficulty empathizing with others.

The final test Baron-Cohen proposes is the Intuitive Physics Test. This test consists of images of machines, such as a wheel connected to a bar, which in turn is connected to another bar. Questions consist of knowing how the machines will operate

³⁸⁵ Baron-Cohen, Simon “Empathy Quotient” *Psychological Tools* <https://psychology-tools.com/test/empathy-quotient>

³⁸⁶ Baron-Cohen, Simon “Systematizing Quotient” *Psytoolkit* <https://www.psytoolkit.org/cgi-bin/psy2.4.1/survey?s=G8eJN>

³⁸⁷ Social Intelligence Test *Lab In the Wild* <http://socialintelligence.labinthewild.org/mite/>

and what the effect of each motion will be.³⁸⁸ For instance, in the question with the wheel, there is a point P on one of the bars. When the wheel spins, it will move.³⁸⁹ The question asks how it will move. If one answers most of these correctly, then they are apt at understanding systems. This implies that one has a masculine brain, not a feminine one,

Psychological tests are not the only indicators of an extreme male brain. There are other indicators of increased testosterone, such as one's fingers. Teatero and Netley argue,

One assumption of the EMB theory is that, beyond biological sex, high FT activity underlies the male brain (Auyeung and Baron-Cohen 2008). The ratio of the length of the index finger (second digit) to the ring finger (fourth digit) (i.e., digit ratio or 2D:4D) is the most frequently used putative biomarker of FT relative to fetal estrogen activity (Berenbaum et al. 2009). Low (masculinized) 2D:4D has been hypothesized to be related to high FT (Manning et al. 1998) and experimental research on mice suggests that the cellular site of hormonal action on the digits, particularly 4D, is cartilage (Zheng and Cohn 2011).³⁹⁰

An Autistic person's index finger can be proportionally longer than their ring finger. Due to this, an Autistic person has more testosterone in the womb than the average person.

This indicates that the Autistic person is masculine. Thus even if an Autistic person is female, she has a male brain, *meaning her identity as a woman and as an Autistic person seem to be in conflict with each other.*

Now that the male brain has been explained, it is time to look at its counterpart, the female brain. Unlike the male brain which excels at systematizing, the female brain

³⁸⁸ This is difficult to explain verbally, but I'm not sure how to attach an image to the document or if this is appropriate in a dissertation. Any help here is appreciated.

³⁸⁹ Bar Cohen-Simon S. Wheelwright, V. Scahill, J. Lawson and A. Spong, "Are intuitive physics and intuitive psychology independent? A test with children with Asperger Syndrome" *Journal of Developmental and Learning Disorders* 5 (2001):47-78 http://docs.autismresearchcentre.com/tests/intuitive_physics_test.pdf

³⁹⁰ Teatero and Netley 2665

excels at empathizing. Simon Baron-Cohen claims someone has a female brain if her “empathizing is stronger (more developed) than systemizing”³⁹¹ While men stereotypically focus on systems, women stereotypically focus on interpersonal relationships. They seek to create bonds amongst people, not create mechanical systems. Thus, an empathizer may go into a caring profession such as a therapist. In order to do her job, she must rely on empathizing with her clients, not on mastering a rigid system.

In order to be a good empathizer, one must be able to detect the moods of others and respond to them. Baron-Cohen explains,

A good empathizer can immediately sense when an emotional change has occurred in someone, what the causes of this might be, and what might make this particular person feel better or worse. A good empathizer responds intuitively to a change in another person’s mood with concern, appreciation, understanding, comforting, or whatever the appropriate emotion may be.³⁹²

To return to the example of the therapist, she intuitively knows when her client is hiding something, or what words to key in on based on his tone of voice. She knows that she must allow her client to talk without sharing her own opinion. If a client is unruly, she knows when to stand up for herself. Still, she does not respond to a depressed client with berating language or inappropriate outbursts. She knows how to keep him at ease while still directing him on the best course of action.

Feminine empathy stands in stark contrast to male systemizing. Baron-Cohen explains,

However systemizing gets you almost nowhere in most day-to-day social interaction. Some philosophers suggest our everyday understanding of people (our “folk psychology”) is rule-based, containing such if-then rules or generalizations as “if

³⁹¹ Baron-Cohen *The Essential Difference* 91

³⁹² Ibid 22

someone has a hard day then they will be grumpy.” Yet our behavior and emotions are not governed by rules to any useful degree.³⁹³

It is sometimes unclear how someone will respond in a situation, even based on their past responses. A breakup is often upsetting for people. Yet a man may be at peace after breaking up with his partner. He may have found his partner too stifling, too different from him, or may have wanted to take his life in a different direction. Thus using the rule “breakups are upsetting” would not apply in this situation. Thus rules are a poor indicator of how one will respond in any given situation, especially given the variable factors in each situation.

Empathizing does not only help in overall situations, but in little nuances of each situation, including when a person’s emotions change. Baron-Cohen writes, “Furthermore, the kinds of rules you can extract are of almost no use when it comes to making sense of, or predicting, the *moment-by-moment* changes in a person’s behavior.”³⁹⁴ A person’s mood can drastically change over the course of an interaction. For instance a student may initially be livid over receiving a C on a final paper. He may storm into the professor’s office demanding an explanation. As the professor explains her reasoning though, the student may calm himself. He may understand why he received the grade he did, and may agree with the professor’s assessment. The once tense situation could be resolved peacefully, but it will take empathy on the part of both parties to do so. If the student cannot view his grade from the professor’s perspective, then he will remain upset. If the professor cannot empathize with the student, then the professor’s critique

³⁹³ Ibid 5

³⁹⁴ Ibid

seems harsh and she will not be able to understand her student's concerns. In this way, it is reading human emotions, not relying on a system, which makes social interaction possible.

In order to empathize, a person must discard her preconceived notions and focus wholly on the other person. Baron-Cohen writes,

A natural empathizer not only notices others' feelings, but also continually thinks about what the other person might be feeling, thinking, or intending... They read the emotional weather in this way not because they want to manipulate the person. Rather, the person with the type E brain continually cares how the other might be feeling.³⁹⁵

A con artist could not be a natural empathizer. While she could read another's emotions, she does not take the other's needs into account. Instead, she is wholly focused on herself. The natural empathizer receives no benefit in the interaction other than the joy of building and maintaining of relationships, though. The natural empathizer is a healer, not a user.

In order to demonstrate how empathizing works. Baron-Cohen uses the example of language and engaging in a conversation. Someone with a systematizing brain is at risk for hijacking it, whereas this is less of a concern with an empathizer. He states,

In any conversation there is a risk that one party will hijack the topic in an undemocratic manner. They may not intend to be undemocratic, but in hijacking the conversation the speaker does not consider that if they are doing all the talking this is only fulfilling *their* needs, not the listener's. Empathy ensures the risk is minimized by enabling the speaker to check how long to carry on for, and to be receptive to the listener's wish to switch to a different topic.³⁹⁶

One of the main issues with Autistic communication is that the Autistic speaker cannot perceive when a listener is tiring of the topic. The former may monologue about her latest

³⁹⁵ Ibid 22-23

³⁹⁶ Ibid

endeavor to learn the Indonesian language, whereas the listener has not desire to discuss is. This makes communication difficult since the person is being talked at, instead of talked to. While most people empathize enough to know when the change the topic, Autistic people may struggle with this, leading to social isolation.

Empathy does not only require one to know when to stop talking, but also to know how the other person is feeling. Baron-Cohen argues,

Moreover, empathy involves a leap of imagination into someone else's head. While you can try to figure out another person's thoughts and feelings by reading their face, their voice and their posture, ultimately their internal world is not transparent, and in order to climb inside someone else's head one must imagine what it is like to be them.³⁹⁷

One must have imagination in order to empathize. To return to the example of the breakup, a good empathizer would know how tumultuous the relationship was between the man and his partner. She may know about their constant fights and the stress they caused the now single man. The man may have made it clear several times that he is no fan of drama. Because of this, the female empathizer can understand why he would feel relief at his breakup, and may be happy for him that the relationship is over.

At this point, it seems that Autistic therapy could be the answer. If a therapist could teach an Autistic person to engage in reciprocal conversations and read subtle nonverbal clues better, then that person should be able to empathize. This is not the case though. Baron-Cohen argues,

However, you are not empathizing if you are doing all of the above in order to appear appropriate, or as an intellectual exercise. You do it because you can't help doing it, because you care about the other person's thoughts and feelings, because it matters.³⁹⁸

³⁹⁷ Ibid 24

³⁹⁸ Ibid

Empathizing is not an action one performs, but is a state of being. Either someone is adept at empathizing, or she is not. If one is not adept at empathy, then she cannot have a female brain. This is problematic for the Autistic person though since she can never meet the requirements for having a female brain. *Thus, she is torn between her male brain and her female identity.*

While not having a female brain may not be problematic for a male Autistic person, for someone who identifies as female this is problematic. Compounding the problem is the fact that therapy offers no way to reclaim one's femininity. Baron-Cohen concludes,

Someone who is less skilled at empathizing may be able to do it only when reminded, or if they discover that they are included more often when they do or say the right thing, and they may even rehearse how to empathize to get the benefits. But they may not do it spontaneously. Other people's feelings matter less to them, and it takes an effort to maintain empathetic appearances.³⁹⁹

According to EMB, one should be suspicious if an Autistic person claims she is a natural empathizer. If she is only behaving empathetically because she has been through extensive therapy in order to be trained how to do so, then she does not possess a female brain. *Regardless of any therapy the Autistic female may undergo, she cannot change the fact that she does not have a female brain, calling her femininity into question.*

The de-feminization of the female Autistic does not only occur when one discusses the mind of an Autistic person. Their physical features are also seen as masculine. Diana Weiting Tan, Suzanna N. Russell-Smith, Jessica M. Simons, Murray T. Maybery, Doris Leung, Honey L. H. Ng, and Andrew J. O. Whitehouse performed a

³⁹⁹ Ibid

study measuring how masculine one appears compared to their Autustimspectrum Quotient. In order to perform this study, they gave each participant a 50-item Autism-spectrum Quotient before taking their picture. Tan et. al explains,

Each participant in the first cohort was photographed front-on while seated 3m from a Canon digital single-lens reflex camera placed on a tripod. Participants were instructed to wear no make-up or jewellery, remove glasses, pin any loose hair away from the face, and hold a neutral facial expression. All males were clean-shaven. Adobe Photoshop was used to rotate each face so the pupil centres were horizontal and separated by 80 pixels. An ellipse was drawn over the face so that everything outside the hairline, ears, and just below the chin was obscured with a grey frame. Photographs were presented as 320 x 420 pixel black- and-white images.⁴⁰⁰

The faces were made to be as sexually androgynous as possible. No woman was allowed to show any outward sign of femininity, nor was any man to display his masculinity. In this way, the test was meant to be gender blind.

In addition to appearance, the subjects were instructed to record their voices. The researchers explain, “A second cohort of 47 Caucasian High- and Low-AQ students, fluent in English, was recruited in a similar manner to provide voice samples.”⁴⁰¹ By recording people fluent in English and of the same racial group, the effect of culture was lessened. Someone listening to the recording could not rate a person as more or less feminine because they sounded as if they were a member of a racial group which is accused of being too masculine. Since all were fluent in English, they would not stumble over words either, which would make it difficult to understand them due to an accent or

⁴⁰⁰ Weiting Tan, Diana, Russell-Smith, Suzanna N. Simons, Jessica, Maybery, Murray T., Leung, Doris, L.H. Ng, Honey, and Andrew J.O. Whitehorse “Perceived Gender Ratings for High and Low Scorers on the Autism-Spectrum Quotient Consistent with the Extreme Male Brain Account of Autism” *Plos One* July 17, 2015 1-9; 3

⁴⁰¹ Ibid

mispronunciations. In this way, the researchers hoped that only the voices would be judged, and not their ethnicity.

The final portion of the study involved those who would determine how masculine or feminine the subjects appeared. The researchers state, “Thirty Caucasian undergraduate students (15 of each sex; mean age = 18.9 years; SD = 2.9 years) were additionally recruited to rate the masculinity and femininity of the faces and voices.”⁴⁰² All the subjects and all the participants were members of the same ethnic group, meaning that the standards used would be only from a Caucasian standpoint. This allows the impact of racial standards to be lessened.

The results of the experiment cast doubt as to whether or not the Autistic woman could pass as feminine. They conclude, “The findings of less feminine faces for higher AQ females and more masculinized voices for higher AQ males are consistent with the EMB theory of Baron-Cohen et al.”⁴⁰³ An Autistic woman’s body betrays her allegedly male mind. She does not appear to be a woman mentally, nor does she appear to be one physically. Just like the finger ratio test, her femininity seems to be in question.

At this juncture it is worth asking if this leads to many Autistic women identifying as transgendered. Weiting Tan and her colleagues do not support this notion. They claim,

[T]here is some evidence that both males and females with gender identity disorder, rather than females only, are at increased risk of ASD. From the EMB theory, one would predict that only females should encounter these issues.⁴⁰⁴

⁴⁰² Ibid

⁴⁰³ Ibid 5

⁴⁰⁴ Ibid 2

Despite the insistence that Autistic people must have a masculine brain, some Autistic men identify as women, just as many Autistic women identify as cisgendered. This casts doubt as to how best to define female Autistics though given her alleged male brain. Thus the Autistic woman lives in tension between her disabled and gender identity.

According to Simon Baron-Cohen, there are two types of brains: masculine and feminine. The masculine brain excels at creating systems. The female brain excels at empathizing with others. There are ways to measuring which type of brain one has, namely the systematizing quotient, the empathy quotient, the reading eyes test, and the intuitive physics test. If one scores high on the empathy quotient and reading eyes test, they are a natural empathizer. If one scores high on the systematizing quotient and intuitive physics test, then they have a masculine brain. If one has an extreme masculine brain, then one is diagnosed with Autism.

While the masculine brain is needed to make advances in certain fields such as science, the feminine brain is needed as a counterpoint. Someone with an empathetic brain excels at communication. She can sense when her conversation partner has changed moods, and how best to respond to those moods. Unlike her male counterpart who only uses language to convey ideas, she uses communication to build relationships. Empathy is innate, not learned.

This puts the Autistic person in a precarious position though. If empathy is intuitive, then she cannot learn how to be a natural empathizer through therapies. If she cannot gain a feminine brain then, she is left with a masculine one. Further exacerbating the problem is studies which come out casting her physical femininity into question as

well. Certain studies have argued that Autistic women appear more masculine than a non-Autistic woman. This accentuates the differences between them. *Thus, the Autistic woman is wedged between her identity as a woman and as an Autistic person and must find a way to reconcile these identities.*

Section IV: Problems with the Extreme Male Brain Theory

Now that the Extreme Male Brain Theory of Autism has been explored, it must be asked if it can hold up to scrutiny. Research has been divided on this issue. Certain studies indicate that Autistic people do just as well with tests associated with more feminine brains as any other population. There are also areas where Autistic people struggle which are commonly associated with men, such as rotational objects, thus calling the Extreme Male Brain Theory into question.

Arguably the biggest problem with Extreme Male Brain Theory is that recent research has indicated it does not stand up to large-scale studies. Many of the studies supporting Extreme Male Brain Theory were performed only on a few dozen people. In a 2019 study performed on over two hundred people, it was shown that the effects of testosterone were negligible on whether or not one performed well on empathizing tasks. This further weakens the case that the Extreme Male Brain is the cause of Autism.

The lack of science behind the Extreme Male Brain Theory is not the only reason to discard it. Sociological researchers point out that this could be hurting women more than Baron-Cohen intends by reinforcing a heteronormative view of gender. The Extreme Male Brain cannot account for differing gender identities, nor does it account for women who go into more systematizing fields. Thus, this theory does not only call the femininity

of Autistic people into question, but it calls into question whether any woman should be encouraged to enter more systematizing fields such as engineering.

If Baron-Cohen is correct that Autistic people are mind-blind, they should be unable to discern the intentions of others. This may not always be the case though.

