Embodied sociality and the conditioned relativism of dispositional diversity

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By Damian Milton

Abstract:

This paper explores the concepts of 'embodiment' (Merleau-Ponty, 1945), as well as those of 'conditioned relativism' and 'dispositional diversity' as first devised by the paper's author some fifteen years ago as an undergraduate student, and applies them to debates regarding neurodiversity. These concepts were devised by the author many years prior to being diagnosed as being on the autistic spectrum, having been previously assessed as "suffering" from a number of mental illnesses by a number of psychiatrists in his youth. Drawing upon Marxist and Phenomenological theories in particular, these concepts are explained through an eclectic citation of references ranging from Lao Tsu to Jimi Hendrix. These philosophical/sociological conceptions will be contrasted with those of others within the neurodiversity movement as a way of highlighting the need for "autistic solidarity" and the disabling effects of being isolated from others of similar disposition. It is hoped that through this overview, a theoretical account of autistic difference being a normal part of the diversity characteristic of all nature, and thus hopefully dislodging the hegemonic dominance of what constitutes "normalcy".

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Introduction

"Socrates: ...there are two types of madness, one arising from human disease, the other when heaven sets us free from established convention.

Phaedrus: Agreed." (Plato, 1973: 80-81).

Throughout human history there has been narratives regarding "madness" and psychological abnormality. The above quote from the dialogues of Plato sets out two very differing narratives however that have persisted to this day. The former describes madness in terms of an illness, a disease that blights the mental faculties of those who suffer from it. The latter a far more positive view of mental abnormality that frames such deviance as a setting free from "established convention". In the dialogue Socrates and Phaedrus separate these two narratives out to define two differing types of mental abnormality, one good and one not. Yet in the narratives surrounding mental and neurological diversities today similar narratives abound of both kinds regarding the same socially constructed "conditions".

This paper charts the development of a philosophy regarding the dispositional diversity of human agency that originated in my own undergraduate study some fifteen years ago. As a teenager I had been labelled with a number of psychiatric conditions, all of which did not sit well with my own personal experiences and understandings. This led to an aversion of the psychiatric profession, yet also the beginning of a search to understand why I felt so socially different. This search led me to the study of philosophy and sociology, where I began to build theories regarding dispositional diversity and the conditioned relativism of human agency.

"The box most applicable to my perceptions of selfhood in Kramer's (1994) analysis, is that of the 'socially isolative schizoid', which to me underlies a belittling of 'abnormal' dispositions." (Milton, 1999).

It was during this period that I also studied the works of radical psychiatrists and work regarding the social model of disability. These ideas were brought sharply to focus however when my son was diagnosed as autistic some years ago. In researching autism it became apparent that I myself could be considered as on the autism spectrum and I was later diagnosed in 2009 at the age of thirty-six. In the years before my diagnosis I had become increasingly aware that I was not alone in my philosophical ruminations, as to my surprise there was an entire "neurodiversity" movement already in existence.

Drawing upon Marxist and Phenomenological theories in particular, this paper explores the concepts of dispositional diversity and conditioned relativism. These philosophical/sociological conceptions will be contrasted with those of others within the neurodiversity movement as a way of highlighting the need for "autistic solidarity" and the disabling effects of being isolated from others of similar disposition. It is hoped that through this overview, a theoretical account of autism and neurodiversity will be presented.

Conditioned relativism and dispositional diversity

"Men make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please…The tradition of all the dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brain of the living" (Marx, 1852/1970:15).

It has long been recognised that people are both materially and discursively produced and conditioned within an historical and cultural context. Yet such assertions can also lead to a philosophy of mind that is purely deterministic, running contrary to the liberal ideals of free will, choice, rights and responsibilities. According to the theory of conditioned relativism, unconstrained free will is a myth, with every entity being somewhat interconnected with the material and social nexus which produced them. The appearance of a unified self with a coherent consciousness able to freely act being an illusion created by each embodied person being conditioned uniquely and relativistically. Despite the entity of a self being entirely dependent on the material and social environment it finds itself in, the emergent property of consciousness is, within this conceptualisation, uniquely dependent on the somatic affordances (physical limitations) of a physical brain. Thus social agents are constructed in a unique way, yet one which is fully configured within a material and social environment. An entity dependent on the social for survival and yet is an active agent within it. Although all humans are conditioned in this way, each occupies a unique trajectory in their development, each building their own experiences and perceptions of social life and even their use of language. Language may contain what is communicable, yet much meaning is lost in translation (Milton, 2012). Such issues are further contorted by social positionality and relations of power. The social perception of the socially alienated outsider (Becker, 1963) has long been of issue in social theorising and is reflected by attempts to both normalise populations deemed as deviant, and in reactions of 'insider' standpoint epistemology, concerns regarding reflection in practice and on positionality in research, feminist concerns of situated knowledge, and more recently the expressions of "neurodiverse" activists.

