

# Asperger's Syndrome and the Eccentricity and Genius of Jeremy Bentham

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## Introduction

It is well known that Bentham was eccentric. He was 'reclusive and inaccessible [...] had a favourite walking stick named Dapple [...] an ancient cat [...] called the Reverend Dr John Langborn, and a jokey vocabulary [...] [using] expressions like "antejentacular circumgyration", meaning a walk before breakfast'.<sup>2</sup> After his death his body was dissected, in accordance with his will, in front of a group of his friends. Bentham was also a genius, producing remarkable work of undisputed contemporary importance. Clearly he had an extraordinary mind.

We asked ourselves whether an explanation for Jeremy Bentham's unusual positive and negative qualities might emerge if his life were assessed from a present-day psychological, psychodynamic or psychiatric perspective. While aware of the reductionist pitfalls of psychobiography, we believed such an effort might illuminate aspects of Bentham's character and motivations and thereby assist future biographers. Our findings suggested that, had he lived in the present century, it is likely he would have received the diagnosis of Asperger's syndrome.

## Genius, eccentricity and Asperger's syndrome

We hypothesise that Jeremy Bentham's strikingly unusual cast of mind can be best understood as emerging from Asperger's syndrome (AS) which is an autistic condition compatible with a wide range of outcomes, from high achievement and independence to severe impoverishment of quality of life.<sup>3</sup> It manifests as a characteristic triad of impairments: at the behavioural level in social and

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<sup>2</sup> J. Dinwiddy, *Bentham*, Oxford & New York, 1989, pp. 17-18.

<sup>3</sup> See T. Grandin, *Thinking in Pictures and Other Reports from My Life with Autism*, New York, 1995; K. Nazeer, *Send in the Idiots: or How We Grew to Understand the World*, London, 2006; and D. Tantam, 'Asperger syndrome in adulthood', in U. Frith, *Autism and Asperger Syndrome*, Cambridge, 1991.

communicative ability; impaired imaginative capacity; and obsessive preoccupation with circumscribed interests. Diminished imaginative capacity appears particularly in the sphere of social relationships,<sup>4</sup> and ‘the hallmark of autism and related disorders is deviant social development, which generally seems to be congenital in nature’.<sup>5</sup> AS has been linked to exceptional talents and ‘genius’ by several authors.<sup>6</sup>

As Snyder has explained, the autistic mind differs from the normal mind in that it more readily recalls discrete details, rather than maintaining an image of the whole picture: it ‘sees more of the parts than the whole’.<sup>7</sup> Thus the genius who suffers from AS is thought to lack certain neuropsychological mechanisms related to the ordinary process of mental modelling.<sup>8</sup> Somehow, in certain cases, that defect allows the flowering of a unique creative capacity linked to the ability to perceive details, their structure and interrelation, which remain unrecognised by the ‘normal’ mind. We contend that just such a distinct and ‘abnormal’ cognitive style may have been an important source of Bentham’s genius.

It has been suggested that Wittgenstein chose to focus on the two areas (language and its social context) that as an AS sufferer confounded him, precisely because they did confound him.<sup>9</sup> We believe that Jeremy Bentham’s choice of areas to investigate may have similar origins.

### **Diagnosis of autism and Asperger’s syndrome**

Autism and Asperger’s syndrome, first described in the 1940s, are ‘pervasive developmental disorders’ which sufferers are usually born with, but which can take some time to become evident. The disorders result from abnormal brain development and, while genetic factors are important, the precise aetiology remains uncertain.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> U. Frith, *Autism: Explaining the Enigma*, (2<sup>nd</sup> edn.), Oxford, 2003.

<sup>5</sup> F. Volkmar & D. Pauls, ‘Autism’, *Lancet*, lxii (2003), pp. 1133-41.

<sup>6</sup> For example, B. Hermelin, *Bright Splinters of the Mind: a Personal Story of Research with Autistic Savants*, London, 2001; M. Fitzgerald, *Autism and Creativity: Is There a Link between Autism in Men and Exceptional Ability?*, London, 2003; A. Snyder, ‘Autistic Genius?’, *Nature*, cdlxxxii (2004), pp. 470-1; and L. Pring, ‘Savant Talent’, *Developmental Medicine and Child Neurology*, xlvi (2005), pp. 500-3.

<sup>7</sup> See Snyder, ‘Autistic Genius?’, pp. 470-1.

<sup>8</sup> Wittgenstein and Einstein have been suggested: see O. Sacks, *An Anthropologist on Mars: Seven Paradoxical Tales*, London, 1995, and I. James, *Asperger’s Syndrome and High Achievement: Some Very Remarkable People*, London, 2005. See also the section on John Howard below.

