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Psychological Autism, Institutional Autism and Economics*

As an economist with a son having heavy autistic leanings, the discussion of the “Autistic Economics” quickly caught my attention. I had never thought of the economics profession or its neoclassical orthodoxy as “autistic.” I think that this way of thinking can be useful, at least as a preliminary step, allowing the economics profession to eventually transcend autism. But as with all analogies, we must examine not only the similarities between autism and orthodox economics, but the differences.

The Autism Spectrum

As a layperson interested in psychology, I have reached a preliminary understanding of autism, based on others’ research and on discussions with other parents of autistic or semi-autistic children. “Autistic disorder” is a social communication disorder and a developmental delay, involving “restricted, repetitive, and stereotyped patterns of behavior, interests, and activities.”¹ I interpret this constellation of symptoms as being the result of an organically-based (neurobiological) sensory-processing problem which is much like the opposite of being deaf. Instead of hearing too little, a person with autism may hear too much, and be unable to filter out the noise or to prioritize the information received to make it intelligible. The external stimuli that most treat as normal

* Thanks to Edward Fullbrook, Barkley Rosser, and Lynn Kilroy for their input. Of course, the full weight of any blame for misleading, inaccurate, or ambiguous content is on my shoulders.

¹ See the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (DSM-IV), Washington, DC: American Psychiatric Association, 1994 4th ed, category 299.00.

seem to be a constant barrage of blackboard chalk scraping the wrong way. Not surprisingly, an autistic person slams hands over his or her ears, trying to shut out the meaningless cacophony. Alas, for that person, information overload occurs not simply with sound, but with the other commonly-known senses (sight, taste, smell, touch), along with proprioception (the sense of movement through space) and the vestibular sense (understanding one's own body's internal signals). So folks with autism tend to not only shut out external stimuli, but to be extremely anxious, communicate poorly with others, and be physically uncoordinated.

Just as with “neurotypical” individuals (i.e., many or most of those reading this essay),² each person with autism or autistic tendencies is unique. Different individuals with autistic problems have different combinations of these sensory-processing difficulties, so that one may be better at screening sounds than at prioritizing and understanding visual information – and so forth. Some, but far from all, compensate for processing problems in one sphere with genius in another, as with cinema's “Rainman.” There are also degrees to which the whole neurobiological package hits an individual – and the amount of emotional or intellectual resources she or he has to resist impairment. Thus, professionals write of the “autistic spectrum,” the continuum from hard-core autism to high-functioning autism, to Asperger's syndrome or borderline autism (AS), to the loner mentality so common among professors, accountants, and computer specialists.³

² See <http://isnt.autistics.org/> for an analysis of “neurotypical disorder,” which affects 9625 out of 10,000 individuals.

³ See, for example, Attwood, Tony. 1998. Asperger's Syndrome: A Guide for Parents and Professionals (London ; Philadelphia : Jessica Kingsley Publishers).

In terms of behavior, folks on the autism spectrum tend to be isolated from the world; have troubles with communication with others; engage in repetitive body movements; insist on sameness, repetition, and routine; and seem to treat others as objects.⁴ Those with AS have been described as follows:

“Persons with AS show marked deficiencies in social skills, have difficulties with transitions or changes and prefer sameness. They often have obsessive routines and may be preoccupied with a particular subject of interest. They have a great deal of difficulty reading nonverbal cues (body language) and very often the individual with AS has difficulty determining proper body space. Often overly sensitive to sounds, tastes, smells, and sights, the person with AS may prefer soft clothing, certain foods, and be bothered by sounds or lights no one else seems to hear or see.”⁵

This is just a partial list of symptoms, but the general idea is clear: people with autism have a hard time doing anything but to live inside their heads, no matter how friendly the social environment is.

It is not surprising, therefore, that one autistic mother that I know had to explain to her two autistic children that there was something “out there” called “society” which had norms and mores which they had to learn and obey. Those on the spectrum instinctively see Baroness Thatcher’s dictum that there is no society, only individuals⁶ as self-evident.

⁴ A more complete list can be found in many places. Mine is based on a web-page of by the Los Angeles-based United Autism Alliance (<http://www.unitedautismalliance.org/knowledge/>).