"Extremes of any combination come to be seen as 'psychiatric deviance'. In the argument presented here, where disorder begins is entirely down to social convention, and where one decides to draw the line across the spectrum." (Milton, 1999 - spectrum referring to the "human spectrum of dispositional diversity").

The outcome of the conditioned relativism of human embodied sociality creates a diversity of dispositions and developmental trajectories. Thus in the formulation, there is no "neuro-typical" to deviate from other than an idealised fantastical construction of Galtonian inspired psychological measurement. The above quote suggests that there are arbitrary lines "drawn in the sand" between what constitutes normality and psychiatric (or indeed neurological) deviance from often arbitrary measurements comparing the development of children against a flawed theory of stages and milestones.

Trait theories of personality

Throughout history, personality was conceived of in terms of types, perhaps the earliest being those of Hippocrates in Ancient Greece, who divided people into categories: melancholic, choleric, phlegmatic and sanguine; based upon a scientifically naïve notion of an excess or lack of bodily humours. Butt (2007) explains how contemporary theories regarding individual differences in personality grew from three dominant psychological traditions: Experimental, Psychometric and Clinical. All of these strands of thought are interested in the individual differences that people express, in terms of behaviour and what is commonly perceived as personality. The experimental tradition, often argued to be the dominant one within twentieth century psychology began with behaviourist theories, before being largely surpassed by cognitive theories in the latter half of the century. The psychometric tradition originated in attempts to measure cognitive abilities such as intelligence, establishing traits (ways in which individuals could be said to differ from one another).

Trait theories are exemplified in the work of Eysenck and Rachman's (1965) study, where classification is seen as fundamental to the "scientific study of human personality". Eysenck and Rachman (1965) suggest that through the use of factor analysis, clustering groups of traits and then reducing these to super-ordinate measurements, individuals could be measured using standardised scales along two personality dimensions that could be shown to endure over time: extraversion-introversion and neuroticism-stability. Differences along these continuums were then said to be linked to biological differences. Eysenck and Rachman (1965) then contended that personality inventories could be used to make predictions about how people were likely to act in certain situations and make comparisons between individuals.

Interestingly, Eysenck and Rachman (1965) utilised the same four personality types as originally described by Hippocrates, yet clustered certain personality traits within these types, identified by psychometric questionnaires measuring personality across the two crossing continuums of introversion-extraversion and neurosis-stability. An interesting analogy can be made between extremes of these types and the characters of the 'Winnie-the-Pooh' stories. The melancholic disposition (introverted-neurotic) exemplified by Eeyore's depressive nature (Moody, Rigid, and Pessimistic) and the social anxiety of Piglet (Anxious, Reserved, and Quiet). The choleric temperament (extraverted-neurotic) characterised by Tigger and possibly Roo (Restless, Excitable, Impulsive, Optimistic, and Active). There is also the phlegmatic characters (introverted-stable) of Owl and Pooh himself (Passive, Thoughtful, and Calm), and even the sanguine personality (extraverted-stable) of Rabbit taken to the extreme of a somewhat authoritarian personality (Outgoing, Talkative, and Responsive). According to normative categorisations of abnormal deviance, all such extremes of psychiatric/neurological divergence are pathologised with misguided attempts to normalise such character types. Even if this were possible, it is argued here that attempts at behavioural modification are like attempting to change the characters of the hundred-acre wood to be indistinguishable from Christopher Robin.

The same psychometric methodologies have been used in the creation of autism quotient tests (Baron-Cohen, 2003) and reflect an appeal to scientific credibility and an adherence to the use of quantitative data collection and analysis. In criticism to such approaches, Butt (2007) argues that social psychological knowledge, rather than being based on pre-existing phenomena waiting to be discovered, suggests that knowledge is constructed and situated historically and culturally. Knowledge therefore, is seen as being socially situated and not a measurable and objective standard separated from those who produce it.