According to Elise B. Barbeau, Adrianna Mendrick, and Laurent Mottron,

Although Baron-Cohen's research group is focused on trying to relate autism to exaggerated male behaviours, there is growing evidence that people with autism would also perform well on more feminine tasks. For example, a recent review from Gernsbacher, Stevenson, Khandakar, and Goldsmith (2008) concluded that 'every empirical study to date has shown that autistic individuals across a wide range of age are capable of understanding the intentions of other people's actions'.⁴⁰⁵

Even though an Autistic person has difficulty reading the nonverbal cues of others, they are able to pair the intentions of others to a living body. If they saw people as only systems to be manipulated though, they would not be able to perform this task. Thus, Autistic people are not such systematizers that they can no longer engage in Husserlian empathy.

Another issue with the Extreme Male Brain Theory is that testosterone may not have the effects on cognition Baron-Cohen believes it has. Barbeau et. al discuss test scores comparing patients with congenital adrenal hyperplasia with Autistic and Non-autistic subjects. Congenital adrenal hyperplasia is a condition in which there is an increase of fetal testosterone, meaning the person with it may take on more masculine traits.⁴⁰⁶ Theoretically, someone with this condition would score higher on the

⁴⁰⁵ Barbeau, Elise B, Medrick, Adrianna, and Laurent Mottron "Are Autistic Traits Autistic?" *British Journal of Psychology* 100, 2009, 23-28; 25

⁴⁰⁶ Ibid 26

systematizing quotient than an Autistic person. This does not seem to be the case though.

Barbeau et. al explains,

However, they score higher only on the subscales measuring social skills and imagination, whereas individuals with autism score high on all the subtests. Also, even if CAH women score higher than normal men in those subtests, their scores are still much lower than the average scores of people with autism.⁴⁰⁷

If Autism was caused by an increase level in fetal testosterone, then people with a diagnosed condition of too much exposure to testosterone in utero should score about the same or more than Autistic people. Since this is not the case, an increase of testosterone may not be the culprit in what causes Autism, calling the theory into question.

More recent studies have also called into question the connection between fetal testosterone and Autism. Karson T. F. Kung, Debra Spencer, Vickie Pasterski, Sharon Neufeld, Vivette Glover, Thomas G. O'Connor, Peter C. Hindmarsh, Ieuan A. Hughes, Carlo L. Acerini, and Melissa Hines performed two studies examining the role fetal testosterone and Autistic traits. In the first study, children with CAH were recruited. They took the Autism quotient along with Autistic children in order to measure their results. The researchers claim, "There were no significant group differences in age or vocabulary."⁴⁰⁸ If the Extreme Male Brain Theory held up, patients with CAH should score differently than Autistic children.

⁴⁰⁷ Ibid

⁴⁰⁸ Kung, Karson T.F.; Spencer, Debra; Pasterski, Vickie; Neufeld, Sharon; Glover, Vivette; O'Connor, Thomas G; Hindmarsh, Peter C; Hughes, Ieuan A.; Acerini, Carlo L; and Melissa Hines "No Relationship between Prenatal Androgen Exposure and Autistic Traits: Convergent Evidence from Studies of Children with Congenital Adrenal Hyperplasia and of Amniotic Testosterone Concentrations in Typically Developing Children" *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry* 57 (12) 1455–1462, 2016; 1457

The second study measured the Autistic traits of children whose amniotic fluid had been tested for testosterone due to in-utero medical purposes. They put the children with higher testosterone through a vocabulary test. The researchers state, “In this study, amniotic testosterone was not significantly related to autistic traits in either boys or girls.”⁴⁰⁹ This further weakens the idea that Autism is caused by an Extreme Male Brain since testosterone does not seem to have an immediate effect on whether or not one can empathize.

Perhaps the most damning argument against the Extreme Male Brain Theory was made by Amos Nadler, Colin F. Camerer, David T. Zava, Triana L. Ortiz, Neil V. Watson, Justin M. Carré and Gideon Nave. They begin,

Previous studies reported that testosterone administration impaired cognitive empathy in healthy humans, and that a putative biomarker of prenatal testosterone exposure (finger digit ratios) moderated the effect. However, empirical support for the relationship has relied on small sample studies with mixed evidence⁴¹⁰

In order to reach more conclusive results, a larger study needs to be performed. The researchers seek to rectify this problem through two larger scale studies. The first study involves two hundred forty-three males,⁴¹¹ whereas the other involves four hundred participants.⁴¹²

⁴⁰⁹ Ibid 1459

⁴¹⁰ Nadler, Amos; Camerer, Colin F.; Zava, David T.; Ortiz Triana L.; Neil, Watson V; Carré; Justin M; and Gideon Nave “Does Testosterone Impair Men’s Cognitive Empathy? Evidence from Two Large-Scale Randomized Controlled Trials” *The Royal Society Publishing* 286; 1-9 August 12, 2019, 1

⁴¹¹ Ibid 2

⁴¹² Ibid 3

In the first task, the men participated in a questionnaire regarding their demographic information and mood. Next, participants were given a gel which contained testosterone. The researchers explain,

There they were provided en masse small plastic cups containing either 10 g of topical testosterone that is a widely prescribed transdermal testosterone gel with clearly mapped pharmacokinetics [22] (100 mg, Vogelxo™, n = 123) or volume equivalent of inert placebo of similar viscosity and texture placebo (80% alcogel, 20% Versagel®, n = 118) under a double-blind protocol...⁴¹³

The testosterone gel was meant to give a quick exposure to the hormone. It was also a quick way of determining how much of the hormone was in the body. A saliva sample was taken to get an exact measurement of overall testosterone.⁴¹⁴

The next step was to give the subjects a task which is associated with a more empathetic than systemic mind. They continue,

We administered the adult version of the RMET developed by Baron-Cohen et al. [7] which shows the eye region of an actor's face, and a list of four words that describe emotional states and cognitive processes among which participants select the one that best described the person in the image⁴¹⁵

If high amounts of testosterone are meant to impede one's ability to empathize, then the additional testosterone should impede the subjects' ability to read nonverbal cues. They should exhibit a masculine, not a feminine, brain.

In the second study, patients once again provided a saliva sample to test the amount of testosterone in their bloodstream.⁴¹⁶ Instead of a gel applied to the skin, the researchers gave the subjects either a nasal spray or a placebo. They explain,

⁴¹³ Ibid 2-3

⁴¹⁴ Ibid

⁴¹⁵ Ibid

⁴¹⁶ Ibid 4

This [spray] is a newly approved nasal gel used for the treatment of hypogonadism. Pharmacokinetic data indicate that serum testosterone concentrations rise sharply within 15 min of testosterone gel application and remain elevated (relative to placebo) up to 180 min post-application.⁴¹⁷

With the elevated testosterone levels, the subjects were asked to give another saliva sample, and perform another of Baron-Cohen's tests.⁴¹⁸ With this, they sought to see if testosterone had any effect on one's ability to empathize.

The results of the two studies were similar. The researchers state,

Despite experimental differences between them, their collected data exhibit the same results with robust statistical consistency, to demonstrate a lack of effects of testosterone administration and 2D : 4D on cognitive empathy.⁴¹⁹

The subjects did just as well on the tests in the morning as they did in the afternoon after the testosterone was administered. If the Extreme Male Brain Theory was correct though, then they should have done more poorly in the afternoon than in the morning though.

These results cast serious doubt on the Extreme Male Brain Theory, especially in light of the larger sample size than many of the studies affirming the Extreme Male Brain Theory. While the researchers admit further tests should be run to verify their results, the tests do cast doubt as to the viability of the Extreme Male Brain Theory.

The inconclusive nature of the science behind the Extreme Male Brain Theory is not the only reason for pause. Sociologically, the Extreme Male Brain Theory is problematic. Angela Willey, Banu Subramaniam, Jennifer A Hamilton, and Jane Couperus argue,

⁴¹⁷ Ibid

⁴¹⁸ Ibid

⁴¹⁹ Ibid 6

In the extreme male brain theory of autism, the hyper- systemizing brain is masculine and productive while the empathetic brain is feminine and needed only as a complementary figure that ultimately leads to reproduction.⁴²⁰

The systemizing male brain is adept at occupations such as computer programming, scientific research, and analyzing data. These professions tend to be financially lucrative, whereas positions held by those who are empathetic such as teachers and therapists tend to pay less. The extreme male brain theory then reinforces heteronormative stereotypes, and could steer women away from these positions because they may be seen as less capable of performing them than a man.

The issues with the female brain are not only patriarchal, but heteronormative as well. They continue,

Second, the implicit heteronormativity is striking. The problem is two male brains mating, leading to mentally challenged and underfunctioning progeny. It would seem that we need “real” hetero- sexuals—dimorphic in brains and bodies.⁴²¹

Since Autism is theorized to be a genetic condition, it is implied that either one or both parents could carry the gene. In order to decrease the chances of passing it on, two people of two different brain types should produce children. So, the Autistic woman is not only problematic in how she displays femininity in her personal life, but also in how she passes femininity onto her children. If she has the genes for Autism then she risks giving it to her children.

Due to these differences, the Autistic woman’s differences are not celebrated, but are suppressed in favor of heteronormative values. They state,

⁴²⁰ Willey, Angela, Subramaniam Banu, Hamilton Jennifer A, and Jane Couperus “The Mating Life of Geeks: Love, Neuroscience, and the New Autistic Subject” *Signs* University of Chicago Press 40:2 2015 (369-391); 385

⁴²¹ Ibid

[T]he inclusion of the autistic on a continuum of both masculinity (in the extreme male brain) and love (through assortative mating) is an attempt to domesticate difference rather than embrace it. The new autistic subject does not expand our conceptions of love and loving but instead conforms to quite normative notions, naturalizing heterosexual coupling within the biological body.⁴²²

There is no room for gender fluidity in the masculine/feminine brain theory. Either one is a female with a female brain, or a woman with the wrong brain type. This pits the Autistic woman against her femininity. She feels as if she must decide between her identity as a woman, or her brain type as masculine.

Most problematic for the Extreme Male Brain Theory is the fact that it does not give a clear way to help Autistic people deal with their more problematic issues such as sensory overload. Ruth Sample argues,

“Sexing the brain” adds nothing to our understanding of autism. It adds nothing to our understanding of what causes autism. It adds nothing to our knowledge of how to remediate autism. EMB has the potential to divert research funding from other research programs that could enhance our understanding of autism and provide insight into remediation, if not a cure, for autistic symptoms.⁴²³

The more money which gets funneled into (dis)proving the Extreme Male Brain Theory, the less money goes towards researching therapies which could help Autistic people cope with their symptoms in a productive manner. The more money which is spent on reinforcing traditional gender roles, the less money goes to scholarships to help women get into fields such as STEM. The more money which is spent endorsing heteronormative stereotypes, the less money goes towards analyzing queer identities. In this way, the Extreme Male Brain Theory hurts not only the Autistic community, but other minority communities as well.

⁴²² Ibid

⁴²³ Sample, Ruth “Autism and the Extreme Male Brain” *The Philosophy of Autism* (eds. Jami L Anderson and Simon Cushing) Rowman and Littlefield Publishers Lanham, MD 2013, 73-102; 74

Although the Extreme Male Brain Theory seems attractive, it has serious flaws. Elise B. Barbeau, Adrianna Mendrick, and Laurent Mottron argue that other groups with high testosterone, such as those with CAH, do not score as one would expect them to according to Extreme Male Brain Theory. If high testosterone is the cause of Autism though, these groups should score similar, if not the same. Other researchers have noted that there is no correlation between high testosterone in utero and vocabulary skills. If linguistic skills are associated with feminine traits though, this should not be the case, further weakening the argument.

Perhaps most troubling is how small the testing samples have been in many studies endorsing Extreme Male Brain Theory. Amos Nadler, Colin F. Camerer, David T. Zava, Triana L. Ortiz, Neil V. Watson, Justin M. Carré and Gideon Nave performed a study on the effects of testosterone on a sample size of hundreds of people. They found that testosterone had no effect on how well one could read nonverbal cues such as eyes. Although more research must be done to verify their results, it should give one pause before fully endorsing the Extreme Male Brain Theory.

Sociologically, the Extreme Male Brain has issues. It endorses traditional gender norms, such as women being better empathizers. This can lead to gender roles being complementary, which can exclude queer individuals. Perhaps most problematic is that the Extreme Male Brain Theory says nothing concrete about Autism. It does not treat symptoms, nor does it create a world in which Autistic and non-Autistic people learn to empathize with each other.

Conclusion

One of the issues some scholars have with *Being and Time* is that Heidegger says little about embodiment. This is done by design. Thomas Abrams argues that this omission is due to the focus of Heidegger's project. He intended to discuss how being in the world is possible, not the specifics of embodiment. Still, Heidegger does mention the body in his later works, namely the *Zollikon Seminars*. He argues that there are two ways of referring to the body. The first is the *Körper*, or the portion of the body which is encapsulated by the skin. This is in contrast with the *Leib*, which extends into the world. The *Leib* extends into the world, a phenomenon Heidegger refers to as *bodying-forth*. Still, it must be noted that *Dasein* is meant to be neutral and asexual.

Despite Heidegger's unwillingness to discuss the specific aspects of *Dasein's* experience such as gender, feminist scholars have found ways to use his work to discuss their experiences. Dorothy Leland describes the authentic experience as creating a coherent life story. One must acknowledge where she has been so she can plan for the future and return to the moment. Part of one's history is one's culture. Culture is not monolithic though: each culture has several subcultures within it. This can most clearly be seen in the instance of race. A Chinese immigrant to the United States may feel pressure to become more Americanized while trying to honor his Chinese heritage. This creates a conflict the person must attempt to resolve. Although she offers no solution, she believes understanding this dynamic can lead one to political action.

Nancy J. Holland uses the idea of scripts to analyze *das Man*. Scripts are social roles which one must act out. For instance, the role of alcoholic involves a dependency on drinking, a family who is often codependent, and destructive habits which make daily

life difficult. Gender is scripted as well. There are roles such as sister which only someone identified as a woman can act out. Since scripts are so closely related to the body, *Dasein* is always already embodied.

The embodiment of *Dasein* means one can analyze its experience through the lens of gender and disability. One way of doing this is through the Matrix of Domination. This theory states that people experience oppression differently based on their characteristics. For instance, a poor bisexual white woman will experience oppression differently than a wealthy black heterosexual man. This allows one to analyze embodied experiences and how *das Man* impacts them. Still, it must be noted that no characteristic of one's life is more important than another's. A black lesbian will sometimes experience oppression from her race, sometimes from her orientation, and at other times from both. These characteristics work together to form her experiences and give her a fuller range of experiences.

One place where two minority identities intersect is in the case of the Autistic woman. More boys than girls are diagnosed as Autistic. This may be in part due to biology, but may also be in part due to the fact that the diagnostic criteria for Autism is largely based on how it is exhibited by boys. This leads to Autistic girls being diagnosed later in life, which can lead to issues such as developing a mental illness.

Nowhere is the tension between gender and disability more obvious than in the case of the Extreme Male Brain Theory. Proposed by Simon Baron-Cohen, EMB states that there are two types of people: those who systematize and those who empathize. The former are associated with men, the latter with women. Someone with a masculine

systematizing brain is an expert at creating and understanding systems. Although a systematizing brain may be helpful in many areas of society, it is problematic if one only systematizes. Some systematizers have difficulty empathizing with others. In extreme cases, this leads to Autism, or the Extreme Male Brain. One can determine if he has a masculine brain by undergoing four tests: the Empathy and Systematizing Quotients, The Systemizing Quotient, the Reading the Mind in the Eyes Test, and the Intuitive Physics Test. If one scores high on the systematizing test, then one possesses a masculine brain.

Conversely, the feminine brain is naturally empathetic. Deciphering the emotions of others comes naturally for her. She can respond to the moods of those around her appropriately, and focuses upon building relationships. This skill cannot be taught though. If someone goes to therapy to learn how to behave in a more socially acceptable manner, then she cannot have a feminine brain.

