

OF A DELICATE INSIGHT | OaDI

On Behaviour:

Thoughts on Neurodivergence & Neuroagency

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**“EACH GLIMMER, an OFFER of COMFORT
& Shelter in Gentleness, *fys*”**



**„JEDER SCHIMMER, eine QUELLE
des WOHLBEFINDENS
& Geborgenheit in Sanftmut, *fds*“**

First of all, let me say that the following words describe my thoughts and ideas and thus are not universally or specifically representative. So, what you make of them is at your good liberty and your discretion! I speak here from my perspective and experience of Asperger's (that was the term used when I received my diagnosis; you may or may not agree with it today. To me it still echoes as true), ADHD (cf., ADHS), dyscalculia and OCD.

The thoughts herein are not meant for diagnostic purposes. If you have any questions regarding the diagnosis of neurodivergent conditions or the use of medication, then please always consult with your GP, pharmacist, psychiatrist, therapist or other recognised, qualified medical specialist(s) who can provide safe, tested and sound council. Always be careful of what you hear or read. If in doubt double check your sources!

Look at the diagnostic process and the medical aspect of it (not the medical model per se) as figuring out the various elements of your physical health, your mental health and your wellbeing. To be guided by someone who has objectively studied neurodivergent conditions is highly valuable. A professional medical/support practitioner might be able to point out perspectives or insights which could very well change your game, outlook or prognosis. I always find the outside perspective beneficial. While the medical perspective can seem negative and diminishing, beyond it, there is the space of choice to formulate your own thoughts. If need be, get a second opinion. In good conscience, I would not recommend that you self-diagnose or self-identify. Mind though, if you cannot focus, get distracted and are struggling otherwise, then that sort of fits the description of not working properly or of being impaired. The word *properly* applies in that you need to figure out how you can function in this society, for yourself, and autonomously, i.e., you might say *properly*. The word *impairment* apparently holds a meaning which goes something like to make someone or something stumble (2022). Thus, it is not the malignant, terrible term we might perceive it to be. It is much more about what you make of it, I have found – how we use it. What I'm saying is this – my goal has never been to rely on others to adjust to me and my needs. This is tougher in practice than in written speech, of course. It has at times been difficult to deal with setbacks, and to understand others. I remember also that I had to learn not to make every situation about my own condition (cf., Befinden).

I have to use certain types of support, am unsure about things here or there and there is always that deep voice of doubt, that almost hypercritical voice echoing and reverberating in the background, in my mind, telling me “you just ain't that good!” or “what the hell are you doing here?” or “why on earth would anyone get back to you or want to speak with you”. I ain't being hyperbolic! I ain't looking for sympathy either though! It's just a ditch. Excuse the shift in the English, I felt like it and why not. So, we are talking about imposter syndrome, not only creatively speaking, as a person too. My aim is and has always been to enable myself to navigate and negotiate the societal stage, for myself and by myself. Simply to say “this is me” was never enough for me and it never will be. The foundations upon which all of this and my other works build is the following: I had to learn to manage

my life and fit myself (without losing myself in the process) into a world which did not cater to my needs. That was back in Germany. There was not much talk about neurodivergence back then and as I recall not much support beyond the excellent therapy and psychiatric guidance I had, after my mum fought for it, or so I recall. In short, I had to become able to navigate a world which was not built to accommodate the neurodivergence with which I've been graced. I say "graced" because although I see there is a medical basis, I also feel it is a valuable aspect of my life, which offers me a beautiful, perhaps discerning, lens, well, some aspects of it do so. To hope for a better world in fifty years was not an option. It is not an option today. To get me to that point of managing my life better was the duty and responsibility of my parents and the doctors who worked with me and treated me on those just and valid medical foundations. This is my perspective, and it is one for which I am grateful. As it stands, nowadays I'm aware, or know that I do not have all the answers. I'm more reserved about producing straightforward sentiments. I hold therefore that neurodivergent conditions require, in their foundations, a medical diagnosis since they are not an item of fashion in which you may or may not clothe yourself voluntarily or because you feel like it. Why anyone would voluntarily identify as having social communication difficulties, reduced focus, difficulty to focus (which is a nightmare at times), or difficulty processing information and the world is a mystery to me. Of course, this a negative view and it does not cover all grounds. Let me put it this way: I am neurodivergent. It is how I'm wired (more about this later on). These conditions can have and have had a profound and challenging impact on me, my family, friends and other personal or professional circles. They require medication or expert guidance, which the layperson cannot render, even though they may play a vital supporting role.