⁵ See “What is AS?” at <http://www.udel.edu/bkirby/asperger/>.

⁶ In reality, she said that “there is no such thing as society. There are individual men and women, and there are families.” (See http://www.cooperativeindividualism.org/thatcher_society_and_responsibility.html)

Autism and Economics

The orthodox economist's *a priori* agreement with Thatcher's assertion – i.e., its commitment to methodological individualism – suggests that the textbook *homo economicus* (*HE*) might be autistic. For example, as with *HE*, autistic individuals often have preferences that are little shaped by their social environments (or at least seem that way to frustrated parents or partners).⁷ But there are major differences. First, unlike for neurotypicals or *HE*, information-processing problems are extremely important to autism, as with Herbert Simon's "bounded rationality." Second, just as with neurotypicals but unlike *HE*, people with autism have consciences, are torn by inner mental and emotional conflicts, and often want to connect socially with other human beings, if they can.⁸

Instead of being autistic, *HE* is more robotic or cybernetic in nature. The use of this kind of one-dimensional "man" in theoretical work is appropriate to a profession suffering from "institutional autism" (see below). Someone with autism is likely to treat other human beings as if they were furniture or automatons. Put another way, like those with autism, the economics profession's dominant vision lacks a "theory of mind." This means that, like autistic individuals, those who employ *HE* as a theoretical concept "do not understand that other people have their own plans, thoughts, and points of view... [and] have difficulty understanding other people's beliefs, attitudes, and emotions."⁹

⁷ Contrary to this assertion, autistic children, like neurotypical children, can be very suggestible, absorbing all sorts of attitudes and preferences from the popular culture.

⁸ Despite its lack of conscience, *HE* is also not sociopathic or psychopathic since a person with antisocial personality disorder (to use the up-to-date term) often exploits society's mores for his or her selfish aims. This shows a clear understanding of society that both *HE* and the autistic individual lack.

⁹ From Stephen M. Edelson of the Center for the Study of Autism, "Theory of Mind," at <http://www.autism.org/mind.html>. The concept – also used in animal ethology – was first applied to autism by Uta Frith.

Turn now, before any analysis of their etiology, to other specific “autistic” symptoms of the profession. The original statements by the rebellious French economics students¹⁰ define autistic economics in terms of its one-sided and exclusionary interest in “imaginary worlds” (as opposed to empirical study), “uncontrolled use of mathematics” (as an end in itself rather than merely as a tool), and the absence of pluralism of approaches in economics (the monopoly of the neoclassical approach).

The first two of these characteristics seem at first to fit with the idea of autism. Indeed, they merge into one symptom in many cases, since mathematics almost always portrays an idealized and thus imaginary world.¹¹ However, there is a major difference from autism here: many folks with autism have difficulty with abstract thought, since they are overwhelmed by the concrete details of life. While the focus on an imaginary internal world is an obvious result of autism, the use of abstraction should be seen instead as a defense mechanism against the confusion arising from the blooming, buzzing, confusing concreteness of the empirical world.

The third characteristic – a tendency for a single paradigm to dominate – seems to fit well with the an autistic person’s rigidity and desire for sameness, expressed as a preference for clear simple answers rather than intellectual debate or critical thinking. However, it does not explain why neoclassical economics – which includes methodological individualism and the focus on *HE* – is the prevalent orthodoxy. Nor does

¹⁰ See the “Open Letter From Economic Students to Professors and Others Responsible for the Teaching of this Discipline” and “Petition for a Debate on the Teaching of Economics” (from June and July of 2000, both found at <http://www.paecon.net/>).

¹¹ Of course, it is quite possible to describe an ideal world without math, as in utopian novels.

this list of “symptoms” say anything about treatment. So the profession must be described.

An Autistic Profession?

It would be a mistake to apply the psychological description of autism to economics in an unvarnished way. Even though high-functioning autistic people are often attracted to academia, where they can lecture others without listening, engage in research alone, and develop beautiful mind pictures, it is hard to say that a majority – or even a large minority – of economists have autistic tendencies. Individuals on the autistic spectrum do not have to specialize in economics to succeed in academia since there are other outlets for expression of their proclivities besides economic theory.¹² Being able to “work well with others” helps one achieve success in academia, as in most spheres, so that those with autistic tendencies would need to be very smart or to work very hard to compensate for social-skills deficits. In sum, self-selection can only be one part of the basis for autistic economics.

