The autistic state demonstrates how the mind can dissociate itself from unpleasant experiences

Resignation involves psychologically separating or dissociating—becoming alienated—from the unconfrontable subject of the human condition and all the many truths that bring the subject into focus. According to the quotes cited earlier about savants, many if not most savants are autistic. An understanding of autism will show dramatically how the human mind can block out, dissociate itself from, or create a life in denial of an unconfrontable reality.

To understand autism it needs to be recollected that nurturing, or love-indoctrination, of infants was the prime mover or main influence in both the maturation of our species and the maturation of our personal lives.

It was through nurturing, the process of ‘love-indoctrination’, that humans were able to develop an instinctive orientation to behaving unconditionally selflessly and as a result become utterly integrated and cooperative. In our past instinctive state, prior to becoming conscious and corrupted by the problem of the human condition, everyone behaved selflessly and considered the welfare of the group above their own. This instinctive memory of a loving, cooperative, alienation-free, all-sensitive past is what we term our ‘soul’, one expression of which is our ‘conscience’, the instinctive expectation within us that we behave selflessly, lovingly and cooperatively.

Of course, with the emergence of the human condition and the need to resign to a life dedicated to denial of any idealistic truth that appeared to condemn humans, this truth of the significance of nurturing in the maturation of our species, and in our own lives, was repressed and denied.

Before beginning the explanation of autism I would like to include four quotes. The first two quotes acknowledge our species’ innocent, cooperative, loving instinctive past. The third quote acknowledges the extraordinary sensitivity we once possessed. The fourth quote acknowledges the existence of our conscience. The quotes are taken from the writings of Sir Laurens van der Post.

‘This shrill, brittle, self-important life of today is by comparison a graveyard where the living are dead and the dead are alive and talking [through our soul] in the still, small, clear voice of a love and trust in life that we have for the moment lost…[there was a time when] All on earth and in the universe were still members and family of the early race seeking comfort and warmth through the long, cold night before the dawning of individual consciousness in a togetherness which still gnaws like an unappeasable homesickness at the base of the human heart’ (Testament to the Bushmen, 1984, pp.127–128 of 176).

‘There was indeed a cruelly denied and neglected first child of life, a Bushman in each of us’ (The Heart of The Hunter, 1961, p.126 of 233).

‘He [the relatively innocent Bushmen people of the Kalahari desert] and his needs were committed to the nature of Africa and the swing of its wide seasons as a fish to the sea. He and they all participated so deeply of one another’s being that the experience could almost be called mystical. For instance, he seemed to know what it actually felt like to be an elephant, a lion, an antelope, a steenbuck, a lizard, a striped mouse, mantis, baobab tree, yellow-crested cobra, or starry-eyed amaryllis, to mention only a few of the brilliant multitudes through which he so nimbly moved. Even as a child it seemed to me that his world was one without secrets between one form of being and another’ (The Lost World of the Kalahari, 1958, p.21 of 253).

‘Human beings know far more than they allow themselves to know: there is a kind of knowledge of life which they reject, although it is born into them: it is built into them’ (A Walk with a White Bushman, 1986, p.142 of 326).
As a result of their instinctive heritage of growing up in an all-loving community, all humans now instinctively expect to be loved. Tragically however, since the emergence of consciousness some 2 million years ago and with it the dilemma and agony of the human condition, no infant has been given as much love as all infants received prior to the emergence of the struggle with the human condition.

In their innocent vulnerability, the main way children have coped with these wounds to their instinctive self has been to make themselves invulnerable to the pain by splitting themselves off from the world of that anxiety and trauma. As was described earlier, the hurt or damage or corruption of the souls of new generations and the progressive implementation of psychological block-out or alienation to cope with the hurt, have been occurring from birth onwards. The Australian impersonator, Barry Humphries, revealed that in performing his ‘Dame Edna Everage’ stage act he is ‘performing a life long act of revenge’. Humphries is quoted as saying that when he was growing up ‘The phrase commonly used by my mother was “We don’t know where Barry came from”, which I regarded as an indication that I might well have been adopted.’ As a child, when he asked his mother if she loved him, she responded, ‘Well, naturally I love your father most of all, and then my mother and father, and after that, you and your sister, just the same.’ Humphries added: ‘Not to get a clear picture from one’s parents as to where one stood in their affections, that was a troubling thing…I suppose one grows up with a desire to murder one’s parents, but you can’t go and really do that. So I suppose I tried to murder them symbolically on stage’ (Australian Women’s Weekly, Oct 2001).