Now! In my previous essay you might have spotted the term *mathematics of neurodivergence* somewhere in the text. Let me elaborate here: I'm not talking about mathematics in the usual, canonical sense of the word. Neither do I expect anyone to perform high-end formulas or work out complex equations. I am, as mentioned before, dyscalculic. Thus I use my memory and language faculty to compensate for a lack of ability to comprehend the meaning of numbers properly. In other words, I trained rigorously and intensely when I was young to memorise numbers, to tell the time (analogue and digital), to drill in simple and more complex arithmetic. I just about got through mathematics in education (mostly scoring 4 at best and 6 at worst, which are "enough" and "insufficient/not enough" respectively, or "just about a pass" and "fail") and with profound difficulty. My mum taught me to treat numbers as linguistic instead of numerical units and to an extent it has worked quite well. Time telling works, nowadays, like it has never been a problem. It is still the case basically though that numbers make no sense to me. There is no reason to me why e.g., $2+4=6$.

Recently, even though I'm obviously not a mathematician, while working on and thinking about my own composed fictional, engineered languages (cf., constructed languages) I became highly

fascinated by the concept of mathematical thinking. So I was thinking of it as a very precise, focused way of directing my thought. This led me to inaugurate the idea of mathematics as a way of reminding and directing myself to be more acutely aware of how I think about grammar composition or writing out poetic or prose lines; how I arrange these things. In essence, these are formulations with constituent parts which must make sense to work, and thus, arguably, are quite close to equations.

Language simply gives me more liberty to make things up and define my own rules. You cannot apparently go and say $2+4=13$. In a composed language you have free reign in that matter, whatever the grammatical rule you invent, it holds its own truth. As the author, I must then make it functional by honouring that truth. In other words, I should be disciplined and refrain from changing the rules for every other little grammatical problem because it suits my whim.

I approach the composed/engineered language like it is a natural language I have found and which I'm studying. A scholar of German, English, Finnish or Gàidhlig, for instance, cannot just change parts of the respective grammars simply because they do not like them.

That's the tricky part. As the author I'm the maker, the observing student and scholar. On the other hand, a composed language is, just as natural languages are continuously evolving, under construction, so rules may change or I may have an idea which is better than a previous one. Of course I can adjust things! It's fantasy! It's fiction! As the author I have to make that process appear natural and authentic (i.e., it should sound and read like the language is meant to exist, not like it was created). The idea is therefore that mathematics is a lens, a means of approaching my work which helps me to handle its constituent elements, and to fit these together. This is the real truth and essence of the way in which I want to use mathematics as a term: metaphorical, practical and instrumental.

Now on to philosophy: it is often thought of as high and lofty, removed from the pragmatism of our modern life and thus perhaps of *no real use* to a modern world. I find that often we favour the practical application of skill and knowledge over the act of thinking, which is also often perceived as "not real" unless it is translated into something more physical, and thus tangible.

That the world we inhabit originated in thought is often missed. If thought were not real, then why do we suffer physically from mental health or feel when we remember something whether it is beautiful or not? Why then, do we long for someone or something in thought? Why does a new idea, of which we think, excite us, if it is not real? Why would it be so dear to us? If it were not real, would we not simply be able to discard it? How do we engage in dialogue or make sense of the world if the thought which captures those ideas and that information is not real?

Well, of course there is real and there is *real*. You have to enact the thought to transfer it into reality, in order to make it real. A subtle discernment of thought is critical therefore, for not everything we think, in fact corresponds to, or is representative of our reality. This of course we must concede.

So, for instance, I was and am enjoying Shapiro's *Thinking about Mathematics: The Philosophy of Mathematics* (2000). I think it is a wonderful book and an inroad to mathematics in a

broader sense. It places mathematics in a historical context which is helpful. Whereas, here'ss the thing! I hold, that for me, philosophy is more an act of reflecting on my thought, my behaviour, and my outlook on life. It is the curation and collection of wisdom (helpful guiding thought, maxims and the like) by which I navigate this beautiful world. Philosophy need not feel lofty or high. What it should be for me is useful in life, though. In that height and in that vaulted loft where it so beautifully resides, I also see a wonderful place full of depth. A place into which I can project thought, let it percolate, reflect on it, make sense of it, then embody it as best as I am able. It is philosophy at liberty from the boundaries and frameworks of the canonical works and schools of thought.