More profoundly, it would be a mistake to apply an autistic person’s own highly individualistic perspective, i.e., seeing “economics” as a simple aggregation of isolated economists. Instead, the economics profession is an institution, spawning a collective product and should thus be analyzed in a sociological or social-psychological (institutionalist) way. The profession trains people to accept autistic assumptions (and attracts those who do so already) and rewards them for doing so. Thus, the autistic aspect of the field involves more than the sum of its parts.

¹² However, I doubt that very many autistic individuals study sociology or social psychology, which (as their names suggest) are inherently societal in their nature.

Again delaying a full discussion of the basis for this institutional autism, it must be stressed that the French students' summary does not apply exactly to the empirical world. As with psychological autism, there is a spectrum. The hard-core autistic walling-off from the societal environment can be seen most strongly in the specific, highly abstract, axiomatic, or "Bourbakist," school that the students protested against.¹³ Further down the spectrum toward "normal," the approach of only dealing with the world by lecturing or dictating to it (as with Asperger's syndrome) can be seen with the International Monetary Fund, which applies the same preconceived vision of the ideal market system (and the same neo-Liberal set of policy imperatives) to every country it encounters. At the other end of the spectrum, there are all sorts of economists who work for government, business, foundations, and even labor unions; the fact that these real-world institutions are willing to pay for their contributions indicates that these economists' degree of social connectedness is adequate to the task. They may use abstract math or econometrics, but it would be libelous to apply the autistic tag to these economists.

The existence of a spectrum does not mean that the profession itself lacks institutional autism. The autistic economics of the Bourbakists and their Anglophone counterparts or the I.M.F. and similar organizations define the most prestigious segment of the economics profession, the one that "smart young economists on the rise" wish to emulate. Thus, autistic economics tends to dominate the "Big Name" departments, along with most professional journals, departments, professional associations, and textbooks.

¹³ See, for example, Philip Mirowski and Roy Weintraub. "The Pure and the Applied: Boubakism Comes to Mathematical Economics," Science in Context, Summer 1994, 7:245-272. A classic case of Boubakism is Gerard Debreu's Theory of Value (New York, Wiley: 1959).

Since much of the socio-institutional basis for the prevalence of autistic economics is shared with other academic fields, the nature of the subject matter must be considered. As a “soft science” dealing with the complexity of human social interaction as participant-observers, economists cannot approach the objectivity – and the ability to attain consensus – of the physical sciences. But we deal with a much simpler subject-matter than does, say, the sociology profession, so that some hope of consensus arising exists, at least on key issues. That is, economics is in the middle of a spectrum between obvious consensus on many issues and the extreme inability to form one. In this context, economists seem to have an autistic drive for sameness – a “physics envy” wish to imitate the natural sciences’ ability to attain consensus. Unlike sociology, for example, they can do so partly by restricting the subject-matter to easy topics such as markets and market-like processes and thus by restricting the acceptable ways of thinking.

To finally explain physics envy and other autistic symptoms, the profession must be understood as an artificial societal institution, created by people, that has taken on a life of its own partly independent of individual preferences while feeding back to shape those preferences and perspectives. Having roots in medieval guilds, academic institutions such as the economics profession center on a hierarchy topped by Big Name professors, universities, professional associations, and journals. Lacking a basis for true scientific objectivity, the identity of these Big Names cannot be decided as in physics. Thus, which professors, universities, professional associations, and journals are most

influential are selected by the already-existing Big Names, i.e., by “the insiders” or the “superstars.”¹⁴ Thus, the dominant ideology of the past is perpetuated over time.

Despite the top-down organization of the profession, it would be a mistake to assume that either a monopoly or a conspiracy exists. Competition also plays a role, in which “success” is defined by rising in that hierarchy. By the pyramidal nature of such hierarchies, the rise of one individual toward the top excludes others from such success, so that competition encourages individuals to over-invest time and effort in order to succeed.¹⁵ Departments, associations, journals, and textbooks also compete to attain the pinnacle of prestige and power defined by the current in-group.