Later, in early adolescence, it was the corruption within themselves—acquired during their infancy and childhood as a result of their particular encounters with the corrupted and resigned world—that forced adolescents to also resign to a life of denial of the issue of the human condition.

The vulnerability of children was especially great in the situation that has existed where parents have been unable even to acknowledge the corruption of their resigned adult world. Tragically, unable to explain the human condition, humans could not afford even to admit they were corrupted, because of the crippling criticism such an admission would attract. As has been described, this silence, in effect preposterous lying, has devastated new generations arriving on the scene.

While a few cases of autism are caused by physical damage to the brain, most have been a result of extreme instances of this tragic situation where mothers have not been able to give infants the love they expect, and as a result the infant has had to dissociate psychologically from its reality to cope with the violation and hurt to its instinctive self or soul. Child psychiatrist and psychoanalyst, D.W. Winnicott, says that while ‘a proportion of cases where autism is eventually diagnosed, there has been injury or some degenerative process affecting the child’s brain…in the majority of cases…the illness is a disturbance of emotional development’ (Thinking about Children, 1996, p.200 of 343). To be able to maintain the denial and thus dissociation from the extreme pain of their circumstances required constant application of the denial/block, which is why autistic people tend to be compulsive and obsessive in their behaviour. They escape into repetitive activities and tend to develop a one-track mind. In his 1997 book Next of Kin, psychologist Roger Fouts describes autism as ‘a developmental disorder characterized by lack of speech and eye contact, obsessive and repetitive body movements, and an inability to acknowledge the existence or feelings of other people. The autistic child lives in a kind of glass bowl, inhabiting a separate reality from those around him…Bruno Bettelheim, the renowned psychologist who ran a school for emotionally disturbed children, blamed autism on cold unfeeling mothers’ (p.184 of 420). Again, it has to be emphasised that since the emergence of the necessary battle with the human condition all mothers have been ‘refrigerator mothers’ to some degree, mothers who have been unable to give their children the amount of
unconditional love that those children instinctively expect. While humans have not been able to love themselves it has been virtually impossible to properly love or nurture others. The association of autism and savant abilities was mentioned in the quote from the documentary, *Uncommon Genius*, that stated ‘for more than half of all savants, the syndrome owes its origins to a familiar condition—autism’. The relationship between autism and savant abilities is not difficult to understand. If the autistic person could completely block out their reality, that is block out the world that was producing the pain that their instinctive self’s expectation of being loved felt—for example, through developing a very narrow focus away from their reality onto some object or activity—their mind could be freed to access some of the potential of the soul’s truthful, sensitive world. A window could be opened up to the immense potential that humans lost access to when they became preoccupied with worry about the hurtful, corrupted world around them, and/or their own corrupted state. That window to the soul’s world depended on completely blocking out reality.

It might be thought that the dissociation that occurred at resignation, when people adopted a life of denial of their reality, should have given them some access to the soul’s truthful, sensitive world. However, resigned people were not normally completely blocking out their reality, in fact they were constantly on the lookout for any criticism arising as a result of that reality. Generally, resigned people did not completely dissociate themselves from the world in the same way that autistic people did. However, there were some people who although not sufficiently hurt in infancy and childhood to become autistic, were sufficiently hurt to need to live an extremely alienated existence after they resigned; such people could develop some access to the soul’s truthful world. In *Beyond* I describe this manner of accessing the soul’s world as ‘shattered defence’ access. To quote, ‘Sometimes when people became extremely exhausted [corrupted] their alienation (mental blocks) became disorganised and through this “shattered defence” the soul occasionally emerged. They became “mediums” or “psychics” or “channellers”’ (p.182 of 203). As explained in *Beyond*, such shattered-defence access of the soul’s true world was of course not the natural, secure, balanced access that people who never resigned have. For these people, whom we have historically referred to as prophets, the soul’s world has always been an ultra natural place, not something weird, abnormal and apparently supernatural.