Researchers have raised problems with the Extreme Male Brain Theory of Autism. Other groups of people with high testosterone levels, such as those with CAH, do not score on empathy tests the way an Autistic person does. This is problematic, since high testosterone in utero is supposed to be the cause of the lack of empathy. Also, when children who tested positive for high testosterone in utero perform as well as other children on linguistic tests, it should give pause that the Extreme Male Brain Theory is accurate.

Perhaps most troubling about the Extreme Male Brain Theory is that many of the sample sizes used to endorse it are small. When studies were performed on hundreds of people with elevated levels of testosterone, there was no difference between their ability

to read nonverbal cues before and after the testosterone was administered. This further weakens the accuracy of the Extreme Male Brain Theory.

Most troubling is that the Extreme Male Brain Theory endorses traditional gender roles. It argues that men will always excel at tasks traditionally associated with them. It also leaves little room for people of differing gender identities, excluding members of the queer community. It offers little in terms of helping the Autistic community as well.

Still, the Extreme Male Brain Theory is prevalent, which creates a conundrum for the Autistic woman. She has a feminine identity, and a disabled one. The Autistic woman must find a way to live authentically by incorporating these identities into her life story. In the next chapter, a Heideggerian analysis of authenticity will be given, one which can give key insights into how the Autistic woman can resolve this conflict.

Chapter VI Autism and Authenticity

Now that the unique challenges Autistic women pose to phenomenology have been discussed, it is time to analyze their experiences and explore what new perspectives they can offer to philosophy. In order to do this, one must first find a way to explore her experiences phenomenologically in order to create such an account. One avenue for doing so is by applying Martin Heidegger's views of authenticity to the Autistic experience.

According to Heidegger, living amongst *das Man* leads one to ignore her relationship with Being. He calls this state fallenness. Although this term is based off the Christian idea of a fallen nature, Heidegger does not mean to say that *Dasein* is committing any wrongdoing. Rather, fallenness is the mode in which *Dasein* interacts with others and her world by default. Still, it estranges *Dasein* from her Being, meaning an event must occur in order for her to face her own existence and live authentically.

The most common way *Dasein* reclaims her authenticity is to go through the process of anxiety, or *Angst*. Heidegger distinguishes anxiety from fear by noting that the latter points to an object in the world. *Dasein* is fearful of something which is in a specific place at a specific time. Anxiety is not directed towards anything. When *Dasein* experiences terror, she flees from an object. When she experiences anxiety, she flees in the face of her existence.

Anxiety is the phenomenon of the world falling away. Beliefs and objects in the world no longer hang together as they should. The world loses its meaning, causing

disorientation. Still, anxiety is short in duration. Once it passes, *Dasein* claims it to be nothing. Many times, she continues her life as though nothing had occurred.

If she chooses to meditate upon her anxiety, though, she could learn three things about her relationship to Being. First, *Dasein* must take ownership of her existence. Nobody can live her life for her. Second, she realizes that she is more than mere potentiality. She already has beliefs about herself and goals she wishes to obtain. Third, she lives in a world which is not of her own creating. In anxiety, she reformulates her relationship with the world and realizes she lives within one. These lessons help her to live authentically.⁴²⁴

At first, it seems odd to compare the experiences of the Autistic woman to *Dasein's* anxiety because the latter is meant only to last a moment, whereas an Autistic woman's sense of unease may last for years.⁴²⁵ Anxiety may not be as momentary as some argue, however. Matthew Ratcliffe argues that anxiety is a ground mood, which underlines other moods and makes them possible.⁴²⁶ One may always be on the precipice of anxiety, open to the potential of feeling it at any time. Others such as Anthony Vincent Fernandez argue that Heideggerian anxiety is akin to depression. The person who has depression feels as if the world is meaningless. It is difficult to formulate a coherent life

⁴²⁴ Polt 78-79

⁴²⁵ This is true in the case of women such as Gwen, who were diagnosed later in life. They report feeling as if they are living secret lives in pretending not to be Autistic, as well as increases in social anxiety. William, Mandy and Robyn Steward "Women with Autism Hide Complex Struggles Behind Masks" *Spectrum News* September 20, 2016 <https://www.spectrumnews.org/opinion/viewpoint/women-autism-hide-complex-struggles-behind-masks/>

⁴²⁶ Ratcliffe, Matthew "Why Mood Matters" *The Cambridge Companion to Heidegger's Being and Time* (ed. Mark A. Wrathall) Cambridge University Press, New York 2013 (157-177)

narrative, and it is unclear how meaning hangs together. In this way, depression is a type of prolonged Heideggerian anxiety.⁴²⁷

Although depression is a mental illness and Autism is a neurological condition, the two are sometimes co-morbid, meaning it is not wholly inappropriate to compare them. It is also worth noting that many Autistic women report undergoing a process similar to Heideggerian anxiety before receiving their diagnosis. The feelings of the world falling away and not fitting together have been widely reported in the Autistic community. Some Autistic women have gone so far as to burn out, meaning they can no longer tolerate the social norms placed upon them. They withdraw into themselves and report the world is confusing and meaningless. This has led some women to go to a psychiatrist to seek treatment for a condition such as depression, only to receive the diagnosis of Autism. Others research Autism because a family member with the diagnosis behaves similarly to her, which has led to her receiving a diagnosis. After receiving this diagnosis, many Autistic women discuss the moment where their experiences coalesced. They became resolute in who they were, allowing them to build a community which adheres to different norms than those placed upon them by *das Man*.

This chapter will examine the process a woman goes through to claim authenticity. Section I will give a Heideggerian analysis of authenticity. Section II will discuss how Anxiety relates to depression. Then, the phenomenon of Autistic burnout will be analyzed, as well as a path Autistic women can take to claim their authenticity.

Section I: Heidegger on Authenticity

⁴²⁷ Fernandez, Anthony Vincent “Depression as Existential Feeling or De-situatedness? Distinguishing Structure from Mode in Psychopathology” *Phenomenology and the Cognitive Sciences* 13, 595-612, 2014

In order to understand how the Autistic woman views the world, one must understand the process she undergoes to reach her authentic self. Martin Heidegger argues that one is inauthentic when dwelling with *das Man*. The inauthentic *Dasein* defines herself as others do without searching for her own relationship with Being. This is due to *Dasein's* fallen nature. She has drifted away from herself, and is no longer focused on her own Being. In order to regain her relationship with Being, *Dasein* must undergo a process which will expose the kind of being she is, as well as give her insights into her existence.

The first step of becoming authentic is to undergo anxiety, or *Angst*. Anxiety must first be distinguished from fear. Fear is directed towards an object in the world at a certain time. Anxiety is directed towards existence itself. When *Dasein* fears an entity, she flees from it. When she undergoes anxiety, she flees in the face of herself.

In anxiety, objects and relationships in the world are disjointed no longer hang together. This leads *Dasein* to reflect upon her Being and how she is interacting with her world. From this, she learns that existence is always an issue for her. She is not pure possibility, but rather lives in a relationship with her world. She is in a world which gives her opportunities she can either take advantage of, or discard. From this, she is able to forage a new relationship with Being.

As discussed in a previous chapter, *Mitsein* is an ontological structure of *Dasein*. Since *das Man* is a manifestation of *Mitsein*, it is necessary for *Dasein* to be a part of *das Man*. Still, this leads to a certain type of Being, namely fallenness. Heidegger explains,

“In these [idle talk and curiosity], and in the way they are interconnected in their Being, there is a revealed basic kind of Being which belongs to everydayness; we call this the *falling* of *Dasein*.”⁴²⁸ Idle talk is a form of discourse. Discourse is necessary for *Dasein* in order to navigate the world around her. Curiosity is necessary to communicate with Others on their interests. Because of these, both are modes of *Dasein*'s being. Still, the term fallenness denotes that something is lacking in these modes of discourse.

Fallenness seems to have a negative connotation. This seems especially clear when one examined on the Christian concept of a fallen, sinful nature, which influenced Heidegger's thought.⁴²⁹ Still, this does not mean Heidegger sees fallenness as an inherently negative phenomenon. He claims, “This term [fallenness] does not express any negative evaluation, but is used to signify that *Dasein* is proximally and for the most part *alongside* the ‘world’ of its concern.”⁴³⁰ A fallen *Dasein* may become overly interested in gardening. She may not have any vegetable seeds or a yard which could fit a garden; yet she may listen to her friends discussing gardening techniques and read books on the subject. There is nothing inherently wrong with an interest in gardening if one is not a gardener. It is simply a way *Dasein* interacts with Others in her world.

In Christian thought, fallenness is a separation from God and a failure to live up to one's ideal nature. This is not the case for the fallen nature of *Dasein*. Heidegger continues,

⁴²⁸ Heidegger *Being and Time* 219

⁴²⁹ Polt 75

⁴³⁰ Heidegger *Being and Time* 220

Dasein has, in the first instance, fallen away [*abgefallen*] from itself as an authentic potentiality for Being its Self, and has fallen into the ‘world.’ ‘Falleness’ into the ‘world’ means an absorption in Being-with-one-another, in so far as the latter is guided by idle talk, curiosity, and ambiguity.⁴³¹

If a *Dasein* is a cardiologist who is in a fallen state, she behaves in the ways *das Man* expects a doctor to behave. She sees a patient and discusses his diagnosis in the simplest terms possible. When necessary, she prescribes certain medications and if qualified, helps make surgical decisions for a patient. For the most part, she does not dwell on what led her to become a doctor, or what the importance of medicine is in relation to Being. She goes through her life with little reflection.

Falleness is a part of *Dasein*'s Being, but that does not mean that it is a structure of Being. Hubert L. Dreyfus agrees,

Dasein is always absorbed in doing something. All other versions of falling that are associated with inauthenticity, and so would not characterize authentic *Dasein*, cannot qualify as existentials, but are only existentielle possibilities.⁴³²

Someone who engages in idle talk about gardening and only takes a passing interest in it is behaving inauthentically. Someone who is only curious in cardiology but does not have the skill set to be a cardiologist is fallen. Thus, falleness is inherently inauthentic.

It is important to note that inauthenticity can be defined by what it is rather than what it is not. Heidegger explains,

On no account, however, do the terms “inauthentic” and “non-authentic” signify ‘really not’ as if in this mode of Being, *Dasein* were altogether to lose its Being. “Inauthenticity” does not mean anything like Being-no-longer-in-the-world, but amounts to rather a quite distinctive kind of Being-in-the-world—the kind which is completely fascinated by the ‘world’ and by the *Dasein*-with of Others in the “they.”⁴³³

⁴³¹ Ibid

⁴³² Dreyfus, Hubert L. *Being-in-the-World* 227

⁴³³ Heidegger *Being and Time* 220

An inauthentic *Dasein* is someone who allows *das Man* to dictate who she is rather than taking ownership of her existence. An inauthentic teenage *Dasein* may only watch the movies her peers take an interest in, and may read tabloids in order to keep up on the latest gossip her friends are discussing. Still, inauthenticity is a *way* of existence, not a cessation of it. Being-no-longer-in-the-world would equate to death, or the cessation of all existence.

Although Heidegger claims not to condemn fallenness, he implies that it has negative effects on one's relationship with Being. Stephen Mulhall argues,

In short, *Dasein's* average everyday disclosedness is inauthentic. Uprooted by its absorption in the 'they' from any concern for its world and solicitude for its fellow human beings, it is also uprooted from any genuine self-understanding-any grasp of which possibilities are genuinely its own, as opposed to those which 'one' has.⁴³⁴

An inauthentic *Dasein* underestimates herself and does not take every choice into account. If she is looking for a job, she may restrict herself to her local area despite having the financial means to relocate. She may feel as if she must take care of relatives in her town because this is what is expected of women in her family. Instead of seeking what would work best for herself, she seeks to live up to the expectations placed upon her by others by remaining in the area. In this way, she cuts off possibilities, leading to an inauthentic existence.

If most of *Dasein's* everyday interactions are inauthentic, it is worth asking how one becomes authentic. In order to do this, one must understand anxiety. Before one can do that, however, one must understand the distinction between it and fear. *Dasein* flees in

⁴³⁴ Mulhall, Stephen *Routledge Philosophy Guidebook to Heidegger and Being and Time* Routledge New York 2nd Ed 2005; 108

the face of what she fears. While fear discloses aspects of *Dasein's* world, this does not necessarily lead to information on her existence. Heidegger begins,

Our Interpretation of fear as a state-of-mind has shown in each case that in the face of which we fear is a detrimental entity within-the-world which comes from some definite region but is close by and bringing itself close, and yet might stay away.⁴³⁵

A bear is something which can invoke fear in a hiker. It is an entity within the world which occupies a specific location. It could be a hundred feet from the trail, or inches from the hiker's tent. The fear intensifies as the bear approaches, which prompts a response. This response could range from running away, striking the bear with a fallen tree branch, or shooting it in the head if one has a suitable firearm. In this way, the bear invokes fear.

This is not the kind of phenomenon *Dasein* experiences when facing her existence. Heidegger continues,

That in the face of which it thus shrinks back must, in any case, be an entity with the character of threatening; yet this entity has the same kind of Being as the one who shrinks back: it is *Dasein* itself.⁴³⁶

A bear is threatening, yet it cannot meditate upon its existence, nor could it force a *Dasein* to do so. *Dasein* is *Dasein* though. Because of this, *Dasein* undergoes a different experience than fear when facing her existence. Thus, a new term is needed to explain adequately the phenomenon of fleeing in the face of oneself.

Heidegger claims that fear does not arise only from an object in the world, but from the fact that *Dasein* exists at all. He explains, "The turning-away of falling is

⁴³⁵ Ibid 230

⁴³⁶ Ibid

grounded rather in anxiety, which is in turn what first makes fear possible.”⁴³⁷ *Dasein* can only fear bears because she has a grasp of her existence. Since she knows that a stuffed bear is highly unlikely to end her existence, thus, she does not fear it. If she did not understand that a bear attack could cease her existence, she would not be afraid of bears. Because she cares for her existence though, the bear can incite fear. In this way, the mood of anxiety gives rise to the emotion of fear.

Unlike fear, anxiety is not simply an intense emotion. Rather, it distorts how one perceives her world. He writes,

Here, the totality of involvements of the ready-to-hand and the present-at-hand discovered within-the-world, is, as such, of no consequence; it collapses into itself; the world has the character of completely lacking significance. In anxiety, one does not encounter this thing of that thing which, as something threatening, must have an involvement.⁴³⁸

When *Dasein* fears a bear, the world becomes centered upon the animal, and reacts to its presence accordingly. Anxiety has no focus though. The tools which one uses no longer hang together. The meaning of concepts such as “existence” become unraveled. Goals one has become meaningless. The world falls away until it is rendered nonsensical.

Perhaps most disconcerting about anxiety is that unlike fear, it does not originate from a location or spatial object. Heidegger continues,

That in the face of which one has anxiety is characterized by the fact that what threatens is *nowhere*. Anxiety ‘does not know’ what that in the face of which it is anxious is....Therefore that which threatens cannot bring itself close from a definite direction within what is close by; it is already ‘there’ and yet nowhere; it is so close that it is oppressive and stifles one’s breath, and yet it is nowhere.⁴³⁹

⁴³⁷ Ibid

⁴³⁸ Ibid 231

⁴³⁹ Ibid

When *Dasein* experiences anxiety, her emotions and intentions fall into a void. She cannot flee from what she is anxious about because existence itself is an issue. Anxiety comes from no direction; it simply is.

At this point, it may be tempting to believe anxiety is a total separation of *Dasein* and the world. Since it is not in a location, it must lead *Dasein* away from the world.

Dasein cannot be led away from the world though since she is always already in it.