This system implies a dynamic that perpetuates autistic pathology over time: people at the bottom of the hierarchy are not only trained to think and practice the dominant ideology, but find it in their professional interest to do so whole-heartedly and sincerely. Otherwise, they do not get the desired publications, jobs, promotion, tenure, attention, and fame. Those who accept the dominant world-view most profoundly are most able to be creative in developing new applications and are seen as *wunderkinder* who can rise to the top. This result is reinforced by self-selection, as the deviants leave the profession or sink into professional backwaters. Of course, those who rise feel they must teach it to those further down the hierarchy (students), since they believe in it and want the students to succeed at the higher levels of a profession they value. Those textbooks produced by Big-Name economists (or their conceptions) tend to dominate,

¹⁴ On the former, see for example, Olivier J. Blanchard and Lawrence H. Summers, “Hysteresis and the European Unemployment Problem,” *NBER Macroeconomics Annual*, 1986, pp. 15-78. On the latter, see Sumner Rosen, “The Economics of Superstars,” *American Economic Review* 71(December 1981): 845-58.

¹⁵ For this vision of competition, see Frank, Robert H. and Philip J. Cook. 1995. *The Winner-Take-All Society: Why So Few at the Top Get So Much More Than the Rest Of Us*. New York: Penguin.

while the “winner-take-all” nature of the textbook market limits the number of textbooks available.¹⁶ Finally, the neoclassical approach of excluding critical thinking and intellectual debate makes the task of teaching easier.

The self-referential nature of this system encourages the focus on imaginary worlds, including that of mathematics. The latter also plays a major role because of its use in grading subordinates’ success, a crucial part of any hierarchy. It has always been very difficult to judge how hard or well an academic actually works, while such decisions often threaten to become unpleasant political processes. Student course evaluations are almost always inadequate, as is the number or size of a professor’s publications (along with the number of times they are cited). But most feel that the quality of her or his mathematical technique can readily be judged. Simultaneously, the ambitious scholar can be envious of the older professors whose mathematical techniques are rusty or out-dated by applying the newest and fanciest methods. Just as we see the prevalence of jargon or obscurantism in other fields, in economics the one-upmanship of academic competition encourages the over-use of mathematics and the embracing of physics envy.

However, the institutional autism of the profession exists in a societal context. The economics profession cannot be understood without stressing its separation from the other social sciences. During the last century or so, the economics profession has defined itself in comparison to other fields. This, along with their self-satisfied sense of mathematical virtue, has encouraged economists to sneer at other specializations (especially sociology), the way the hatters’ guild mocked the laborers – or to try to conquer them, as Gary Becker and his school does. Either way, the main flow of

¹⁶ Again, see Frank and Cook, 1995.

information is from economics to other fields, rather than vice-versa. This Asperger-style elitism means that the profession eliminates whole sets of questions and parts of society from analysis, restricting the empirical and theoretical information that economists have to process, adding order to a complex and confusing reality. It allows the economists to maintain their beloved assumptions, however unrealistic.

Of course, the economists' guild exists in a modern capitalist environment, not a medieval one. It must sometimes prove its usefulness to business, government, and other societal institutions, which can threaten to de-fund academic programs that are totally "irrelevant."¹⁷ This, of course, explains why the dominant form of economics is neoclassical (studying idealized markets), just as a different style of economics (one emphasizing planning) prevailed in the old Soviet Union. This role for the societal environment implies that the profession cannot be entirely autistic, just as no individual can be so.

This point is reinforced if we define neoclassical economics. This approach can be seen as involving adherence to (1) mathematical method, with an emphasis on (2) utilitarianism and methodological individualism, (3) equilibrium, (4) naturalism, and (5) positivism.¹⁸ Last but hardly least, in the neoclassical ideal, (6) all human activity is seen as exchange or as organized by markets, in reality or as an ideal.

In terms of the discussion above, all but one of these may be seen as reflecting the profession's autistic attitudes, at least in part. I have discussed the first two of these

¹⁷ Critics of autistic economics should recognize the possibility of the rise of an economics which is totally subservient to these interest groups.