Trait theory rests upon the assumption that a consistent structure of personality resides in each individual person, yet perceptions of attributes related to others may have more to do with those doing the perceiving, than those being perceived. Traits from this view are nothing more than constructions in the 'eye of the beholder' that reflect a world view of the perceiver, rooted within cultural ideologies and not a reflection of inner psychological dispositions of those being rated. Mischel (1968, cited in Butt, 2007) argues that attributions of disposition made about others reflect the perceptual prejudices of the onlooker. He found that people will rate others' attributes having observed them very briefly and that behavioural traits rarely show the consistency that trait theorists suggest. These findings suggest a fundamental attribution error is being made by trait theories, with those doing the rating attributing dispositions to the actions and behaviours of others without any justification. Mischel (1968, cited in Butt, 2007) also criticised the questionnaires used in psychometric testing, with words such as "often" being construed to mean different things to different people and are thus an invalid indicator of some underlying trait, accordingly, behaviour is theorised as much more context specific and situated. Thus, trait theory does not attempt to capture the unique richness of individual character, but rather measure and classify it.

It can be argued that the nomothetic approach adopted by trait theory offer little more than a description of behaviour and displays a circularity of reasoning, for example: explaining aggressive behaviour by saying someone is aggressive. In response to this criticism, such theorists suggest that personality traits can be related to underlying physiological factors. In so doing, they attempt to avoid the criticism that trait theory just re-describes phenomena, by positing a materialist account of behaviour and the mind-body problem within philosophy, an account for human action based in unchangeable and stable biological difference.

Within the framework of conditioned relativism, a diversity of dispositions ensues, yet rather than being unchangeable and stable differences based purely in biology, dispositions are also forged in unique social positionalities – an ever-changing embodied sociality. In constant movement more analogous with the river flowing through the hundred-acre wood then the reductionist accounts of trait theorists.

"Nothing endures but change" – *Heraclitus*

Social normativity and the sick role

"When you realise there is nothing lacking, the whole world belongs to you" – *Lao Tzu*

In contrast to the philosophy of Hercalitus or Lao Tzu, alongside the ideology of normalcy, deviance and lack being symptomatic of psychological trait theorists through the ages, notions of social normativity have also flourished. Such normative theories have indeed dominated much political philosophy and early sociological theory, the founding fathers of normative sociological discourse being Auguste Comte and Emile Durkheim. Durkheim (1897) suggested that individuals had a personal need for a state of equilibrium regarding the regulation of one's moral values and integration into society. Too little or too much could lead to dysfunction and even suicide through social anomie. Thus people were seen to need a level of social control and sanction, for their own good and for the good of society. Despite Durkheim (1897) believing that society needed a certain amount of social deviance in order to maintain enough dynamism for change, he also argued that deviance was functional for reinforcing the norms and values of society. Thus the positioning of some of the population as deviant outsiders was an inevitable part of a functioning society, reifying inequality and notions of the idealised norm in contrast to a deviant other.

The functionalist notions of Durkheim (1897) were embedded within the sociological theorising of the Post-War American theorist Talcott Parsons (1951) who developed the theory of the sick role. Within this conceptualisation illness and disability were seen as a deviancy from functional norms in need of professional monitoring and surveillance. Thus power became vested in the professional expert as a gatekeeper to the sick role and not the patient, literally seen as a role of being patient for the expert advice offered by the medical profession, which was to be followed in order to remediate one's condition and take one's place back in the economy. This system was seen as an ideal type model upon which to base service provision.

With rising life expectancy in many highly-developed societies in the post-War era, and increasing numbers of people being classified as long-term ill or disabled, Safilios-Rothschild (1970) expanded Parsonian notions of the sick role to include people who were deemed unable to achieve a level of functional norms: the rehabilitation role. The reasoning here consisting of those deemed disabled to make every effort to achieve as close a fit to normality as was possible, or as Goffman (1963) would have critiqued as leading to stigmatisation, to pass as normal.