Heidegger explains,

The utter insignificance which makes itself known in the “nothing and nowhere,” does not signify that the world is absent, but tells us that entities within-the-world are of so little importance in themselves that on the basis of this *insignificance* of what is within-the-world, the world in its worldhood is all that still obtrudes itself.⁴⁴⁰

There is nothing intrinsically valuable about a hammer. It only has significance because of how *Dasein* uses it to navigate her world. A carpenter could see the hammer as a tool for building a house, a housewife could see it as a tool to help fix a nail to the wall so she could hang a picture, or a murderer could see it as the weapon she used to perform her deed. In anxiety, the meaning of the hammer is stripped away, though. There is no context for the hammer, so it is rendered nonsensical. *Dasein* feels the world and its meaninglessness press down upon her.

Although anxiety is disconcerting, *Dasein* often brushes it aside and moves about her life. Heidegger concludes, “When anxiety has subsided, then in our everyday way of talking we are accustomed to say ‘it was really nothing.’”⁴⁴¹ *Dasein* does not wish to dwell on such an overwhelming yet peculiar mood. Thus, she often returns to her

⁴⁴⁰ Ibid

⁴⁴¹ Ibid

inauthentic life of idle talk and curiosity, ignoring the nagging feeling that there is more to her existence. In short, the experience may leave no impact upon her.

This is not the best strategy for dealing with anxiety though. If *Dasein* does not ignore this experience, she can gain knowledge about Being. According to Richard Polt, there are three lessons *Dasein* can glean from anxiety. He begins,

First, as he already claimed in §9, my own existence is an issue for me: I am assigned the task of being someone, and the way in which I deal with the possibilities open to me will determine who I am.⁴⁴²

A *Dasein* who attends the university as a student is tasked with determining how best to select a new career. She cannot abdicate the responsibility of taking on a certain role in society since she is the one living her life. Even if she is wealthy enough to have no need to work, she must decide that she wants to sunbathe on her yacht instead of have a career. Choosing not to do anything is still a choice, one which *Dasein* can choose. Thus, she is responsible for creating herself within the possibilities presented to her by *das Man*.

Although each *Dasein* is responsible for creating herself, she does not do so without any reference to her history. Polt continues, “Secondly, I am not *pure* possibility; I already have a life. I am already familiar with an established identity and world—the very world that anxiety is calling into question.”⁴⁴³ The college student *Dasein* must select a career, but she does not do so with no reference to her previous experiences. If she takes an interest in medicine, this is usually rooted in some experience she undergone, such as a desire to emulate a doctor who helped her in the past or an interest in science kindled by a

⁴⁴² Polt 78

⁴⁴³ Ibid 79

teacher. In order to determine if medicine is a possible career choice, she must reflect on whether or not she enjoys the classes she takes in order to obtain her degree, as well as determine what she feels is within her capabilities to do. She does not make her decision independent of her experiences though.

Anxiety does not only ask one to focus upon her existence, but on that of the world as well. Polt concludes,

Thirdly, anxiety can help me realize that I am normally absorbed in my daily tasks, oblivious to both my existentially and facticity. From my anxious state of alienation, I can recognize that I am normally at home in a world I take for granted.⁴⁴⁴

A *Dasein* who is a college student is already in a world of textbooks, exams, professors, and other students. In anxiety, these fall away, forcing her to acknowledge the world of the university. It also forces her to consider what about her world she may want to change. If after experiencing anxiety she decides to change her major from business to medicine, then she is aware of the world of the business she is losing and the potentiality of living in a new one, namely that of medicine. Thus, anxiety imparts invaluable knowledge, assuming *Dasein* is courageous enough to grasp it. If she does, then she can live authentically.

Heidegger argues that *Dasein* is a fallen being. It has become lost in *das Man* and ignored her relationship with Being. He does not believe that this is necessary a negative phenomenon; it is simply the type of being *Dasein* is. Still, this fallenness leads to inauthenticity. An inauthentic *Dasein* is fascinated by the world. She allows others to

⁴⁴⁴ Ibid

dictate her existence and refuses to take responsibility for her own choices. This leads her to become uprooted from her world as well as from others.

When *Dasein* is inauthentic, she flees in the face of herself. This leads her to become estranged from her own Being. This estrangement leads to anxiety. Anxiety differs from fear in that the former is directed towards an object in the world, whereas the latter is directed towards the world itself. While anxiety feels close and distant, it is in no location. Instead, it is a part of *Dasein's* being. This is why once the moment passes, *Dasein* often claims the experience was nothing.

Still, anxiety imparts knowledge that the authentic *Dasein* grasps in order to live her life. First, it exposes that it is *Dasein's* task to take ownership of her existence. She cannot turn her life over to *das Man* and force them to live it for her. Second, anxiety exposes *Dasein* as an entity which is not merely pure possibility. Rather, she must take the potentialities offered to her by *das Man* and live them out in a way which maximizes what she believes is her potential. Third, anxiety exposes *Dasein's* world. Because the world falls away in anxiety, *Dasein* must acknowledge once it concludes that she does in fact live in a world. She must navigate this world in order to reach authenticity, which can be done if she grasps the lessons anxiety intends to impart.

Now that the authenticity of *Dasein* has been discussed, it can be applied to the Autistic woman. Like other *Daseins*, Autistic women undergo anxiety. Once they complete the process though, they learn of their neurological condition. This in turn leads to a new kind of authenticity, one where the feminine Autistic *Dasein* can offer insights into other branches of philosophy.

Section II: Anxiety, Depression, and Autism

The Autistic experience shares many similarities with that described by Heidegger, especially regarding anxiety and authenticity. Under the right circumstances, Heideggerian anxiety could last for an extended period of time. Matthew Ratcliffe discusses how anxiety is a ground mood for *Dasein*. It forms an undercurrent for other moods. He goes so far as to claim we are always potentially able to fall into anxiety. If this is the case, then anxiety may last longer than one moment, making it a useful tool for analyzing the feminine Autistic experience.

Fruitful research has been done to examine how prolonged Heideggerian anxiety may appear. Scholars such as Anthony Vincent Fernandez have examined the link between Heideggerian anxiety and depression. He notes that depression is when the world falls away. It is difficult to discern the meaning in objects and create a coherent life story. This is similar to how things fall away in Heideggerian anxiety, meaning depression could be a type of Heideggerian anxiety.

Although depression and Autism have different origins, the conditions can be comorbid, which means it is not inappropriate to compare them. Growing up, many Autistic girls were taught to suppress their true feelings and curb their behaviors. This leads to a world which is disorienting and inhospitable. Many times, it is rendered meaningless, and it is difficult for the Autistic woman to determine how social norms hang together. She withdraws into herself and feels as though the world lacks meaning. The condition in which an Autistic person withdraws from the world and goes into self-isolation is called burnout.

Like Heideggerian anxiety though, burnout can lead to knowledge. Some women who experience burnout go to a psychiatrist for another condition such as depression, only to receive an Autism diagnosis. Other women may receive one after a loved one receives the diagnosis, and she realizes her behavior is similar. In this way, she can make sense of her past experiences. Then, she can move onto join and form a community, one with norms different than those espoused by *das Man*.

Although every *Dasein* is prone to anxiety, the experience is not as common as one may believe. Richard Polt notes, “Anxiety is rare, and everyday perspective tends to dismiss it as a moment of meaningless confusion.”⁴⁴⁵ This calls into question how long a mood must be in place in order for it to qualify as anxiety. The Autistic journey towards authenticity can last years, if not decades. If this is the case though, then Heidegger’s anxiety may not adequately encompass the Autistic experience since it may only last a moment.

Some scholars have explored the idea that anxiety lasts longer than a mere moment. One such interpretation views anxiety through the lens of Heidegger’s moods, which often last longer than a mere moment. Matthew Ratcliffe begins,

Although Heidegger does not explicitly offer a detailed account of the depth of mood, he does acknowledge that only some moods have the status of being fundamental or “ground” moods (*Grundstimmungen*).⁴⁴⁶

⁴⁴⁵ Polt 76-77

⁴⁴⁶ Ratcliffe, Matthew *Why Mood Matters* 166

All moods are important to *Dasein* because they reveal at least some aspect of the world. Not all moods are created equal though. Some are fleeting and do not disclose Being. Others are more fundamental, and necessary for *Dasein* to interpret her world.

It is worth asking at this point whether or not anxiety could qualify as such a ground mood. Ratcliffe continues, “So, Heidegger searches for a ‘way of disclosure in which *Dasein* brings itself before itself.’ He finds this in the mood of anxiety [*Angst*], which he takes to be a ground mood.”⁴⁴⁷ Because anxiety is a mood which reveals aspects of *Dasein*’s existence, it is one which other moods spring out of. It can be a mood which one flees from, but there is always the potential for developing it.

How deeply anxiety runs is a matter of debate. Ratcliffe argues,

However, Heidegger sometimes indicates that we do not *become* anxious at all but are somehow anxious all the time....he later indicates that anxiety is never absent but is instead “covered up” (277), as though were something laying dormant, with the threat of its awakening quietly permeating all of our experiences.⁴⁴⁸

Since anxiety is the most fundamental of moods, it could last longer than a few moments. It has the potential to last months or in extreme cases, years. Still, this only raises the question of how anxiety experienced over the course of years would appear.

One candidate for prolonged Heideggerian anxiety could be clinical depression. One such scholar who has examined this connection is Anthony Vincent Fernandez. He focuses not only on how depression is similar to Heideggerian anxiety on a phenomenological level, but on an ontological one as well. He begins,

However, if we join with Heidegger (and Ratcliffe) in believing that certain ground moods (or existential feelings) are in fact world-disclosive, both revealing the world

⁴⁴⁷ Ibid 167

⁴⁴⁸ Ibid 168

through a context of significance and situating us within this significance, the profundity associated with the loss or degradation of this structure of existence becomes immense.⁴⁴⁹

A loss of *Dasein's* sense of the world can be just as traumatic as fleeing in the face of oneself. In losing the world, one becomes disoriented and loses her sense of grounding. Without this, she cannot make sense of her surroundings or create meaning. Due to this, she is so deep in anxiety that it is as if she has no mood at all.

Through an analysis of depression, one can begin to grasp the existential predicament the Autistic woman faces. Fernandez analyzes depression as follows,

The world is still there, but not as forcefully as it once was...Cultural practices, personal, professional, and family roles all lose significance. The sense of the future bringing anything meaningful, either positive or negative, is either absent or severely eroded. The past, too, offers little to stand on. If you are still capable of reflecting upon your situation, who you were and who you are ceases to offer a space of possibilities.⁴⁵⁰

If a depressed person has goals, he may feel as if they are unobtainable. The past is seen as a tragic series of events which are doomed to repeat themselves. The erosion of all emotions means he cannot feel excitement towards any event, and finds most objects meaningless. Thus, the depressed person is in a prolonged state of meaningless suspension, something akin to a prolonged sense of Heideggerian anxiety.

The experience of depression is common in the Autistic community. According to Cheryl Platzman Weinstock,

They [Autistic people] are four times more likely than neurotypicals to experience depression over the course of their lives, although scientists are unsure why. Their rates of depression rise with intelligence and with age.⁴⁵¹

⁴⁴⁹ Fernandez, 605

⁴⁵⁰ Ibid

⁴⁵¹ Weinstock, Cheryl Platzmai "The Deep Emotional Ties between Depression and Autism" *Spectrum* July 31, 2019 <https://www.spectrumnews.org/features/deep-dive/the-deep-emotional-ties-between-depression-and-autism/>

While not all Autistic people will develop depression, the conditions can be co-morbid. There are several potential reasons for this, such as the risk of Autistic burnout or chemical imbalances. Thus any analysis of depression could be applied to segments of the Autistic populations, with a few subtle differences.

The guilt and shame an Autistic person feels usually begins in childhood. Lei Wiley-Mydske, an Autistic woman, writes, “Growing up, I wish my parents had known that teaching me to fight for my rights was more important than forcing me to fit in.”⁴⁵² Many parents do not understand Autism when they have an Autistic child. Because of this, they face additional challenges when teaching a child how to function in society. If they teach their child to behave independently, then the child may behave so abnormally others cannot relate to her. If they teach her to be too submissive to others though, they could be setting her up for others to take advantage of her. This dilemma puts many parents of Autistic children in a bind, one which is difficult to navigate.

The differences between their daughter and other children can often lead parents to misinterpret their child’s behavior and suppress behaviors they deem undesirable.

Wiley-Mydske continues,

I was conditioned early to know that saying, “no” was not an option, certain “atypical” behaviors needed to be eliminated, and being compliant made me “good.” I spent lots of time learning to deny my natural impulses and feelings in order to conform to what was expected of a “good girl.”⁴⁵³

⁴⁵² Wiley-Mydske, Lei “Change Your World, Not Your Child” *What Every Autistic Girl Wishes Her Parents Knew* DragonBee Press, United States of America, 2017; 55

⁴⁵³ Ibid

Repetitive body movements, also called stimming, is a way for many Autistic people to relax. The behavior is outside the norm, though. Due to this, the behavior is suppressed despite the fact that for many Autistic people, stimming is a form of self-soothing.

Suppressing an important coping mechanism is not sustainable throughout one's life, and can lead to several problems.

At this point, one could argue that there is nothing special about the Autistic woman's case. Many people must resist their impulses in order to conform to the norms set forth by *das Man*. Still, most people are able to grow out of their behavior. They do not internalize the guilt associated with failing to live up to the standards set forth by *das Man*. Rudy Simone explains,

In addition to the embarrassment of having our stims pointed out to us, we will have all of our other idiosyncrasies pointed out as well, one after another, starting when we're young-by our families, our friends, our teachers, and everyone else who might be a witness. We are blamed for our erratic and often uncontrollable behavior. Even those who were well behaved were blamed for social awkwardness and botched interactions.⁴⁵⁴

When dissecting the social interactions between Autistic and non-Autistic people, the behavior of the Autistic person is emphasized. It is automatically assumed that if any breakdown in communication occurs between an Autistic and non-autistic person, that it was the fault of the former. Treatment for Autism focuses on curbing the behavior of the Autistic person, not on promoting neurodiversity in wider society. Since the non-Autistic person more closely aligns with *das Man*, they bear no responsibility in learning about Autism or conforming their behavior to be more accepting.

⁴⁵⁴ Simone, Rudy *Aspergirls* Jessica Kingsley Publications, Philadelphia 2010; 53

This blame becomes internalized within the Autistic person, leading to a change in her psychology. Simone continues, “Because we never knew what we did wrong, a profound sense of confusion, alienation, and *guilt* crept into our psyches, displacing normal childhood emotions.”⁴⁵⁵ This self-doubt invades every aspect of the Autistic woman’s life. It causes her to doubt her own perceptions and how she interacts with others. This can lead to a feeling as if she is not at home in the world.

Even if an Autistic woman is able to go through the motions of a social interaction perfectly, she faces difficulties. Conforming to the norms set forth by *das Man* can be emotionally taxing for the Autistic person. Milly, an Autistic patient, explains,

For me, the main part of having Asperger’s is my “social battery.” I have a certain amount of energy in my battery each week, but by the end of the week most of it will have been used up. I need to recharge it by having some time alone where I can just be myself, but if I don’t manage this I end up very stressed and anxious.⁴⁵⁶

Solitude can be the only refuge an Autistic person finds from the world. When alone, she does not fear Others judging her or blaming her for the breakdown in social interactions. In this way she can recollect herself so she can interact more effectively with *das Man*.

While solitude can be a comfort, for some it is suffocating. Heidi Wangelin explains,

Loneliness was the hardest part of growing up, more than bullying ever was. ...I thought most people didn’t like me. I knew my parents loved me and the teachers liked me, but I honestly thought people my own age didn’t like me.⁴⁵⁷

⁴⁵⁵ Ibid

⁴⁵⁶ Bullivant, Fiona Fischer *Working with Girls and Young Adult Women with an Autism Spectrum Condition* Jessica Kingsley Publications, Philadelphia PA 2018; 56

⁴⁵⁷ Wangelin, Heidi “What I Wish My Parents Knew About Being Their Autistic Daughter” *What Every Autistic Girl Wishes Her Parents Knew* (eds. Emily Paige Ballou, Kristina Thomas, and Sharon daVanport) DragonBee Press, United States of America, 2017; 62

One of the reasons Autistic people are often considered to be solitary is that they are aware of how different they are from their peers. If everything is the Autistic woman's fault, then she, and not societal attitudes towards the disabled, are the problem. A gulf forms between her and her peers. Given the choice, the Autistic person may choose an inauthentic existence over the loneliness and blame she must face from her peers.