¹⁸ See, for example, Philip Mirowski, 1988. Against Mechanism: Protecting Economics from Science. Towota, NJ: Rowman & Littlefield, pp. 24-5.

above. Moving down the list, the centrality of equilibrium seems a symptom of totally autistic thinking in a society such as capitalism in which endogenously-driven change – sometimes drastic, as with financial crises – is the norm.¹⁹ Related is item (4), i.e., the view that human-made institutions such as markets can be reduced to “natural” forces such as individual preferences and technology, in which the complexity and artificiality of human institutions is abstracted from or forgotten. The profession’s positivism – i.e., its view that value-free research is an achievable ideal, that the observer is unaffected by being a participant in the system, and that serious philosophical reflection is unnecessary – also fits with a generally autistic attitudes.

However, the emphasis on markets and exchange – as opposed to other kinds of human institutions such as tradition, democratic cooperation, and hierarchy – clearly reflects the society in which economists live and learn. Though the neoclassical’s vision of exchange and markets may be unduly restricted, idealized, formalized, static, and individualized – symptoms of autistic attitudes – the fact that he or she is actually engaged with a real-world problem gives us a glimmer of hope.

Cures?

Returning to the case of neurobiological autism, there is no cure at this point. That is, there is no known method (such as a pill) to definitively prevent or end this disorder. But autism represents a developmental delay – which opens the door for a long-term struggle to speed up that development, to improve an individual’s functioning in society. Various methods (from behavior modification to active effort to engage a person socially

¹⁹ This point should be remembered by those who confuse the opposition to autistic economics with left-wing economics, since the generally conservative Austrian and Schumpeterian schools reject the static conceptions of the orthodox school.

in his activities²⁰ to occupational therapy) can speed up an individual's ability to learn to cope with the shower of stimuli. Pills can help handle symptoms (such as anxiety), making it easier for therapists to apply other methods. All of these involve trying to break down the walls between the autistic individual and the empirical world.

What about "curing" the economics profession of its institutional autism? It should not surprise anyone that there is no quick fix. The persistence of autistic symptoms (as described by the French students) is based in the hierarchy and the competition to rise in those ranks. This autism encourages, and is in turn shored up by, a refusal to engage with other social scientists in a serious way, as peers. In addition to efforts to get rid of unnecessary hierarchy and competition, outsiders and deviants may be able to push the profession up the developmental ladder to minimize solipsism. These efforts might be helped by the course of events, as when the shock treatment of the Great Depression pushed the profession away from classical economics and toward Keynes. In any event, the effort to force the profession to actively engage with reality must be central.

But such empirio-criticism is never enough. Just as autistic individuals need help making sense of reality, it takes a theory to trump a theory. In many cases, that means that we need to do better than the neoclassicals, presenting improved theories to understand empirical reality. These would be conscious of the limits of mathematical method, embrace the heterogeneity of empirical reality, take a deeper understanding of individual social psychology into account, treat economies as undergoing hard-to-reverse processes, involve institutionalist insights, eschew excessive pretensions of unjustified

²⁰ By coincidence, Dr. Stanley I. Greenspan, the advocate of active social intervention ("floor time") is the brother of economist Alan Greenspan.

J. Devine/March 30, 2006

scientific objectivity, and avoid reducing all activity to exchange, partly by learning from the other social sciences.²¹ If enough people are willing to make the effort, perhaps the profession will move toward pluralism.

In terms of research, it would be a major mistake to reject the profession or even neoclassical economics totally. In my experience, many interesting insights can be drawn from the more sophisticated work of neoclassicals, especially if treated skeptically with an eye to finding the valid aspects of their work rather than simply rejecting them. Despite their problems, it is better to know the state of the orthodoxy's knowledge than to be ignorant of it. Finally, there are reasons for hope. Magazines such as The Journal of Economic Perspectives, which center on presenting ideas without unnecessary formalism, along with such fields as experimental economics, which are by necessity empirical, show the possibility for improvement.

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²¹ For one of my efforts on this front, see "The Positive Political Economy of Individualism and Collectivism: Hobbes, Locke, and Rousseau," Politics & Society, volume 28 number 2, June 2000, 265-304. A draft is available at <http://bellarmine.lmu.edu/~jdevine/HLR.html>.