Functionalist ideals of normalcy have dominated the field of autism studies, with the autistic lifeworld being invaded by a never-ending tide of interventions that try to eradicate autistic styles of diversity. Such a medicalisation and psychologisation of autism has led to internalised oppression and psycho-emotional

disablement (Reeve, 2011; Milton and Moon, 2012) and the rise in psychopharmacology in attempts to control and placate people with genuine "problems of living".

"I cannot foresee Prozac gaining much more popularity, perhaps because of the stubbornness and perseverance of people like myself, who despite living through a 'culture of depression', refuse to be swept along by the rise of psychopharmacology. At least that is, until the next 'miracle drug' arrives, to enable us to live a more 'normal' and 'productive' life." (Milton, 1999).

Fragmented phenomenological constructs of social reality

The phenomenologist Alfred Schutz (1967) split experiences of the social lifeworld into four different aspects: the umwelt (directly experienced social reality), mitwelt (experiences interacting with contemporaries), vorwelt (previous experiences) and fogwelt (imaginations of future possible experiences to come). For Schutz (1967) as people develop there is a general transition within the lifeworld between direct to indirect understandings of experience, leading to an increasing anonymity with what is directly experienced, whilst also creating and re-creating the experiencing of the world by themselves and others through their agency. Uexhull (1957) argued that an organism integrated experiences of the umwelt in what he termed the 'collective umwelt', somewhat similar to notions of the integration of central coherence in psychological theories of autism. Interestingly, Uexhull (1957) hypothesised that disruption to an organism could mean that such an integration would not operate efficiently.

It has been theorised by a number of autistic academics that autistic people can be somewhat characterised by a fragmented perception and experience of the social lifeworld as described by Alfred Schutz (1967). Murray et al. (2005) suggest that autistic people have a tendency toward a monotropic focusing of perceptual interest and attention, yet this could be expressed in any number of different variations. Dawson (2012) argued that the cognitive domains within the brains of autistic people tend to work in relative isolation to one another. Pieper (1989) argued that it was the human capacity to reason which allowed them to live in 'welt' (the social lifeworld), whilst plants and animals lived in an untamed umwelt. A lack of social reciprocity has often been cited as a deficit contained within the minds of autistic people (Baron-Cohen, 2003). Yet such theories psychologise what is essentially a socially negotiated interactive event. Indeed, the dispositions of autistic people are misunderstood themselves and ostracised for their otherness. The autistic experience of the lifeworld is often fragmented, but there also exists a "double empathy problem" between interacting agents of widely differing disposition and perception (Milton, 2012).

"He who knows, does not speak. He who speaks, does not know" – Lao Tzu

The metaphysical philosophy of Pirsig (1991) suggests a working model of dynamic and static quality to the properties of entities. As an example, language in this conceptualisation has a reified static quality of having been inscribed and exchanged. Dynamic quality however much more resembles the directly experienced umwelt as described by Schutz (1967). Autistic people could be said to exhibit a dynamic quality of perception, one less stratified by learnt schemas, one less socialised into obeying normative ideologies, but an embodied sociality nonetheless. Merleau-Ponty (1945) suggested that all consciousness was perceptual, with one's sense of the world and of oneself being an emergent property, an ongoing becoming. By seeing (autistic) people as uniquely and relativistically embodied, yet within an historical and social nexus, helps to dissolve the dogmatic distinctions of mind/body and individual/society.

Subverting the hegemony

"I'm gonna wave my freak flag high" – Jimi Hendrix

Despite various tensions between stakeholder groups, a dominant narrative persists in the field of autism studies that defines autism as a dysfunctional deviation from an idealised notion of normalcy, with little but tokenistic gestures being offered to autistic voices that are more often than not infantalised within debates. In subversion of this hegemony however, have been the growth of autistic narratives and discourse, and the development of autistic culture and communities. In resisting the dominant ableism within the field, the notion of impairment and deficit and resultant normalisation agenda must be deconstructed. Autistic people will need to be utilising their voices in, claiming ownership of the "means of autistic production", and potentially celebrate the diversity of dispositions within and without the culture, or in the words of my Great Uncle:

"I wish no harm to any human being, but I, as one man, am going to exercise my freedom of speech. No human being on the face of the earth, no government is going to take from me my right to speak, my right to protest against wrong, my right to do everything that is for the benefit of mankind. I am not here, then, as the accused; I am here as the accuser of capitalism dripping with blood from head to foot." (Maclean, 1919).

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