Much of this guilt and blame leads to an Autistic woman feeling estranged from the world. Jen Elcheson, an Autistic woman, explains,

I somehow knew from the age of two and a half that there was something profoundly different about me and that it was the result of the workings of my brain....Navigating the outer world seemed so easy for everyone, but not for me. It was downright nonsensical, chaotic, and muddled.⁴⁵⁸

As in anxiety, the world falls apart for the Autistic woman. Norms which are intuitive for non-Autistic people are strange to the Autistic woman. Rules such as “don't lie,” are routinely violated by non-Autistic peers, seemingly without reason, making it difficult for the Autistic woman to make sense of social situations. The world falls away into chaos.

The testimony of one Autistic woman feeling as if she was not at home in the world is not enough to draw a definitive conclusion on the experiences of most Autistic women. Still, clinicians have noted others who share Jen Elcheson's confusion of the outside world. Dori Zener notes,

Undiagnosed autistic women struggle to function in this sensory-social world without the knowledge that they are on the spectrum and the explanation and tools that the diagnosis can provide. They describe feeling different from others from a young age whether they escaped into their imaginary world or books, delved into interests with an intensity that peers could not relate to, or just always felt like they did not fit in.⁴⁵⁹

⁴⁵⁸ Elcheson, Jen and Barb Cook “Growing Up on the Spectrum” *Spectrum Women* Jessica Kingsley Publications, Philadelphia, PA 2018; 33

⁴⁵⁹ Zener 3

By taking an intense interest in a subject, the Autistic girl provides order to her life. She can structure her life around something predictable which she can make sense of, or at least desires to learn more about. This is a double-edged sword though since her peers may not be able to relate to her passions. In return, this further isolates her from Others, leading to deeper feelings of estrangement from the world.

It is not only social situations which create stress for the Autistic woman. Even her own body can be a source of anxiety. Zener continues,

Their intense sensory processing experiences made life scary and unpredictable. Difficulties with emotional processing and overload led to outbursts or meltdowns invoking deep-seated embarrassment and shame.⁴⁶⁰

Most people feel no pain when they hear a machine beeping to remove a credit card from a machine. To an Autistic woman though, this noise may lead to a headache. The shape and sudden pain may distract her from the goal of paying for her items and lead her to cover her ears and crumple to the floor. Once the meltdown ends, she may feel embarrassed that she could not shop as a non-Autistic person could. She may feel defective and wonder why she cannot perform a simple task such as paying for her groceries when those around her could. In this way, she experiences something akin to Heidegger's analysis of anxiety.

Like Heideggerian anxiety, an Autistic woman's depression, often called burnout, can lead to the revelation that she is Autistic. Zener describes it as follows,

Autistic burnout is the emotional, physical and mental exhaustion caused by the cumulative effect of excessive and prolonged stress from having to consciously think

⁴⁶⁰ Ibid

through every life process. After years of performing at a high level, women can suddenly hit a wall.⁴⁶¹

Like the person with depression, the Autistic person is overwhelmed by the world. She finds that she is unable to function since nothing hangs together properly. After years of trying to live up to everyone's standards, she withdraws into herself and loses the will to socialize. To the outsider, the condition appears similar to that of depression, but the origin is different.

No two Autistic people experience burnout the same way. Sarah Deweerdt explains,

Like many aspects of autism, burnout varies greatly from person to person. Some autistic people experience it as an overwhelming sense of physical exhaustion. They may have more difficulty managing their emotions than usual and be prone to outbursts of sadness or anger. Burnout may manifest as intense anxiety or contribute to depression or suicidal behavior. It may involve an increase in autism traits such as repetitive behaviors, increased sensitivity to sensory input or difficulty with change.⁴⁶²

Burnout may present itself in an Autistic woman staying bed all day. She may unpredictably burst into tears, or begin raging over minor issues. Florescent lights may become more painful, and she may engage in repetitive behaviors more often. Most tellingly though, she may begin to experience symptoms akin to major depression, making her experiences akin to Heideggerian anxiety.

Like depression, burnout is a type of anxiety which can take years to recover from. Zener explains,

This experience is often first identified as severe depression, but then a thorough history can reveal underlying sensory, social and behavioral challenges. It can take years to fully

⁴⁶¹ Zener 10

⁴⁶² Deweerdt, Sarah "Autistic Burnout, Explained" *Spectrum* March 30, 2020 <https://www.spectrumnews.org/news/autistic-burnout-explained/>

recover from burnout, and most people never return to the level of activity and performance they previously sustained.⁴⁶³

Like depression, the experience of burnout has lasting effects on the person who suffers from it. After emerging from it, an Autistic woman may be less likely to socialize, or could have difficulty understanding her boundaries. Conversely, it could have the effect of leading her to receive an Autism diagnosis.

One such instance of a woman who sought out a diagnosis after depression is Erin Human. She writes,

My story is a common one: the adult autistic who pushes themselves too far beyond or outside the boundaries of their neurological makeup, for too long, in order to keep up with the demands of the neurotypical lifestyle, will eventually burn out. And that's when we finally seek the answer to a question that's been at the back of our minds for most of our lives: exactly *why* am I different from those other people?⁴⁶⁴

As with anxiety, Autistic burnout leads to knowledge about her condition. Often, this occurs because an Autistic woman sees a psychiatrist who brings Autism up as a possible diagnosis. It could also occur because she does research onto why she may feel as she does, leading her to the conclusion that she is Autistic. Regardless, this type of anxiety leads to knowledge about her being, which could in turn help her restructure her world.

Getting this clinical diagnosis may not come easily. Many Autistic people only come to the realization that they are Autistic through analyzing their life experiences.

William Mandy and Robyn Steward discuss the story of Gwen, a woman diagnosed with Autism in her 30's. They write,

In her 20s, Gwen received treatment for anxiety and depression, and as she was helped to reflect on her experiences and feelings, it dawned on her that she might have autism. A

⁴⁶³ Zener 10

⁴⁶⁴ Human, Erin "Emerging from Burnout" *Knowing Why: Adult-Diagnosed Autistic People on Life and Autism* (ed. Elizabeth Bartmess) The Autistic Press United States of America 2018 (11-19); 12

psychologist validated her self-assessment with an official diagnosis, and Gwen's life finally started to make sense to her.⁴⁶⁵

Like anxiety, one begins to recover from Autistic burnout by taking stock of her existence. She notes the experiences where she had difficulties reading the nonverbal cues of others, or the sensory difficulties she has when in a crowd. Through this analysis, she can begin the process of coming to terms with her condition.

After examining her experiences, she can begin to learn about her condition, which could lead to a resolution to the crisis of burnout, as it did in the case of Gwen.

Mandy and Steward continue,

She now understood why she found it so hard to get along with people at school and work, and whenever she noticed herself feeling overwhelmed in noisy, crowded shops, she realized that this was part of the sensory sensitivity that comes with autism. She now derives strength from her sense of belonging to the autism community, and is enjoying a growing sense of pride as a woman with autism.⁴⁶⁶

Gwen now has the knowledge she needs to navigate her life. She can make accommodations for herself in crowded shops, such as noise cancelling earphones or relaxing exercises. Many of the issues she has faced in life are now explainable, instead of her simply being odd. With this knowledge, she can join the Autistic community and work towards a more authentic existence.

Depression and burnout are not the only ways to receive an Autism diagnosis later in life. Often, the search for a diagnosis is a result not of a woman suspecting she has Autism, but because she is seeking to understand a relative's behavior, usually a child.

Dori Zener explains,

⁴⁶⁵ Mandy

⁴⁶⁶ Ibid

Often women come to realize that they have autism during the process of a family member's diagnosis. For some, this begins when a mother has a young child who is not meeting milestones and is referred for a developmental pediatric assessment. Parents relate to their son or daughter's habits and think, "they are just like me."⁴⁶⁷

Since the Autistic woman in this scenario is an adult, a psychologist may not be interested in diagnosing her initially. Still, the child's diagnosis can illuminate the mother's past behavior. If the mother is at risk of burnout or becoming weary of feeling like the outsider, she may fight for a diagnosis. In this way, she could gain knowledge of herself which could lead to authenticity.⁴⁶⁸

Once the Autistic woman finds her voice, she is able to build a community by reaching out to other Autistics. She can peruse the internet to find groups of people with her condition, or can find other ways to organize within the Autistic community. Zener explains,

For many women, autism becomes their intense interest and they become experts on the condition. Women who do their own research and seek the diagnosis as a confirmation of their autism express pride, relief and validation for finally being seen and understood. They wear their diagnosis as a badge of honor. They are often already a part of the autistic community on social media like Facebook and Twitter.⁴⁶⁹

By claiming an Autistic identity, the Autistic woman claims not only an identity, but a community. Although *das Man* exists in the Autistic community as well, finding similar people can create a more accepting society, where norms are more accommodating to the Autistic experience. The Autistic woman not only finds a new way of interpreting her world, but discovers a new world she was always already a part of. In this way, she becomes authentic.

⁴⁶⁷ Zener 8

⁴⁶⁸ To read one such story of this occurring, see Wiley, Liane Holliday *Pretending to be Normal*

⁴⁶⁹ Zener 11

Comparing Heideggerian anxiety and Autistic burnout leads to some interesting philosophical conclusions, in large part because of the nature of anxiety. Matthew Ratcliffe argues that anxiety is a fundamental mood. Because it underlies many other moods, there is always a risk of falling into anxiety. From this interpretation, anxiety could last anywhere from a few moments to years.

Fruitful research has been conducted comparing Heideggerian anxiety of depression. Anthony Vincent Fernandez gives an account of depression as an all-encompassing mood. It is a condition in which the world falls away and no longer hangs together. The depressed person can no longer create a coherent life narrative or make meaning in their world. In this way, depression changes one's existential outlook. Since many Autistic women suffer from depression, an analysis of this mental illness can shed light into their experiences.

Autistic women are taught from a young age to suppress their condition in order to fit in with their peers. This causes guilt and shame in the Autistic woman. It can create confusion because the world hangs together well for the non-Autistic woman, but not the Autistic one. Often the woman retreats into her interests or solitude in order to escape the world. This can lead to further social isolation and loneliness though, which exacerbates the condition.

The mounting guilt, shame, and confusion cumulates in Autistic burnout. This is when the world falls away for the Autistic woman and she is left to reconfigure it. Often this leads to her seeing a therapist for depression, only to receive the Autism diagnosis in addition to it. Conversely, she could research the condition and conclude she meets the

criteria for it. This could lead to a diagnosis. She may also receive a diagnosis after noticing a loved one who has been diagnosed is behaving as she does. After this diagnosis, she can begin to make sense of her world, perhaps even leading to living a more authentic life, one which encompasses her identity as an Autistic woman.

Conclusion

Heidegger argues that *Dasein* is by nature, a fallen entity. Although fallen is not meant to have a negative connotation, it does explain the everyday way in which *Dasein* interacts with her world. Because she is fallen, she is inauthentic, meaning she does not take ownership of her relationship to Being. It takes a mood to awaken and call her to authenticity.

In order to understand anxiety, one must understand how it differs from fear. Fear is directed towards an entity in the world and demands a certain action. Anxiety is not directed towards anything in the world. Instead, it is a mood in which the world falls away. Objects and concepts in the world no longer hang together as they once did. Once the mood passes, the person experiencing it often declares it to be nothing.

Anxiety should not be ignored, but analyzed. It exposes three facts about *Dasein's* relationship with Being. First, existence is an issue for *Dasein* and nobody can decide how she will live out her life. Second, *Dasein* is not simply pure possibility. She is already in a world which shapes what is possible. Third, *Dasein* is in a world she must navigate. These facts can lead her to engage in a more authentic existence.

At first, authenticity would seem to have little to do with the Autistic experience. This is not the case though. Many Autistic women discuss being blamed for the

breakdowns in relationships. Their stims are mocked instead of analyzed, leading to them being suppressed. Because of this, Autistic women often report loneliness and more interestingly, a sense of the world falling away and no longer fitting together.

Some may argue that the Autistic woman's sense of the world falling away is only tangentially related to anxiety. Heideggerian anxiety is only meant to last a moment, but these women report feeling as they do over the course of years. Still, there is research done into the connection between Heidegger's anxiety and depression. Anthony Vincent Fernandez explores depression, arguing that like Heideggerian anxiety, the world falls away. In depression, there is no more grounds from the world. The world is eroded away. This is of particular interest to Autistic women, who often experience depression as a co-morbid condition. Thus comparing the two conditions is not wholly inappropriate.

The Autistic woman often feels shame and guilt from the time she is a child. She is taught to suppress her urges such as stimming and is often unable to navigate complex social situations. This can lead to the feeling that the world does not hang together. Situations are disjointed and lack meaning. In extreme cases, this leads to Autistic burnout, or a period of time in which the Autistic person can no longer socialize. Instead, she is overwhelmed by the demands of the world and withdraws from it.

Like Heideggerian anxiety though, the Autistic woman can come through her experiences with a renewed sense of self. There are a few ways a diagnosis could be disclosed. First, one could experience Autistic burnout. She could also discover they have Autism when a family member is diagnosed with the condition. Regardless of how the Autistic woman receives a diagnosis, it may lead her to become intensely interested in

her condition. She could devote her spare time to researching it and, perhaps more importantly, finding a community. This community can unite and form new norms, ones which are no longer under the constraints of *das Man*.

The final chapter will examine how this new identity could appear. It will be divided between those who identify as female, and those who identify as androgynous. From this analysis, some patterns of how Autistic women live authentically should emerge.

Chapter VII

A Phenomenology of the Feminine Autistic Experience

Now that a framework for analyzing the Autistic feminine experience has been created, a proper phenomenological analysis of these Autistic women's experiences can be undertaken. First and foremost, a common Autistic saying cannot be emphasized enough: "If you've met one person with autism, you've met one person with autism."⁴⁷⁰ Thus, any phenomenology of Autistic femininity can only examine trends, with the understanding that all Autistic women have different experiences. These trends can still shed light on Autistic experiences though, meaning an examination of them is valuable.

There are two major trends which one notes when examining Autistic women. One trend indicates that Autistic girls are much more similar to their non-Autistic female peers than the Extreme Male Brain Theory would lead one to believe. Some Autistic are often more linguistically adept than their male Autistic peers. On average, bonds between two girls tend to rely more on speech than relationships between two boys. If an Autistic girl is linguistically gifted, she may have an easier time relating to her female peers than many may believe. So, it is appropriate to note the similarities between Autistic and non-Autistic women when creating a phenomenology of the feminine Autistic experience.

Other Autistic people identify as sexually androgynous. They feel as if Autism gives them an ability to explore their gender identity more freely. Some may dress in a traditionally more masculine manner, while others may dress androgynously. Regardless,

⁴⁷⁰ "105 Favorite Quotes About Autism and Asperger's" *The Art of Autism* March 30, 2020

they forge a new conception of gender, one which is worthy of phenomenological exploration.

Section I: Feminine Autism

For some Autistic women, authenticity entails fully embracing their gender. Some may argue that this would be difficult given that many Autistic women are thought of as more masculine than their non-autistic female peers. Still, there is evidence that the gulf between Autistic and non-Autistic women may not be as wide as suspected. Research suggests there are similarities in how Autistic and non-Autistic girls develop satisfactory friendships. Like their non-Autistic peers, Autistic girls tend to build relationships based on talking, not simply in engaging in activities with others. Autistic girls also seek the same qualities in a friend as their feminine non-Autistic peers do. In these ways, an Autistic woman relates to her femininity.

Despite these similarities, there are key differences in how an Autistic and non-Autistic woman interact with each other. When two non-Autistic girls are in conflict, they tend to talk until a compromise is reached. If an Autistic girl has a conflict with another girl, she tends to take an “all or nothing” approach.” Either she accepts full responsibility for the conflict, or dumps the friend. This could lead to a vulnerability to abuse, and/or social isolation.