I study philosophy through my own research. What has helped me to move through my conditions and appreciate how they impact on my life was philosophy of mind in which case Bohm, the physicist, inspired me a lot. It opened my eyes to how I can manage my conditions or what I must or should do to improve my management of them. Philosophy allows me to work on these things and fit them into my life. So that when situations or circumstances arise in which, say, I feel overwhelmed or something does not quite work out, I have a way of placing that into the fabric of my knowledge. It gives me insight, tells me what I could adjust, do better the next time.

For some time now, I have been training myself, and continue doing so, to be flexible in my thinking, in my approach to life. This is critical to the treatment of my neurodivergence. It is immensely of value. Fluid movement is profoundly beneficial.

When it comes to neurodivergence, I hold that in its foundations, we need a medical approach, at least initially. Not necessarily, that is, because I wish to be overly negative, but because the subject matter is too complex not to consult with a professional (medical/support) practitioner who can make sure that what we are feeling is in fact what we believe it to be. The best medical/support approach, in my opinion, happens when the medical/support practitioner listens, and reacts to, or works with their patient or client. No one really wants to be a patient, of course, or a client. Need one though define oneself by those terms? I hold that one should not feel clamped down in a medical or support environment or be made to feel like an item to be researched. The best doctors I have worked with guided me but did not enforce anything upon me. They did here or there apply a stern voice which in hindsight I appreciate though.

Philosophy can then build on this and should provide space for thought. Let's now hearken back to "this is how I'm wired". What I meant is that I see my neurodivergence as a foundation, a baseline condition, ergo, everything else can or does build on it. I do not think that this wiring or how I used it, even though my brain is thusly wired, is unchangeable. Factually, I would not be writing this if it were unchangeable! It takes an immensity of work and labour to adjust (I must honour this aspect by mentioning it and doing justice to those who have thus far supported and sustained me). It is nonetheless possible. More so if I do so for myself because I wish to do so, and not because society demands it of me. Philosophy can also engage with how it is that we see and perceive neurodivergence

as a phenomenon and aspect of our life (I say this inclusively of those who are non-neurodivergent). How do we approach it? How do we understand it or seek to understand it better? How so do we appreciate its constituent elements? How does the individual formulation of neurodivergence work, juxtaposed against, or fitted into the world in which we live? Those are the sides of the equation with which we are working, i.e., its mathematics. How we solve this equation is a question to which answers must be found, though the answers themselves are subtle and elusive I feel. I do not have them all. That is what I am trying to figure out.

Branching out here, you see, the other reason why I am using the term mathematics (not logic though) is that it challenges me to engage with it. I find it highly fascinating actually! I want to learn about mathematics precisely because I am dyscalculic. I wish to understand what it means and for at least a decade now have been looking into it.

I worked closely with one of my maths teachers, one of the most generous men I have ever had the privilege of meeting. He once asked me how I was getting on with my venture into understanding mathematics. Unfortunately back then I was not able to provide an answer. He would also run extracurricular support sessions. During one of these I was the only student in attendance. He would sit patiently at a table with me. He would sit there for straight minutes of silence waiting for me to grasp a question by which I felt profoundly troubled. He would gently guide me under circumstances in which plenty of other teachers would have given up. So at least I recall it.

So how would I properly attain this engagement with mathematics? How even to begin? It is similar with the others matters & essences of neurodivergence and things like social interaction, communication, relationship formation, subtext and subtlety. It is not about understanding, or observing life in a clinical, scientific way either, based purely on reason and logic. Reason is critical. Nothing though that is social works according to logic in my experience and to wish the emotionality of life to be removed from our world denies the very essence which fires its heart and soul. We need good ethos and a bit of good pathos in this equation, as well, for it to be coherent and reflecting of the movement of being. How do we uphold and/or define dignity in a mental health crisis outside of mental health professional practice, as a society, as people? When, let's say, an individual has reduced or limited control of their behaviour? How do we define dignity in the tensions of raw roughness & gentleness when it becomes increasingly effortful to uphold stability or react well?