R.D. Laing was describing the ‘shattered defence’ way of accessing the soul when he said that ‘the cracked mind of the schizophrenic may let in light which does not enter the intact mind of many sane people whose minds are closed’ (*The Divided Self*, 1960, p.27 of 218). Interestingly, Laing immediately continued to say that German existentialist Karl Jaspers was of the opinion that the biblical prophet Ezekiel ‘was a schizophrenic.’ While some biblical prophets may have accessed the soul’s true world using shattered defence, those who had full and natural access to the soul and were prophets in the true sense were exceptionally sound rather than exceptionally exhausted, alienated, separated from their true self, or schizophrenic.

The *Uncommon Genius* documentary about savants referred to earlier also gave examples of people with dementia who developed savant abilities: *researchers discovered people who suffered dementia and then suddenly gained prodigious skills they’d never experienced before. One case was a man who, when his brain degenerated, became a composer as he lost his ability to speak*. Dementia is obviously another form of complete dissociation from reality.

It was also mentioned earlier that when people prayed or chanted mantras or counted rosary beads they were trying to shut down their alienation-preoccupied mind in order to let through some of the truthful world of the soul. They were trying to shatter their defence. Fatigue, hallucinatory drugs, despair, faster-than-thought activities, such as scree-jumping, and near-death experiences have been cited as other ways of achieving this breakthrough to the world of the soul.
Autism is an extreme state of alienation, so extreme that the person has given up all efforts to manage their reality apart from totally blocking it out. In this totally disconnected state the soul’s potential suddenly becomes accessible. Autistic people block out all awareness of their unloved circumstances by blocking out all reality so that there is no longer any disconnection from their soul’s world, but of course such access to their soul depended on the maintenance of an extraordinary degree of dissociation from reality.

The most honest analysis of autism that I have come across appears in the already mentioned 1996 book, Thinking About Children, a posthumous publication of some of the papers written by British paediatrician, child psychiatrist and psychoanalyst, D.W. Winnicott, who died in 1971. On the book’s dust jacket it says that Dr Winnicott, a former president of the British Psycho-Analytic Society, spent ‘a lifetime thinking about the nature of the child and the origins of human nature’, and is ‘increasingly recognized as one of the giants of psychoanalysis’. The following are some quotes from the book that confirm what I have said about the significance of nurturing in human life and how children psychologically react when they do not receive the amount of nurturing their instincts expect.

Firstly, Winnicott remarked that ‘Many writers have expressed the view that an understanding of autism would widen our understanding of human nature’ (p.223 of 343). There is a hint here of the truth that the dark shadow of the dilemma of the human condition was the real impediment to understanding autism and, beyond that, human nature as a whole.

The following is a typical case history of an autistic child from one of the many documented by Winnicott: ‘When I first saw Ronald at the age of 8, he had very exceptional skill in drawing…Apart from drawing he was, however, a typical autistic child…I will look and see how things [Roland’s behaviour] developed. The mother herself was an artist, and she found being a mother exasperating from one point of view in that although she was fond of her children and her marriage was a happy one, she could never completely lose herself in the way that she must do in order to achieve results as an artist. This was what this boy had to compete with when he was born. He competed successfully but at some cost…At two months the mother remembers smacking the baby in exasperation although not conscious of hating him. From the start he was slow in development…His slowness made him fail to awaken the mother’s interest in him, which in any case was a difficult task because of her unwillingness to be diverted from her main concern which is painting’ (pp.201,202).

In a reference to the instinctual expectations of infants Winnicott said: ‘There are certain difficulties that arise when primitive things are being experienced by the baby that depend not only on inherited personal tendencies but also on what happens to be provided by the mother. Here failure spells disaster of a particular kind for the baby. At the beginning the baby needs the mother’s full attention, and usually gets precisely this; and in this period the basis for mental health is laid down. This in all its details becomes established by constant reinforcement through the continuation of a pattern of care that has in it the essential elements. Naturally, some individual infants have a greater capacity to go ahead in spite of imperfect care…On the whole, however, it is the quality of early care that counts. It is this aspect of the environmental provision that rates highest in a general review of the disorders of the development of the child, of which autism is one’ (p.212).