Relationships between Autistic women and their peers are complicated by other factors such as race. Many Autistic women who are of color report enduring micro-aggressions, but feeling unable to lash out. Exacerbating this problem is they don't know if they are perceiving the situation correctly since they have such difficulty in deciphering

non-verbal cues. Due to their minority statuses, Autistic women of color are less likely to fight back, which can lead to distress despite their feminine identity.

Traditionally feminine ways of socializing may be closed off to many Autistic women as well. Gail Pennington notes that social occasions such as cooking before a meal can prove stressful for some Autistic women. An Autistic woman may be unable to multitask, or engage fully in the conversation. This can lead to social isolation since she is not engaging in the activities many of her feminine peers are doing.

It must be noted though that these issues do not mean that Autistic women feel estranged from their femininity. Many are happy in their gender identity, and do not wish to change it. Their version of authenticity is to redefine what womanhood means and how one expresses it without discarding their femininity altogether.

One way of exploring the similarities between Autistic and non-Autistic women is how they view friendship and interact with their peers. This analysis is key given that femininity is often thought of in terms set forth by the non-Autistic *das Man*. If a girl is comfortable in her femininity, then she may need to fit into certain norms, making an analysis of them key. Felicity Sedgwick, Vivian Hill, and Elizabeth Pellicano, researchers of Autistic friendship, begin,

Although a recent review of research into autistic children's friendships (Mean ages between 10.34 and 13.94 years) found they had fewer friends than neurotypical children, autistic children were highly satisfied with their friendships (Petrina et al., 2014). Friendships with non-autistic children ('mixed friendships') build better social and linguistic skills and may be of higher 'quality' than non- mixed friendships (Bauminger et al., 2008b).⁴⁷¹

⁴⁷¹Sedgwick, Felicity, Vivian Hill and Elizabeth Pelicanno "It's Different for Girls': Gender Differences in the Friendships and Conflict of Autistic and Neurotypical Adolescents" *Autism* Vol. 23(5) 2018, 1119-1132; 1119

Despite the stereotype that Autistic people have difficulty socializing with others, they can form and maintain friendships. This is especially key in childhood development, when peers form an integral part of one's identity. As one gains independence from one's family, one requires others to help form and maintain an identity.⁴⁷² Since friendships are so key in forming an identity, it is important to analyze what these friendships are and how they influence notions of gender.

A proper analysis of Autistic friendships must take gender into account, given that Autistic boys and girls tend to express themselves differently. Sedgwick et al. explain,

First, autistic boys and girls socialise in distinct ways. Kuo et al. (2013) found that autistic boys tended to play with friends, whereas autistic girls mostly talked with theirs, despite similar amounts of socialising overall. These skills may allow autistic girls to maintain closer and more empathetic friendships – and, ultimately, to interact as neurotypical girls expect.⁴⁷³

Whether due to genetics or socialization, Autistic girls can more easily mask their linguistic difficulties than their male counterparts, if they have any at all. When interacting with girls, this gives an Autistic girl an advantage over an Autistic boy since it is easier for the two females to relate to each other via spoken communication. In focusing more on linguistic communication than simply playing with their peers, an Autistic girl is expressing her femininity, at least in relation to her peers.

The ability to speak with non-Autistic girls does not mean one can ignore her Autistic identity. The researchers continue,

⁴⁷² Gray, Sarah, Helena Romaniuk and Galina Daraganova “Adolescents’ Relationships with Their Peers” *Australian Institute of Family Studies* November 2018 <https://aifs.gov.au/publications/adolescents-relationships-their-peers>

⁴⁷³ Sedgwick et al. 1119

Second, although some research has highlighted that autistic girls have difficulties socialising with neurotypical girls (Cridland et al., 2014), these challenges do not prevent them from forming friendships altogether.⁴⁷⁴

One should not downplay the difficulties Autism can create. If one has difficulty in deciphering non-verbal cues, then one will struggle to understand when one is becoming upset, which in turn can lead to misunderstandings. An Autistic girl may annoy her female peer, but the latter is hoping the former deciphers on her unspoken cues to stop her behavior. When this does not occur, the non-Autistic peer may lash out, leaving the Autistic girl confused. This can in turn lead to conflict. With communication though, these issues can be resolved. Given that many Autistic girls do relate to their peers by speaking, there is hope for these relationships to be maintained over time.

Autistic girls tend to view their relationships the way non-Autistic women view theirs as well. The researchers argue, “Third, autistic girls rate their best-friendships (as indexed by the Friendship Qualities Scale (FQS)) as more like those of non-autistic girls than autistic (and non- autistic) boys.”⁴⁷⁵ The FQS measures several areas of friendship, such as closeness, acceptance, help, and safety. In order to measure these traits, statements such as “I believe all the information given by my friends” and “my friends help me to solve problems” are posed.⁴⁷⁶ The participant must then state how much they agree or disagree with them. By answering similarly to a non-Autistic peer, an Autistic girl may take the first step in claiming her feminine identity.

⁴⁷⁴ Ibid

⁴⁷⁵ Ibid

⁴⁷⁶ Thien, Lei Mee, Nordin Abd Razak, and Hazri Jamil "Friendship Quality Scale: Conceptualization, Development and Validation" *Australian Association for Research in Education* December 2012 <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED542465.pdf>

At this juncture, one could argue that only Autistic girls are being discussed.

Embracing one's gender identity is a lifelong process, not one which ends in adolescence.

These similarities exist in adulthood as well though. The researchers note,

These distinctions between autistic males and females appear to extend into adulthood. Although some women report social difficulties (Bargiela et al., 2016; Hayward et al., 2016), many autistic women identify supportive relationships as key to being successful (Webster and Garvis, 2016). Indeed, 80% of autistic women in one study reported being satisfied with their social lives (Baldwin and Costley, 2015), even if they had also experienced social difficulties.⁴⁷⁷

Although an Autistic woman has difficulties forming a they-self, many eventually discover a way to live amongst *das Man*. If she is fortunate, there may even be some relationships where she is permitted to be authentically Autistic. Thus, an analysis of Autistic friendships in girls is fruitful when analyzing how adult Autistic women interact with their peers.

So far, only the similarities of Autistic and non-Autistic girls have been emphasized. Still, Autism affects socialization. The researchers are careful to take these concerns into account. They begin,

Arguing with friends was discussed by all girls, most commonly about gossip and changing group dynamics – ‘people saying things, gossip ... then they have a massive falling out’ (AG). Indeed, instances of relational conflict were discussed in detail, which, even if resolved, had a lasting impact on their friendships.⁴⁷⁸

Stereotypically, girls are more likely to talk to their peers. This often means gossip inevitably becomes a problem. Someone claims another friend is trying to steal the listener's boyfriend, which can lead to fights amongst all three members. Instead of focusing their aggression on the male in question and ascertaining his true intentions, the

⁴⁷⁷ Sedgwick, et al. 1120

⁴⁷⁸ Ibid 1125

girls fight amongst themselves for his affection. This could lead to an irreparable damage in the relationships amongst all parties. This type of conflict could happen in dynamics involving only non-Autistic girls, but could become complicated by an Autistic girl who is unaware of complex social dynamics and has difficult socializing.

There are key differences in how non-Autistic and Autistic girls deal with this issue. The researchers explain,

For major disagreements (as opposed to minor bickering), neurotypical girls described conflict resolution as a reciprocal process with joint problem-solving: ‘we decide to sit down and talk about it’ (NG).⁴⁷⁹

If two girls can read each other’s body language, this can allow them to determine a workable solution to their issue. If one girl is afraid that another is attempting to steal her boyfriend, she may be able to tell from the supposed thief’s body language that her relationship with him is purely platonic. The supposed thief may also see that the girlfriend’s feelings are injured by her relationship with the boy. This may lead to the former cutting all ties with the boy, or for the girlfriend to decide her friend is worth more than the boyfriend in question. In this way, conflicts are resolved.

Autistic girls are somewhat different in their approach though. The researchers explain,

In contrast, autistic girls described an ‘all-or-nothing’ approach, either taking sole responsibility for what had happened (‘I would very quickly apologise to her’, AG) or ending the friendship entirely, seeing the other person as the wrong-doer (‘I’m just like, ‘why did you lie?’, AG), or feeling it could not be resolved (‘we stopped being friends’, AG).⁴⁸⁰

⁴⁷⁹ Ibid

⁴⁸⁰ 1125-1126

Since the Autistic girl cannot read her peers' body language, she may decide upon an expedient way to resolve a problem. By taking full responsibility, she ends the conflict by assuaging the other's feelings. This restores social harmony, albeit often at the price of the Autistic girl suppressing her feelings. If the Autistic girl leaves the friendship, this removes her from the drama as well. Although this could lead to feelings of loneliness, this may also protect her from a toxic relationship, a defense mechanism her non-Autistic peers may be more reluctant to employ.

Interestingly, one area where Autistic girls seem to have little conflict is in determining how high up one is on the social hierarchy. The researchers argue, "Autistic girls did not mention this competition [the competition for social standing], suggesting they were unaware of the dynamics between their neurotypical peers."⁴⁸¹ By staying out of competition, the Autistic girl may enhance her relationships. If there is less competition for social standing, there is less of a risk of conflict. Thus, Autism could strengthen relationships in a way that's not immediately obvious simply by ignoring social conventions such as a female hierarchy.

Although Autistic women often have relationships similar to that of other women, this does not mean that the bonds are always close. This becomes especially clear in relations between white women and women of color. S. Henderson, a woman of color, explains, "White women make me feel unsafe, the insidious abuse and micro aggressions from them are far worse than the more overtly negative experiences with males which is

⁴⁸¹ Ibid

saying a lot.”⁴⁸² Many people of color report being victims of micro aggressions. Autistic people of color face have the added pressure of not understanding whether or not they are misreading the situation, experiencing racism, or if something else had taken place.⁴⁸³ This creates an added level of discomfort when navigating interracial relations, especially in environments when such relations are already tense.

Despite the confusion in navigating these relations, there are clear indicators that Autistic women of color have difficulty interacting with white women. Henderson continues,

White women have gone out of their self-righteous way to harm me, and my character specifically while maintaining their image of moral superiority. FYI white women just because I don't resort to physical violence doesn't mean I can stand your passive aggressive condescending selves; it means I resent that I will have harsher consequences than you if I were to do so and that my actions as a woman of color would be deemed a problem of character rather than just a mistake that human beings make, like they are considered just mistakes when you do the worst of things.⁴⁸⁴

In previous chapters, it has been discussed that the Autistic woman is accused of lacking empathy. For many, this means that if there is a problem between an Autistic and non-Autistic person, the former is blamed for the issue. The blame is more likely to be assigned if race is involved given racial tensions and stereotypes in US culture. Since the racial minority is often more likely to be seen as the aggressor, the member of a racial majority has the advantage.⁴⁸⁵ Still, this demonstrates that Autistic people often feel

⁴⁸² Henderson, S “Stereotypes” *All the Weight of Our Dreams* DragonBee Press Lincoln, Nebraska 2017, 231-232

⁴⁸³ For a more thorough analysis of these issues, see Oniawu, Morénike Giwa “Don't Let Them Be Autistic...” *All the Weight of Our Dreams* DragonBee Press Lincoln, Nebraska 2017; 85-87

⁴⁸⁴ Henderson 232

⁴⁸⁵ See Oniawu, Morénike Giwa for more information

vulnerable and marginalized in relationships with other women. This can inhibit them from forming friendships, especially with their non-Autistic peers.

Autistic women are not unaware of the vulnerability they have when interacting with other women. Using the matrix of domination, S. Henderson dissects why an Autistic woman may feel as if she is the vulnerable party in an encounter. She explains,

As it became more evident that some individuals are deemed more credible than others simply by virtue of their class, race, gender, and so on it became more clear to me that I'm not part of any of those groups of people who are given consideration, as I have such a great fear of not being able to provide evidence of my encounters....⁴⁸⁶

This could explain the “all or nothing” thinking Autistic women exhibit towards their peers. If Autistic people are viewed as being at fault for a breakdown in empathy and are not in a position to explain themselves, they often find it easier to leave the situation rather than fight for their viewpoint. This is not only for emotional protection, but perhaps physical and in some cases legal as well. Although there is not enough space to give an adequate account of how race intersects with Autism, it must be noted that this is an issue which often determines how an Autistic woman lives authentically amongst *das Man*.

Exacerbating the issue is that many Autistic people do not feel a natural connection with other women. Gail Pennington explains,

I never could relate to females, as a child or a teen... So much of what they say and do is foreign to me. I am not into clothes, makeup, hair, shopping, decorating, cooking, all the things that seem so very important to most of them.⁴⁸⁷

⁴⁸⁶ Henderson 232

⁴⁸⁷ Pennington, Gail “On Being a Woman” *Women From Another Planet?* (ed. Jean Kearns Miller) AuthorHouse Bloomington, IN 2015; 293

Many would argue that the characteristics listed are stereotypes of women which may not be important when defining femininity. Yet advertising targets women in many of these areas. While there are many male chefs with their own television shows, men who put on makeup and preen over their hair after often viewed as abnormal Autistic women are inundated with these stereotypes from the time they are children though, leading them to have a view of a gender they may not be able to fully participate in.

One area where these stereotypes come together is in what Pennington labels the “Kitchen Ritual.” She explains,

To this day I cannot do what I shall call the Kitchen Ritual, when after a party or before it, all the women in the kitchen are cooking, cleaning, and talking up a storm with each other. They seem to enjoy it but it is a nightmare for me to have to participate. I hate people watching me do things, for one. I cannot cook or clean and talk at the same time, for another.⁴⁸⁸

A holiday such as Thanksgiving can become isolating for an Autistic women since she cannot participate with other women in their activities. This creates problems where she either participates and feels uncomfortable, or she socializes with the men. The only avenue for comfortable participation may be to focus only on one aspect of the ritual such as just talking or only performing one task silently.⁴⁸⁹ Even not fully participating can make one feel isolated from her gender though. Many times, the Autistic person simply decides to walk away.⁴⁹⁰

It should be noted that for some women, such as Pennington, this estrangement from their gender does not mean a full denial of it. She explains, “Yet I am every inch a

⁴⁸⁸ Ibid 294

⁴⁸⁹ These are the courses of action Pennington often takes. Ibid

⁴⁹⁰ Ibid

female. I love my femaleness very much. I don't wish to be anything other than female, and never have."⁴⁹¹ These women may not conform to gender stereotypes or participate in activities considered to be feminine but they are more than content in identifying themselves as a woman. In this way, they are redefining what womanhood is and how it should appear. For them, authenticity lies in a modified version of femininity.

Many Autistic women consider traditional femininity to be a part of living authentically. One way of analyzing the way Autistic woman claim their femininity is by examining their friendships. Autistic women are capable of forming and maintaining friendships, often with their female non-Autistic peers. Like many non-Autistic girls, Autistic girls tended to socialize verbally with their peers, a trait which could be helped by Autistic girls tending to have better linguistic skills than their male peers. Like their non-Autistic peers, Autistic girls do fight with their peers. Unlike their non-Autistic peers who prefer to talk and reached a compromise as a solution to their problems, Autistic people take an "all or nothing" approach.

Although Autistic friendships have much in common with their non-Autistic peers, they face unique problems, especially in interracial relations. Autistic women are often aware that another woman is being rude or racially insensitive towards them. Still, they are a member of a minority group, meaning they are less inclined to retaliate. In these instances, it is important to note that race places just as important an aspect of Autistic authenticity as gender does.

⁴⁹¹ Ibid 293

Exacerbating the problem is that many Autistic women may not wish to engage in the same types of activities that non-Autistic women do. Socializing over activities such as cooking may not appeal to certain Autistic women, which could lead to further social isolation. Despite these difficulties though, many Autistic women report feeling comfortable with their gender. Their view of authenticity is to redefine womanhood in a way which suits them.

