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Review of Autistic Company by R. Hendriks (2013)

By Damian E M Milton

In this book, Ruud Hendriks explores how autistic and non-autistic people navigate a shared existence. Hendriks draws upon his experiences of being a care worker for young autistic people; scientific literature, literary works, and the autobiographies of autistic writers. Hendriks discusses various stereotypes and metaphors used to describe autistic people, such as connotations of autistic people being 'machine-like'. Despite referencing the autistic activist Jim Sinclair and how these metaphors of non-humanity have been critiqued, Hendriks produces a highly normative narrative that is in stark contrast to that of autistic activists. He states that autistic people lack: intersubjective abilities, symbolic abstract thought, understanding of the implicit 'rules' of society, a sense of humour, social skills 'appropriate' for contact with peers, imaginative play, mental meta-representations, the ability for introspection and retrospection, and the empathy required for humaneness.

Hendriks does suggest that the metaphors commonly used to describe autistic people underestimate commonalities, and suggests such dispositional differences are not irreconcilable extremes, yet non-autistic misperceptions of autistic subjectivity are framed as not being able to act in a machine-like manner. With the reason for autistic people being outsiders in society being formulated as a lack of insight in context related meaning, psychologising the autistic 'deficit'. In so doing, Hendriks reduces the 'double empathy problem' (Milton, 2012) to a one-sided issue.

Hendriks suggests that a 'thing-like' metaphor refers to the 'real experiences' of people who have dealings with autistic people. An assertion that is highly stigmatising, pathologising, and unsubstantiated with evidence. Hendriks draws inspiration from literary fiction and philosophical work in order to try and move beyond mentalist accounts of autism, yet only does so after a largely uncritical appraisal of scientific literature.

The foray into literary criticism does little to shed light on the topic at hand. Hendriks suggests that his study was not about the lived experience of autistic people, but the forms of living autistic and non-autistic people establish together. Yet, without embedding oneself in autistic cultures, other than a care home for those with additional severe learning difficulties, produces a highly one-sided normative account of such exchanges, only furthering the 'othering' of autistic people within the narrative. Despite good intentions, Hendriks does not succeed in removing himself from medical model interpretations and offensive terminology. As an example, he utilises 'person with autism' and 'autistic people' interchangeably ignoring the claims of autistic activists against person-first language.

Although giving a thorough review of historical literature, there is a distinct lack of more recent research included, particularly regarding the expansion of autistic self-advocacy organisations. This lack of a full literature review leads to a reification of the much criticised 'theory of mind' thesis of autism, and a mischaracterisation of autistic perception leading to a 'behaviourist' outlook.

Occasionally the text is self-contradictory, suggesting at one point that it is unlikely that people ever 'grow out' of their autism and then later pronouncing that autistic people who are able to communicate and write autobiographies as having 'outgrown' their autism, a dangerous and inaccurate depiction of what it is to be autistic.

Hendriks concludes that a shared existence is dependent on the widening of companionship to include physical as well as mental connections. This is a somewhat fair assertion, yet unfortunately falls back into the dualistic pitfall Hendriks is attempting to escape. Hendriks suggests that a stimulus-free and controlling environment to be potentially the only way to help autistic people connect with others, and reifies behaviourist modification techniques to stimulate 'normal development' and reduce 'autistic behaviour', techniques that again are highly criticised by autistic self-advocates. Hendriks suggests that 'leaving autistic people alone' will lead to them becoming lost in the world. One would not recommend neglect for any child, yet building reciprocity needs mutuality of understanding and not one-sided imposition as often advocated by Hendriks.

Hendriks asks how to prevent a non-autistic interpretation from 'gaining the upper hand after all'. A good place to start would have been to co-research and co-write such a piece with a verbal autistic writer or scholar. In future, if interactional expertise is to be gained, such normative assumptions and impositions of non-autistic meanings need to be deconstructed. Instead, the examination of autistic autobiographies ends up being an exercise in 'quote-mining' to fit the claims being made, claims that are often critiqued by some of the authors cited. The understanding shown is thus highly limited and works against the activist rallying cry of 'nothing about us, without us' and is not attuned to the anti-normative stance of critical disability studies, despite suggesting that this is where the work is situated. Simply stated, if Hendriks' conceptualisations were to be valid, the social awareness needed for this autistic writer to compose this review would not be possible.

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