How do I learn even better and more coherently to move through the mighty halls of the theatre of this neurocosmos? How does our perception of gentleness relate to raw roughness, struggle & strife? I think and hold that these are most critical questions with which we needs must engage: on a personal level that is, you see, not only in consultation with a professional practitioner (except, that is, in regard to medication, where you should always seek medical support and council. Never go your own way). How do I advocate for myself and if necessary and appropriate, for others? How do I use my language in order to communicate the meanings of my neurodivergence and mental health? I do not think that communication is so fundamentally different or even impossible, that one agent could

not understand the other. I know it is not. However, there is still a lack of appreciation for perspective, processing and cognition – sensemaking, in other words. This is not an indefinite lack of appreciation, for some day hopefully we will have solved this equation or at least written it. People can learn. But of course there is this challenge, this difficulty. I like the German here: „Diese Frage fordert uns heraus“, something like “this question calls us to emerge, to come forth” – lovely imagery!

Why would a neurotypical person who has no contact with neurodivergence spend their time trying to think like, say, an autistic person would? Such empathy I, as the neurodivergent person, wish to offer. The philosophy I’m suggesting has to allow the neurodivergent person to find ways to render their experiences as just and valid to them. And yet! I say, it also has to allow the non-neurodivergent person to access and understand the ways and behaviours of neurodivergent people. I do not mean total, nonadjusting, and unwavering acceptance in the sense of “this is who I am and that is that”. I have never believed in “this is who I am and that is that” and people do tend to change more than even they admit it to themselves. I would not and do not want to clamp myself down like that!

Why would I submit to never to change, never to adjust, never to go beyond where and what I presently am? Never to learn? Never to grow? We have a curious obsession in our society with upholding continuity to the point of not wishing to change or even fearing change. It throws things into upheaval! It muddies the order. Of course it does and I love it for that! If it occurs in the right way and is beneficial it can be an amazing and wonderful, even uplifting experience. Think only of meeting that one person who betters your life! Think of writing a stanza and suddenly, one simple adjustment (or change) to a line and it allows it to unfold! You taste a new flavour or fragrance! Discover new clothing! A new house! You receive good news! You learn something new! That is change, I would say, change also to your knowledge, your insight and understanding. It is needless to say therefore that I never agreed with the sentiment of *semper idem* which means “always the same” (2022). It think it has its value, surely. If it refers to upholding a certain quality or value that is fine. I do think though it should not be taken too literally. Adjustments to attitude and outlook should be allowed! Life would be so boring without change or adjustment or difference of experience.

Going back to advocacy, there is always a catch, you see: to be able to advocate for my neurodivergence, I must also open my vulnerability to those with whom I speak. I need fundamental trust and confidence. This requires using language or formulations which might seem odd, ramified or more literal. My agency does not necessarily fit the usual or expected social code. Empathy is not as simple and straightforward as we want it to be or as we think it is. My subtext differs a bit. Still, I wish to engage.

Juxtaposed, as a person I wish to move in responsibility to manage who I am and what I wish to do in life. Not as easily done as it is said, of course, it never really is! And there is always that ditch! Yet, to wait and to wish for support cannot be the only thing that qualifies me or which signifies my life. Rights, accessibility, pragmatism and support are all profoundly critical and vital things to attain, uphold and to ponder, some might say for which to fight. What lies beyond this, however, is to live!

We can use neurodivergent difference to bring about thought and culture which goes beyond what we currently have, in the west anyway. This might not be new, ought to be mentioned nonetheless. New philosophy can allow us to react and respond better. We need more openness while respecting tradition and the good old school ways of doing things where these are appropriate. Proportion and balance is critical. I am, for that matter, slightly old school, or at least I like to think so. Though I find it awkward and strange at times, I prefer personal meetings and contact; eye contact and a good hand shake still mean a lot to me. I had to train that, rigorously, I might add! It does hold something profoundly fundamental to look someone in the eyes or to greet, part, or agree by hand shake. So I hold that comfort should not necessarily be the aim. It should function as an aid towards movement.