Section II: Androgyny

Although some Autistic women identify as female, many feel estranged from the gender identity assigned to them at birth. This has led to many women identifying as androgynous. One such study examined the strength one identified with their gender and Autistic traits. The researchers used an IAT test to determine how people subconsciously associated with their gender. To measure Autism, they used the Autism quotient invented by Simon Baron-Cohen. Their results were the higher people scored on the Autism quotient, the lower they scored on their gender identification quotient. Thus, Autistic women were less likely to identify with their gender on a subconscious level, despite what they may say explicitly.

Another study performed on Autistic people sought to determine how much Autistic women identified explicitly with their gender. Although natal Autistic men identified with genders other than what they were assigned at birth, the gender variance was more pronounced in females. Percentage wise, natal Autistic women were more likely to identify as nonbinary or transgendered. Many natal Autistic women had anxiety about their gender, in part because they felt they cannot relate to other women.

These findings echo the words of many Autistic writers. Rudy Simone argues that many Autistic women find no need to identify as a certain gender, just as a person. Other women have reported feeling like they were neither male nor female, but something else entirely. They claim others have treated them as such too. This has led many Autistic women such as Samantha Hack to claim that Autism gives rise to new forms of femininity. By denying gender norms, Autistic people find new ways to be authentically themselves without the pressure exerted by *das Man*.

In order to explore the connection between Autism and gender, Aimilia Kallitsounaki and David Williams took a variety of subjects had had them undergo a few tests. The demographics of the test subjects were as follows:

One hundred and one adults (50 female) took part in the current online experiment. Their average age was 36.93 (SD = 10.11; range 22 to 70) years. Ninety-four percent of participants reported English as their first language and all were cisgender. Thirteen of the 101 participants had a formal diagnosis of autism, according to self-report.⁴⁹²

Although it should be noted that a little over 10% were diagnosed as Autistic, there were other ways of measuring Autistic traits, though it is unclear if these measures would lead to a diagnosis in a professional setting. Still, there were no self-reported transgendered individuals, meaning that explicitly, all participants identified with the gender given at birth.

There were two tests the researchers performed on their subjects, namely the Autism quotient and the Implicit Association Test. The Autism quotient test has already

⁴⁹² Kallitsounaki, Aimilia, and David Williams “A Relation Between Autism Traits and Gender Self-concept: Evidence from Explicit and Implicit Measures” *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders* (50) 2020; 429-439; 431

been discussed in Chapter 3. The Implicit Bias Association was meant to measure gender.

They begin,

To measure implicit gender self-concept, we employed the IAT described by Greenwald and Farnham. The task involved sorting words that belonged to one of four categories (self/other/feminine/masculine), using one of two possible keys. Words appeared on the middle of a computer screen in a random order and category labels were always presented in the upper right and left corners of the screen.⁴⁹³

The test works by putting two categories together and seeing how long it takes to guess which side to put them on correctly, or if the participant could do it at all. So, the test may ask to click on the Z-button if one sees either a personal pronoun or a feminine word. If a participant sees an other or masculine word, they are to click the M key. So, “I, woman” would be together and “you, man” would be together. Then the buttons are flipped, so feminine words are now grouped with other and masculine words are grouped with self. By testing to see how long it takes to connect the two concepts together, a researcher can measure one’s implicit bias.⁴⁹⁴

It should be noted that this test is not measuring how one consciously identifies, but how one subconsciously views herself. This is based on the concept of implicit bias, sometimes referred to as implicit attitude. According to Project Implicit, an organization dedicated to measuring and analyzing tests such as the one created by Kallitsounaki and Williams, “Implicit attitudes are positive and negative evaluations that are much less accessible to our conscious awareness and/or control.”⁴⁹⁵ It is possible then for someone

⁴⁹³ Ibid

⁴⁹⁴ Kallitsounaki and Williams explain the test more in depth, though for the sake of space I have paraphrased.

⁴⁹⁵ Project Implicit “What Are Implicit and Explicit Stereotypes” *Frequently Asked Questions* 2011 <https://implicit.harvard.edu/implicit/faqs.html>

to identify as female but on a subconscious level, feel as if she is not as feminine as her peers. She may not enjoy socializing in traditionally feminist ways, or may not enjoy traditionally feminist activities such as putting on makeup. In this ways, she implicitly considers herself not feminine, though explicitly she claims to feel feminine.

This test was not meant to deny anyone's gender identity or force them into a crisis, but to test the strength to which they identify as they did. The researchers explain, "The focus of the current study was on the strength of gender self-concept, regardless of which direction the self-concept was in (i.e., masculine or feminine)."⁴⁹⁶ A woman who spends most of her time with men in a profession normally associated with men may not identify as strongly with her femininity as a woman who wears makeup and enjoys wearing dresses. This is not to say that one is a woman and the other is not. Rather, the implication is that, gender may not play as big a role in the former's identity as it does in the latter's. In this way, the strength of identity is measured.

The results of the study indicated that Autistic people more weakly identify with their gender than non-Autistic people. The researchers state,

As predicted, AQ score was significantly negatively associated with both Femininity and Masculinity scale scores of PAQ, indicating that as the number of self-reported ASD traits increases the strength of the explicit gender self-concept decreases.⁴⁹⁷

Autistic people may view members of their gender engaging in certain activities and feel as if they cannot join in. For instance, an Autistic man who is interested in J.R. Tolkien may dislike sports. If many of his masculine peers discuss basketball and spend their

⁴⁹⁶ Kallitsounaki and Williams 433

⁴⁹⁷ Ibid 435

weekends in March watching the NCAA Tournament, the man may feel as if gender is not as important to his identity as others may believe. He is still a man, but the strength with which he identifies as one is weaker than most. This result was true of men as well as women.

Although this estrangement from men is intriguing, the more interesting result for our purposes applies to women. The researchers continue, “More than this, however, the current study provides the first evidence that ASD is also linked to a diminished feminine gender identity/self-concept.”⁴⁹⁸ Not every Autistic person assigned female at birth may believe gender is a key component of authenticity. They may play up other aspects of themselves such as race, or they could decide gender is irrelevant. Regardless, they feel estranged from their gender, leading them to focus on new ways of expressing it.

Many Autistic women are not interested in redefining traditional femininity. Rather, they openly identify as being a gender other than woman. This is not an unusual phenomenon in the Autistic community. Kate Cooper, Laura G.E. Smith, and Alisa J Russell explain,

High rates of gender variance have been reported in both autistic natal males and females, suggesting that while natal females are more affected, autistic people as a group are more likely to express gender variance than typically developing controls.⁴⁹⁹

An Autistic natal woman may express her gender difference by refusing to wear makeup, wearing masculine clothing, or identifying as androgynous. They reject gender binary norms and seek a way of navigating the world authentically through their new forged

⁴⁹⁸ Ibid

⁴⁹⁹ Cooper, Kate, Smith, Laura G.E., and Alisa J. Russell “Gender Identity in Autism: Sex Differences in Social Affiliation with Gender Groups” *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders* (48) 3995–4006 2018; 3996

identities. For them, authenticity is gained through their neurological condition, not necessarily their gender.

In order to measure the differing types of gender identities within the Autistic community, the researchers recruited a wide variety of subjects. They begin,

This study had a 2 (sex: male versus female) × 2 (autism:autism vs. typically developing; TD controls) × 2 (gender congruence: congruent vs. incongruent) factorial design. We recruited four groups of participants online (N = 486): autistic females (n = 101), autistic males (n = 118), TD females (n = 153) and TD males (n = 114)... We recruited participants from a variety of sources such as online forums for the autism community, autism organisation websites and group networks....Participants were aged between 16 and 80 years and without known or suspected intellectual disability. Participants were included in the autism group if they reported that they had received a diagnosis of any Autism Spectrum Disorder (i.e., Asperger's syndrome, high functioning autism, autism, atypical autism, pervasive developmental disorder (PDD) and PDD-not otherwise specified), referred to in this article using the term autism or ASD.⁵⁰⁰

One notable strength of this research is that it is clearer who had a diagnosis of Autism and who did not. This meant that questionable methods such as the Autism quotient test were not in use, making it easier to determine gender without potentially problematic stereotypes. Also the age range indicates a wider variety of experience, which could in turn yield different answers.

The researchers then proceeded to ask questions concerning mental health, whether or not one was planning on transitioning from one gender to another, as well as gender identity. Questions were worded carefully in order to ensure that they were answered as accurately as possible.⁵⁰¹ Questions about gender identification included, “‘I identify with other people of the same gender as myself’, 'I am glad to be the gender I am' and 'I feel strong ties with members of the same gender as myself’.”⁵⁰² It should be noted

⁵⁰⁰ Ibid 3997-3998

⁵⁰¹ Ibid

⁵⁰² Ibid

that these are explicit indicators. Answers to these questions would be more indicative of the way a woman is consciously grappling with her gender. This does not make the results more or less accurate than those of an implicit bias test, but they do indicate different levels of consciousness a woman may have towards her gender.

Another aspect measured was gender self-esteem. According to Cooper et. al, gender self-esteem is, “[h]ow positively (or negatively) an individual views their gender group.”⁵⁰³ A woman with positive gender self-esteem would view women favorably, perhaps mores than men. She may seek out the company of women more than men, or consider gender an important part of her identity. If it is low though, this could lead to her despising aspects of herself, or others as members of her gender group.

The researchers asked questions concerning gender self esteem. They included,

[O]verall, my gender group is considered good by others”, and “I feel good about the gender group I belong to.” Participants responded to these items on a 7-point Likert-type scale where 1 = strongly disagree and 7 = strongly agree.⁵⁰⁴

Someone with high gender self-esteem would think others consider their gender to be good, or strongly agree that they enjoy being the gender they are. Conversely, someone with low gender self-esteem would see their gender as bad, and perhaps themselves bad too.

The results were similar to the study mentioned above. Cooper et. al state,

Finally, there was support for the hypothesis that autistic natal females would have lower gender identification and gender self-esteem than controls, because while TD females had higher gender identification than TD males, the opposite pattern was found in the autism

⁵⁰³ Ibid 3996

⁵⁰⁴ Ibid 3999

group, with autistic females having significantly lower gender identification than autistic males.⁵⁰⁵

If Autistic women are not as adept at reading nonverbal cues as other females, and if this skill is considered a key aspect of femininity as the extreme male brain theory implies, then they could feel estranged from their gender on an explicit level. Since typically developing females use gender as a way of defining themselves, an Autistic female may decide she is defined more by her disability. In this way, she finds authenticity through Autism, not femininity.

Because Autistic females have lower gender self-esteem, they may also have varieties in gender expression. The researchers note,

We found that autistic natal females are particularly prone to lower social affiliation to a gender group, and greater variance in their gender expression, with these participants reporting lower femininity and higher masculinity than autistic males.⁵⁰⁶

Autistic women often relate more to men than women, perhaps because men do not expect them to empathize with them the way a woman would. Still, it can be difficult to find a gender group when one is smaller than others, such as nonbinary. In this way, Autistic women face a hurdle when defining themselves authentically. With the rise of the internet and LGBT awareness though, this problem may become less of an issue over the course of the next few years.

Awareness of other gender identities seems to be on the rise for many Autistic women. The researchers conclude,

⁵⁰⁵ Ibid 4002

⁵⁰⁶ Ibid

However, autistic females who were not gender congruent were much more likely to identify outside of a gender binary, with just 7% identifying as male and 26.5% identifying with a non-binary 'other' identity.⁵⁰⁷

There is no longer only a choice between male and female. Instead, some view gender as a spectrum. As more awareness grows, natal Autistic women will have more ways of redefining gender. Once they unite and strengthen their community, they can in turn transform the world and our concepts of gender.

Many Autistic women have already taken on the task of redefining gender in light of their diagnosis. Samantha Hack, a transgendered Autistic woman, states,

Coming to terms with being autistic meant coming to term with being different in a way I had never considered. Embracing my Autistic traits meant embracing my differences and more importantly, trying to figure out what those differences were and which ones I was comfortable sharing with others.⁵⁰⁸

Hack was able to fuse an authentic self with a modified they-self by exploring her differences and reconciling them with society's expectation. The diagnosis of Autism allowed Hack to make peace with who she was while exploring ways she could be authentic. In this way, Autism opened, not closed, opportunities.

Hack was not only able to reconcile her disability identity with her past behavior, but with her gender disability as well. She continues,

Learning about autism led to a flood of new information, which in turn led to re-examining my gender. I learned very quickly from the autistic community that there are a lot more gender options than I had ever considered.⁵⁰⁹

⁵⁰⁷ Ibid 4003

⁵⁰⁸ Hack, Samantha "Using Intersecting Identities and Radically Accepting Communities to Increase Coping Skills" *Knowing Why Adult-Diagnosed Autistic People on Life and Autism* (ed. Elizabeth Bartmess) The Autistic Press Washington DC 2018; 77-78

⁵⁰⁹ Ibid

By forming a community, Autistic women can express themselves and help each other forge a new identity. They can communicate their frustrations with traditional gender norms, as well as expose each other to new possible ways of viewing gender. In turn, the Autistic women will interact with *das Man* and wider society, opening up norms for them as well.

One increasingly common way Autistic natal women identify is androgynous. Rudy Simone explains, “Splitting AS traits along gender lines may seem unnecessary to many on the spectrum because we tend to be androgynous creatures-in mannerisms, behaviors, and, mostly, in essence.”⁵¹⁰ Although Autistic girls tend to have relationships similar to non-Autistic girls, they still forge to create a new gender identity, one which is different than that which is espoused by *das Man*. Like Heidegger’s *Dasein*, this entity is genderless. Since Autism is a bodily condition this identity is rooted in one’s physical nature, mirroring Heidegger’s later views on *Dasein*.

Many Autistic girls reflect the opinions espoused by Simone. Elfinia states, “In high school, girls treated me like I was something else, not boy, not girl, just *it*.”⁵¹¹ Camilla, another Autistic girl, states, “I have never felt female or ‘one of the girls.’ I actually feel as if I am half female and half male.”⁵¹² The inability to create a feminine they-self can lead to confusion, and in extreme cases, bullying. This bullying may have the opposite effect of what is intended though. Instead of encouraging the Autistic girl to

⁵¹⁰ Simone, Rudy *Aspergirls* 61

⁵¹¹ Ibid 62

⁵¹² Ibid

conform to the standards of *das Man*, she may decide to redefine herself when she is old enough to do so.

Despite appearances, many Autistic women do not feel as if they need to change their gender identities. Rudy Simone concludes, “Most of us [Autistic girls] don’t really need any advice in the gender department, just validation...our anima/animus seems pretty balanced and that is something to be proud of.”⁵¹³ Unlike non-Autistic females, the Autistic woman does not feel bound to her gender identity. Her authentic insights are ones which are liberated from strict gender norms. She has a weaker sense of a they-self. Due to this she is able to express herself more fully. Instead of insights into inauthentic empathy, she gives insights into authentic existence.

Although some Autistic women openly identify as women, others are more estranged from the gender assigned to them at birth. Aimilia Kallitsounaki and David Williams studied the implicit biases Autistic people had towards their gender. They used the Autism quotient as a baseline for determining how many Autistic-like a person may be, and used the Implicit Bias Association to determine if, on a subconscious level, people identified strongly with their gender. Note that strength of gender association was not to determine who was a “real” women or “real” man, but how much of a role gender played in one’s identity. The researchers found that the higher the Autistic quotient, the lower one’s gender identity. This was especially true in the case of women.

Other research has indicated similar results. Kate Cooper, Laura G.E. Smith, and Alisa J. Russell examine one’s explicit views of gender. In their study, one needed to be

⁵¹³ Ibid 64

diagnosed as Autism to be placed into the Autistic group. They asked questions regarding gender identity and gender self-esteem. Gender self-esteem refers to how positively one views their gender. Natal autistic women did not have as high gender self-esteem as non-Autistic natal women. A little over one fourth of Autistic natal women declared themselves to be nonbinary, and 7% identified as male. This demonstrates that natal Autistic women are finding ways to redefine gender as part of their Autistic experience.

