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Autism and the Crisis of Meaning

Barbara Flowers Cottrell

University of California, Riverside

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Autism and the Crisis of Meaning, by Alexander Durig. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1996. 312 pp. \$19.95 cloth. ISBN 0-7914-2814-1.

Barbara Flowers Cottrell
University of California, Riverside

In *Autism and the Crisis of Meaning*, Dr. Alexander Durig presents a fresh view not only of autism, but of the nature of meaningful perception itself. He insists that to better understand autism, we must first come to an understanding of how humans structure meaning in "normal" situations. This has long been the goal of many sociologists, particularly symbolic interactionists, but Durig suggests that these researchers make a fundamental assumption when they conduct their studies. They assume that meaningful symbols are what create meaningful perception. He argues that such logic is conceptually backwards. It is meaningful perception that precedes the use of meaningful symbols.

We must see that the interpersonal framework depicts the construction of meaningful symbols, but the apparition and organization of meaningful perception itself must be seen as preceding or superseding the construction of symbols themselves Meaningful perception itself is a phenomenon that is neurologically endowed in humans and shaped specifically through symbolic interaction (p. 35).

In order to understand such "deviant" cases as autism, we must look behind social symbols and try to explore the order that supports them and structures their meaning. It is an approach that is reminiscent of Claude Lévi-Strauss and Roland Barthes, who both argued that burrowing beneath reality was the only way of uncovering the underlying logic of reality. Dr. Durig devotes much of his book to exploring the "deeper" strata of meaningful perception.

He contends that meaningful perception is built around three basic logical processes: 1) induction (making general conclusions from specific situations), 2) deduction (making specific conclusions from specific situations) and 3) abduction (reordering knowledge in the face of new, and often contradictory, knowledge). The successful integration of all three meaning structures is necessary if an individual is to be considered a "normal" member of society. However, he points out that not all people learn (or are able to learn) these processes as neatly as "normalcy" requires. Some may be more skilled at one form of logic than another, or may be incapable of mastering one of the three forms.

Such is the case with people with autism. Whether the cause is neurological or environmental (there is currently no known explanation for

autism), Durig argues that autistics lack inductive reasoning capacities. They are unable to smoothly move from one type of social situation to another because they are incapable of generalizing knowledge from one situation and applying it to a new situation. Consequently, new situations are terrifying for autistics since they have no way of constructing meaning, much less of maintaining a social self. When confronted with such a self-negating situation, they are likely to fall back into comforting routines, like rocking back and forth. It is through this repetitive, ritualized action that the self is rediscovered and reinforced. Durig's insight seems to be supported by the autobiography of autistic Donna Williams, *Nobody Nowhere*. In her book, Williams admits that patterns and continuity are extremely important to her because "things will stay the same long enough to grasp an undeniable guaranteed place within the complex situation around me" (Williams, as quoted in Durig, p. 87).

This lack of "normal" inductive reasoning may also lead to the sharpening of the other types of logic, much like losing one's sight may enhance the remaining senses. Durig reiterates the discovery of many researchers, that some autistics are "savants" who demonstrate incredible intellectual skills. But he points out that the form these abilities take (numerical calculation, the ability to build and rebuild objects of extraordinary detail) reflect the autistic's heavy reliance on deductive reasoning. The fact that only some autistics possess such "savant" characteristics leads Durig to a second important insight. He insists that autism should not be viewed in binary terms, but as part of a continuum. While some autistics may have the super-deductive capabilities that characterize a "savant," others possess ordinary deductive capabilities which, when coupled by a lack of induction, make them "average" autistics. This continuum of logical ability also opens up the possibility for cases of slight autism among people who "pass" as normal in society. The most fascinating part of Durig's book is his comparison between "classic" autistic behavior and the behavior of computer entrepreneur Bill Gates. The similarity between the two suggests that autism may be much more prevalent than previously suspected.

The latter part of the book is devoted to a broader discussion of the crisis of meaning. Durig recounts the history of knowledge and warns social scientists against the promotion of formal logic to the exclusion of other, more informal systems of knowledge. Durig argues that if we persist in this sort of limited reasoning, we create our own type of autism, which may be very difficult for us to control. It may also lead to a profound crisis of meaning if it is challenged by others. But the main utility of Durig's work lies in his reconceptualization of autism. By viewing autism from a fresh perspective, he aids people who work (and live) with autistics. Durig suggests a number of ways to help autistics deal with their environment, including the use of videotapes and computer simulation to prepare them for new situations. By

using these technologies, autistics can repeat the experience many times, so that when they actually encounter the situation, they are prepared for it.

Very rarely does a book mix important theoretical issues with practical advice for helping people. *Autism and the Crisis of Meaning* is such a book.

Law in a Therapeutic Key, edited by David B. Wexler and Bruce J. Winick. Durham, NC: Carolina Academic Press, 1996. 1,012 pp. No price listed. ISBN 0-89089-988-6.

Sarena W. Mayer, Esq.

Touro College, Jerusalem, Israel

Therapeutic jurisprudence is an interdisciplinary study of the role of law as a therapeutic agent. This analysis of the law proposes that legal rules, legal procedures and the roles of legal actors, including lawyers, judges and law enforcement agents, are social forces that often have a therapeutic or antitherapeutic effect on the individuals and ultimately the society they govern. Although, historically, the study of law has focused on rules of law, the rights of individuals and legal entities, and the consequences for violations of such rules and the infringement of such rights, this discipline challenges us to examine the interplay between such legal forces in an entirely different light.

The objective of therapeutic jurisprudence is that we increase our sensitivity to the therapeutic or antitherapeutic effects of our legal system and ask whether the law's antitherapeutic consequences can be reduced and its therapeutic consequences enhanced while upholding the integrity of due process and other values of justice that have evolved over the past centuries. Further, in addition to taking a somewhat retrospective look and analyzing the law that has already evolved, therapeutic jurisprudence proposes that we explore ways in which the knowledge, theories and insights of mental health and its related disciplines can help shape the future development of the law.

The authors are veritable pioneers in this remarkably new discipline. As stated in one of the book's articles (Ch. 28 by Finkelman and Grisso), therapeutic jurisprudence was first introduced by Wexler in a paper submitted in 1987 for a workshop sponsored by the National Institute of Mental Health. By 1991, two edited volumes on the topic, *Therapeutic Jurisprudence: The Law as a Therapeutic Agent* (David B. Wexler ed. 1990) and *Essays in Therapeutic Jurisprudence 9* (David B. Wexler & Bruce J. Winick eds. 1991) were published. Since then, therapeutic jurisprudence has influenced the thinking of an increasing number of scholars in both the legal and mental health fields.

Although one may logically surmise that therapeutic jurisprudence applies