Reflecting on my own path of medical intervention and guidance, I have long since ascertained that the onus to understand society is mostly on me. This has simply become all the more clear to me in recent times. To understand what is strange to me, how other people think, act, behave, that is part of the therapeutic process which I experienced. It is, in my comprehension, an aspect of the autistic condition to wish to bend the environment and circumstance to the needs one has. To go through transitions, adjust and adapt are difficult even when using techniques to navigate (which more or less means move the ship (2022)) any novelty I face. Thus, this life calls (Hill, 2021, p.17). Ergo, if I do not push myself to navigate this world, I will never learn it. Thus, it has always been an aspect of therapy to learn to understand that I need to adjust to society in such ways so as to make myself able to move within it, irrespective of any adjustments being offered to me. That is what therapy should be about, in my opinion. It is not about the adjustments, you see! Or the right to ask for them to be deployed for that right is critical though! For me, it is about what I can do to help myself, and for myself. Without, that is, expecting adjustment from others. This does not negate or render unnecessary reasonable adjustments which could be made. That option must remain upheld. It might even be beneficial not to tell people I am neurodivergent. Not telling people I am neurodivergent avoids the mental barrier evoked by the mere mentioning of the word *neurodivergent* (say, when the recipient knows little or nothing about it)! Not mentioning I am neurodivergent can make receiving the aid from which I might benefit difficult, as my neurodivergence does not always show up obviously. This can lead to misunderstandings and challenging situations. So! It is a bit of a peculiar balancing act. You do need to see the humour in this!

I need to reconcile who I am, and who I want to be, not with what society expects of me, but more critically, with how I can move through society and be successful for myself. A persona, perhaps, is beneficial, which can partake of society, to learn about, and from it. Everyone wears a mask, here or there, to delineate the intimate, private, and the public (Barbour and Marshall, 2015, p.3). This is not unique to neurodivergence though its application might differ. This does not mean giving up who I am. It does not mean not being me. It means, within myself and for myself, to understand how to filter what society should see and hear, how to navigate society and my peers. That too is a natural act, performed by all people, whether or not they are neurodivergent. The fact that we

neurodivergent people have a specific label attached to us makes us feel like we are utterly different. I also think the word *neurodivergent* alone is not enough.

I have roamed this earth for long enough though, now, to recognise commonalities. Others will undoubtedly too. I seek those commonalities. For all the good that is found in, and afforded by freedom and liberty, I hold that privacy and the right to, or the act of not sharing my thoughts and feelings are just as critical and valid. To appreciate silence & quiet and to offer silence & quiet as a gesture of dignity and insight is good. It affords space and gentleness to reflect. It does not mean ignorance or inaction. In personal restraint lies a similarly significant value not to assume that always sharing is always appropriate or that other people in fact wish to know what everyone else has to say. For, people might not want to know. It depends on what it is one wishes to share, when and where of course. Some things are best uttered in private only (these need not be shady; think of medical information, intimate details, very personal thought to name but a few), and then retained, withheld from the public. What this has to do with the topic of this essay? Well, as initially mentioned, I grew up in a world in which neurodivergence was not spoken of much outside of my immediately familiar circles, in school and work. I still hold for myself that neurodivergence is a very personal, intimate subject, and not all things of matter to it, do I wish to share. I hold my privacy dearly and as a shroud to be protected and nourished. This is what I would call my neuroagency – a concept I created in 2019 to describe the ability to understand and manage all of the above. It's a concept by which to explore how to gather, curate and convey this knowledge and insight; how to navigate society with this knowledge, in empowerment, confidence and dignity. I caution though that neuroagency is not a weapon to be wielded against others but an instrument of subtle compassion. It is capacity and knowledgeability of the individual derived from reflection and an understanding of the self and how one's condition affects oneself. The only one who can increase or decrease neuroagency is oneself.

If we observe neurodivergent conditions as inherent qualities in the individual, then through good intervention, we can improve those qualities; we can improve quality of life, without sacrificing who we are fundamentally. Observe this not as societally enforced change to fit into a mould of the neurotypical. To fit into *the mould* should not be the goal. I like to think of it from this perspective: I, the neurodivergent person, want to know how it works. I want to understand the mathematics of this life and of interpersonal threads and ties. There is a profound beauty, and dignity, in the subtleties of connection, if it is allowed to unfold without enforcement and, though at times tricky and challenging, with a good measure of gentleness. To transcend my neurodivergent conditions, I now recognise, holds the meaning of crawling my way out of my tunnel minded ditch; to recognise that the *other* is not, in fact, so removed or immensely different. I will call this neurotranscendence.

All in good time and in its good place we might find good judgement and attain movement.

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