Many Autistic women have taken up the task of redefining gender. Samantha Hack reports that discovering she was Autistic was liberating because she was able to explore other genders she was previously unaware had existed. Rudy Simone argues that gender is often irrelevant in forging one's identity as an Autistic person. Other Autistic people have felt as if they were a genderless "it," yet this did not always cause them distress. For some, then, authenticity lies not in gender acceptance, but in gender transformation.

Conclusion

There are many ways an Autistic person can authentically live out her gender. One possible way is to embrace her femininity and define what it means for her. This may not be as difficult as theories such as the extreme male brain theory suggest. Research indicates that Autistic girls form similar friendships with their female peers as those between two non-Autistic girls. They prefer talking to each other instead of performing tasks with each other. Still, there are noticeable differences. In conflict, two non-Autistic girls often negotiate a solution to their problems. In the case of an Autistic girl, she may either take all responsibility for the conflict or abandon the friendship altogether. In some

ways, the Autistic girl is more able to avoid conflict because she does not tend to compete with other girls for a social order.

This does not mean that all Autistic relationships with non-Autistic women are unproblematic. S. Henderson, a woman of color, argues that when interacting with white women, she is at a disadvantage. Society views the white women's micro aggressions as a simple case of rudeness, whereas Henderson's retaliation would be seen as criminal. In this way, she is vulnerable as a person of color and an Autistic woman.

Other Autistic women report somewhat similar problems interacting with non-Autistic women. Gail Pennington discusses the "Kitchen Ritual," where other women congregate before and/or after a meal. She reports feeling overwhelmed because she cannot talk and prepare food, and feels uncomfortable using other people's things. Sometimes she either works alone, sometimes she talks without helping, and sometimes she avoids it altogether. Still, she defines herself as a woman, and is comfortable in her identity.

While many Autistic women are comfortable in their gender identity, others feel estranged from it, at least on a subconscious level. Aimilia Kallitsounaki and David Williams performed a study in which participants were asked to undergo the Autism quotient as well as the Implicit Association Test. The Implicit Association Test asked participants to group words such as me and woman together, and measured how well participants could place them together. The higher the Autistic quotient, the lower the gender identification score. This does not mean that a person with a low gender identification score is incorrect in identifying as the gender they do. Rather, the strength

of their gender identity is weaker than those who scored higher. On a subconscious level, they may feel estranged from their gender.

Another study conducted by Kate Cooper, Laura G.E. Smith, and Alisa J Russell measured people who were formally diagnosed as Autistic and how they explicitly identify with their gender. They did this by measuring gender self-esteem, or how positively one views the gender they identified with. Results showed that Autistic women had significantly lower gender self-esteem. A little over a quarter of them identified as nonbinary, while seven percent identified as male. This shows that some Autistic women are redefining gender.

The task of redefining gender has been taken up by many Autistic women. Samantha Hack, a transgendered woman, argues that being Autistic allowed her to explore gender in a way she never thought possible, and opened avenues she was unaware existed. Rudy Simone argues that gender factors very little into her identity. This has led to them identifying as having no gender, much like Heidegger's *Dasein*.

Regardless of how an Autistic woman defines herself, she is constantly redefining gender and what it means to be a woman. She is breaking through the norms established by *das Man* and living out her gender identity in her own unique way. Thus, the Autistic woman informs philosophy of what is possible, and the work society still needs to do in order to be fully inclusive of gender and disability identities.

Conclusion

Autistic women offer many unique insights into philosophy. Unlike non-Autistic women who are stereotypically viewed as being more empathetic than men, Autistic women are said to lack empathy due to their neurological condition. This perceived lack of empathy has ramifications for philosophy, especially phenomenology. Unlike other schools of thought, phenomenology argues that we are inherently subjective. Without empathy, one cannot form a lifeworld. Without a lifeworld, one is not a person.

In order to understand how phenomenologists can make such arguments, one must understand the history of phenomenology. Unlike other philosophical systems such as Cartesian dualism, Edmund Husserl argues that the person is more than a mind within a body. The person is always already in a world. She is absorbed in her daily tasks and interacts with objects in the world. In this way, the person is not a subject, but an inhabitant of a lifeworld.

She does not inhabit her lifeworld alone. Rather, she shares it with others, who in turn help her analyze objects in the world. For instance, if a person is standing on the eastern edge of a house and another is standing on the western edge, they can compare their perceptions to create a fuller picture of how the house appears. If another person joins and looks at the northern edge of the house, then the perimeters of the house become clearer. In this way, objects take on their form through the shared perceptions of others.

In order to relate to others in order to form these perceptions, one needs to be able to acknowledge the person as a fellow person. To do this, one must have empathy for them. The process of empathy happens in three instantaneous steps. First, the person must notice that the other has a humanoid shape similar to her own. The definition of humanoid shape is not so strict that it would inhibit someone from recognizing someone of a different gender or disability status as an other. So, a black woman in a wheelchair can recognize an Asian man with a cane as similar to herself given that they share many of the same features. Second, the person must acknowledge the other as a lived body. She notices the other person moves by his own volition, just as she does. This helps her distinguish a person from a robot or mannequin. Third, the person must acknowledge that the other shares a lifeworld with her, allowing them to share perceptions and dwell together. Thus, one is not a person without the other.

Edmund Husserl's definition of empathy was meant as a baseline for further research. He purposefully left the task analyzing different aspects of the person, such as race and disability status, to others. Phenomenologists such as Edith Stein have expanded his theories of empathy to include how people read the emotions of others. The person not only notices the other as a fellow person, but is able to read their emotions through nonverbal cues and reacts accordingly. If one is unable to read body language, then he has a deficient sense of empathy, though most phenomenologists would agree he can demonstrate empathy in a Husserlian sense.

Other phenomenologists argue that nonverbal cues are necessary for empathy. Jean-Paul Sartre argues that one is recognized by the Other via the Look. In the Look, a

person is viewed by the other. The one being viewed does not see eyes, but another person similar to oneself. Thus, nonverbal cues such as eye contact are necessary for empathy.

There are problems with this definition. Some scholars such as Frantz Fanon argue that later phenomenologists do not adequately take conflicts into account. He fears that phenomenology focuses too much on the white subject. When race is brought into the forefront though, tensions often arise. These racial issues must be analyzed.

Another issue with empathy comes from a more analytical school of philosophy. Paul Bloom argues that empathy as reading the other's emotions can lead to faulty conclusions. For instance, someone basing a morality based on empathy may bias one person over another, or may give preference to one group. This can lead to ethically unsound decisions, calling into question how much of a role empathy should play in determine the personhood of someone.

Perhaps the group most affected by a philosophy of empathy is the Autistic. Autism is a condition defined by difficulties in socialization, repeated movements known as stemming, strict adherence to a routine, and multiple sensory issues. Many Autistic people have difficulty deciphering the nonverbal cues of others, leading them to misunderstand their peers. This could lead to the Autistic person coming off as rude and aloof. These issues often lead to broken relationships and social isolation. Most damaging though, the inability to read nonverbal social cues also leads to non-Autistic people accusing the Autistic of lacking empathy.

In order to conform to societal expectations, many Autistic people decide to pass as non-Autistic. Passing is the notion that a member of a minority member mimics the member of a majority group. Originally used to describe lighter skinned blacks claiming to be white, passing has recently expanded to include homosexuals living as straight people and Autistic people presenting themselves as non-Autistic. Still, this can lead to harm such as psychological stress such as anxiety and depression. Thus a new theory of empathy must be set forth to account for the Autistic and non-Autistic person's inability to relate to each other, one not based on passing.

One such theory can be based off the work of Martin Heidegger. In line with Husserl, Heidegger argues the person is not a subject. Instead, she is *Dasein*, or an entity for whom Being is an issue. She is always already in a world inhabited by Others, *Mitsein*. Without *Mitsein*, *Dasein* would not have a world. This does not mean the Other is unproblematic though. Because *Dasein* is absorbed by Others, or as Heidegger calls them *das Man*, she begins conforming to their standards. She dresses as *das Man* dictates, is interested in what *das Man* deems interesting, is shocked by what *das Man* finds shocking, and enjoys what *das Man* deems appropriate to enjoy. Despite sounding dictatorial and sinister, *das Man* is necessary for *Dasein*. In order to interact with Others to create a world, *Dasein* must have norms. These norms creates possibilities, and allows her to create goals. Still, *das Man* does restrict certain possibilities, and is worried about appealing to the greatest number of *Daseins*. Opportunities are leveled down, and greatness is often suppressed. Two ways of achieving this leveling down are through idle talk and curiosity.

For Heidegger, discourse is meant to uncover aspects of our Being. It is meant to analyze an issue, not dance around it. Still, language can be distorted in a phenomenon called idle talk. Idle talk makes certain complex issues easier to understand, but does not get to the heart of the matter. Instead, idle talk circles around the main issue. *Dasein* does not say what is on her mind, but partakes in frivolous conversations such as gossip and arguments with little factual backing.

Akin to idle talk, curiosity examines things which do not pertain to *Dasein's* Being. For instance, a carpenter may read tabloids despite not knowing any of the celebrities personally. She comes off as an expert on fashion despite knowing little of the subject. In this way, true interests are suppressed in favor of frivolousness. It should be noted though that Heidegger is not opposed to idle talk or curiosity. He acknowledges that *Dasein* participates in both in her daily life, and is important in relating to Others. Still, they distract from the project of analyzing Being.

Autistic therapies rely on idle talk and curiosity to achieve their goals. Many Autistic therapies involve giving the Autistic child cue cards of potential conversation starters. The therapist may encourage the Autistic child to ask a peer about a pet regardless of any interest on the former's part. The Autistic person is asked not to share too much of what they think in order to keep the conversation going. Instead, they are forced to engage in small talk instead of learning about others.

Autistic therapy also inhibits true curiosity. For an Autistic person, interests are a way of making sense of the world. An Autistic person may read novels to understand social situations, or take an interest in science because it analyzes the order of the

universe. Still, the therapist encourages the Autistic person not to mention her interests, at least not to the point of dominating the conversation. Instead, she must only focus on the interests of the Other regardless of her emotions. The goal of the therapist is for the Autistic person to communicate as *das Man* does, not as it comes naturally to her.

Applying Heidegger's philosophy to Autism may seem intriguing, but in order to apply it to Autistic women, there must be some account of the body. This way, both the feminine and disabled aspect of the Autistic woman can be taken into account. Many scholars have accused Heidegger of not taking the body into account. Initially, Heidegger argued this was by design since *Dasein* was meant to be beyond the physical. In his later works though, Heidegger takes on the categories of the body set forth by Husserl. He discusses the difference between a *Körper* and a *Lieb*. A *Körper* is a non-living humanoid body, whereas a *Lieb* is a living, animated body which has agency over its own actions. Although simplistic, this definition has allowed scholars such as Thomas Abrams to build robust philosophical systems, one which allows Heideggerian philosophy to account for differences such as disabilities.

Feminists have taken up the task of using Heidegger to analyze their experiences. Dorothy LeLand uses Heidegger's account of *das Man* to discuss how different cultures intersect. For instance, a homosexual immigrant from Mexico to the United States has to navigate American culture, Mexican culture, Latino culture, and gay culture. These identities are used to create a coherent life story, one which can take into account the present and past. Nancy J Holland, another Heideggerian feminist, also discusses the effect *das Man* has on *Dasein*. *Dasein* is always already acting out scripts of her social

roles. An African American mother must act out her role as a black woman, a mother, and any others she takes on such as PTA member. These roles are always rooted in a body though. Thus, *Dasein* is by nature embodied.

In order to analyze these scripts and life histories, one needs a tool for synthesizing all aspects of one's identity. One such way of doing so is the Matrix of Domination. The Matrix of Domination examines a person holistically to determine how they experience oppression. Many factors are taken into account, such as race, social class, sexuality, disability statuses, and gender. So a middle class Asian American woman will experience oppression differently than a poor white male. In this way, all aspects of one's identity are taken into account.

This matrix becomes key when analyzing the experiences of Autistic women. Many studies involving Autism have revolved around Autistic boys and men. Yet, Autism exhibits itself differently in girls and women. Many Autistic women have fewer linguistic difficulties than Autistic men, meaning their symptoms are often overlooked. This leads to many women getting an Autism diagnosis later in life, often when she's seeking treatment for something else.

Compounding this problem is the extreme male brain theory proposed by Simon Baron-Cohen. He argues that there are two types of brains: systematizers and empathizers. Systematizers think in terms of patterns and rules. This type of thinking is associated with masculinity. Empathizers are more concerned with relationships. They are adept at reading people's nonverbal cues, and are often associated with femininity. Someone who must learn how to read people can never be an empathizer, meaning an

Autistic woman has a masculine brain despite any protest to the contrary. Despite her gender identification, she is at least in part male.

This theory causes harm for Autistic women. The theory further associates Autism with masculinity, making it difficult for Autistic women to get a diagnosis due to the impression is that Autistic women will present as masculine. Also, it does not take into account more feminine Autistic women. It skews data so that scientists are looking for Autistic people who can systematize, despite the fact that not all Autistic people are adept at this. By furthering these stereotypes, Autistic women are overlooked and may not receive the resources they need.

In order to break free from these stereotypes, a philosophical theory is needed to explain how an Autistic woman can reach authenticity. A Heideggerian analysis proves fruitful. Heidegger argues that *Dasein* is always in a mood. These moods are not always equivalent to emotions. For instance, one could feel happy while on a subconscious level be bored. Still, there are some moods which are ground moods, one of which is anxiety. Anxiety, or *Angst*, is different from fear in that fear is directed towards an object in the world. Arachnophobia is a fear directed towards spiders, which are objects in the world. *Angst* on the other hand is directed towards Being itself.

Angst occurs in the blink of an eye. It is a phenomenon which one reflects upon and finds odd. This leads some to suppress the experience. If one goes through *Angst*, one can learn from the experience though. First, one may consider the goals she has formed in her life, then she may become aware that she is already in a world she often takes for

granted. Second, she realizes she is more than pure potentiality. Third, she is aware that she is an entity whose Being is an issue for her.

It may not be immediately obvious how *Angst* applies to the Autistic since it occurs for such a brief moment. Some theories have called this into question though. Theorists such as Anthony Vincent Fernandez have argued that anxiety can apply to conditions such as depression. Depression by nature extends over a long period of time. Like in *Angst*, the world falls away in depression, leaving the person with it existentially adrift. This mirrors Autistic burnout. Autistic burnout is when an Autistic person, weary of passing, falls into a depressive like state. The burnt out Autistic person may withdraw from others and feel as if they are helpless. For some women though, this has a positive result. Many women after experiencing this go into a psychiatrist's office and receive the diagnosis of Autism, leading them to form accepting communities.

Although the experiences of Autistic women are diverse, a few patterns emerge. Some Autistic women fully embrace their feminine gender. Still, these women desire to shape femininity in their image, such as by engaging in less stereotypically feminine behaviors. Other Autistic women may identify as androgynous or create new gender identities. In this way, they pioneer a new path for other people, both Autistic and non-Autistic, to take.

There are several overlooked aspects in this dissertation. While I attempted to bring race into the discussion, it does not play a significant role. More work needs to be done on how the feminine experience of Autism intersects with race. Also, most of this dissertation has focused upon people assigned women at birth, not transgendered women.

Still, transgendered people are not an insignificant portion of the Autistic community. Their unique experiences must be explored more in depth, something outside the scope of this work. Other sexualities such as androgyny should be analyzed more completely as well, something the dissertation lacked the space to do.

Another area of research could be the ethics of Autism. As noted by Paul Bloom, many people build systems of ethics based on emotional connections. If an Autistic person has difficulty empathizing though, some argue they may have difficulty thinking ethically. A new form of empathy, such as compassion, could be proposed. This is for a later project though.

Autistic women are often overlooked in both psychology and philosophy. Their experiences are invaluable to both fields though. This dissertation hopes to further the discussion by including their voices. In doing so, it is hoped that their insights can give a deeper understanding of what it means to be empathetic, what it means to be feminine, and ultimately, what it means to be human.

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