Winnicott then proceeded to say that ‘the essential feature [in a baby’s development] is the mother’s capacity to adapt to the infant’s needs through her healthy ability to identify with the baby. With such a capacity she can, for instance, hold her baby, and without it she cannot hold her baby except in a way that disturbs the baby’s personal living process…It seems necessary to add to this the concept of the mother’s unconscious (repressed) hate of the child. Parents naturally love and hate their babies, in varying degrees. This does not do damage. At all ages, and in earliest infancy especially, the effect of the repressed death wish towards the baby is harmful, and it is beyond the baby’s capacity to deal with this’ (p.222). (I am certain that when Winnicott comments that the
fact of parents naturally hating their babies ‘does not do damage’, he is alluding to the fact that children have been genetically selected now, after 2 million years, to cope with a degree of imperfection in their upbringing. Winnicott was implying this when he said in the preceding quote that, ‘Naturally, some individual infants have a greater capacity to go ahead in spite of imperfect care’.

Importantly Winnicott said (the italics and brackets are Winnicott’s emphasis): ‘Autism is a highly sophisticated defence organization. What we see is invulnerability. There has been a gradual build-up towards invulnerability…The child carries round the (lost) memory of unthinkable anxiety, and the illness is a complex mental structure insuring against recurrence of the conditions of the unthinkable anxiety’ (pp.220,221).

Similarly Winnicott said, ‘I am perfectly aware that in a proportion of cases where autism is eventually diagnosed, there has been injury or some degenerative process affecting the child’s brain…[however] It is extremely likely that in the majority of cases of autism the computer [brain] is undamaged and the child is potentially and remains potentially intelligent…The illness is a disturbance of emotional development…that the problem in autism is fundamentally one of emotional development and that autism is not a disease. It might be asked, what did I call these cases before the word autism turned up. The answer is…“infant or childhood schizophrenia”’ (p.200). (The etymology of the word ‘schizophrenia’ is ‘schiz’ meaning ‘split’ or ‘broken’, and ‘phrenos’ meaning ‘soul or heart’. The truth is that all humans who are resigned are alienated or split off from their soul. While schizophrenia has been a description reserved for only the extremely alienated, the truth is all resigned humans are schizophrenic.)

Winnicott even acknowledged that autism is the extreme degree of a universal phenomenon: ‘It has always seemed to me that the smaller degrees of disturbance of the mind that I am trying to describe are common and that even smaller degrees of the disturbance are very common indeed. Some degree of this same disturbance is in fact universal. In other words, what I am trying to convey is that there is no such disease as autism, but that this is a clinical term that describes the less common extremes of a universal phenomenon’ (p.206).

When he made his now-famous comment, ‘Insanity is a perfectly natural adjustment to an insane world’, R.D. Laing was emphasising that the people society has labelled as mad were merely responding to the madness of the resigned world, finding a way to insulate themselves from it. Similarly, he has written that, ‘From the alienated starting point of our pseudo-sanity, everything is equivocal. Our sanity is not “true” sanity. Their [the patients’] madness is not “true” madness. The madness of our patients is an artefact of the destruction wreaked on them by us, and by them on themselves’ (The Politics of Experience and The Bird of Paradise, 1967, p.118 of 156).

Laing summarised the penalty of resignation to a life of denial when he said, ‘I would wish to emphasize that our “normal” “adjusted” state is too often the abdication of ecstasy, the betrayal of our true potentialities, that many of us are only too successful in acquiring a false self to adapt to false realities’ (The Divided Self, 1960, 1965 preface, p.12 of 218).

The necessary dishonesty of the resigned mind

On the subject of humanity’s historic denial of critical truths, in particular the truth of the significance of nurturing in human life, Winnicott says: ‘Mothers do, of course, tend to feel guilty; they tend to feel responsible, quite apart from logic, for every defect that manifests itself in their children. They feel guilty before the baby is born, and they so strongly expect to give birth to a monster that they must always be shown the baby the very moment he or she is born, however exhausted they may be. And the father too. Nevertheless, most people are rational beings in their best moments, and they can then discuss the relationship between autism developing in a child and (in