<sup>9</sup> See Fitzgerald, *Autism and Creativity*.

<sup>10</sup> See Frith, *Autism*; Volkmar and Pauls, ‘Autism’; and I. Hacking, ‘What is Tom saying to Maureen?’, *London Review of Books*, xxviii (11 May 2006), pp. 3-7.

Exceptionally severe deprivation can result in a perhaps identical picture.<sup>11</sup> While much recent work has stressed a neuro-cognitive perspective focussing on the autistic subjects' lack of understanding of the existence of minds ('theory of mind'), it is important to recognise that in normal development, engagement with people, with the mother as a person, comes first. 'For those of us who do not have autism, it is natural to become engaged with people. We do not have concern or hatred for others because we think they have a mind. It is the other way round: we come to think people have minds because we find we are involved with them. What we begin with is our attitudes towards persons'.<sup>12</sup>

The disorder is manifest as subtle differences in development compared with normal individuals: '[The] typical infant comes equipped with a partly innate set of neurological mechanisms for making sense of other people's actions, emotional expressions and vocalisations. The two year old who will comfort his mother when she is looking sad, or who will refrain from hitting his sister because he is aware that she can feel pain, is already mind-reading (or empathising). The 14-month-old child who will look where her father is pointing - without being taught - is already mind-reading her father's intention to direct her to look not at his finger, but at the event across the room that has caught her father's interest. That same 14-month-old who will then look back at her father's eyes, to signal she has seen what he has seen, to acknowledge that the message has been received and the emotional significance shared, is demonstrating extra-ordinary mind-reading skills — all without words. Such looks and exchanges of smiles and acknowledgements are reduced or delayed in many children who go on to receive a diagnosis of autism or Asperger's syndrome'.<sup>13</sup>

An account of the effect on the AS sufferer is provided by an intelligent young man recalling his childhood:

I really didn't know there were people until I was seven years old. I then suddenly realised there were people. But not like you do. I still have to remind myself that there are people [...] I never could have a friend. I

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<sup>11</sup> See M. Rutter *et al.*, 'Quasi-autistic patterns following severe early global privation', *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry*, xl (1999), pp. 537-549.

<sup>12</sup> See P. Hobson, *The Cradle of Thought*, London, 2002, p. 251.

<sup>13</sup> See S. Baron-Cohen, 'Learning to be Ordinary', *Prospect*, cxxii (2006), pp. 66-8.

really don't know what to do with other people really.<sup>14</sup>

There is an increasing body of opinion focussing on the centrality of emotions in normal cognitive development. Thus conditions of severe emotional deprivation may have an adverse impact on neural connections in parts of the brain and can, in exceptional circumstances, result in an autistic picture (as mentioned above).<sup>15</sup> There is general understanding that satisfactory emotional development requires a 'good enough' relationship with an attachment figure. Thus, while the majority of investigations into autism focus on the cognitive abnormality of the individual with the condition, recent work on emotional development suggests there should be greater emphasis on the interdependency of individual development and the 'affective-cognitive and conative processes of interpersonal relatedness'.<sup>16</sup>

Clinical diagnosis of autism and AS involves evidence of impairment in each of the domains of social, communicative and imaginative functioning. Although abnormalities in social development are often evident well before the age of three, that age is taken as the cut-off by which they should be manifest. The disorder is life-long and persists into adulthood. In adults in whom the question of the diagnosis is raised, one seeks corroboration in the early developmental history.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Cited in Hobson, p. 11.

<sup>15</sup> Rutter *et al.* pp. 537-49.

<sup>16</sup> See *The Many Faces of Asperger's Syndrome*, ed. M. Rhode & T. Klauber, London, 2004, p. 52; and Hobson, *Cradle of Thought*, pp. 239-74.

<sup>17</sup> The following abnormalities are observed in autistic conditions (listed by domain):

*Qualitatively abnormal reciprocal social interaction*

1. Failure adequately to use eye-to-eye gaze, facial expression, body posture and gesture to regulate social interaction. 2. Failure to develop relations with peers that involve a mutual sharing of interests, activities and emotions. 3. Lack of socio-emotional reciprocity as shown by an impaired or deviant response to other people's emotion or lack of modulation of behaviour according to social context or a weak integration of social, emotional and communicative behaviours. 4. Lack of reciprocal social interaction, and lack of a spontaneous seeking to share enjoyment, interests or achievement with other people.

*Qualitatively abnormal communication*

1. Delay or total lack of spoken language development. 2. Relative failure to initiate or sustain conversation in which there is reciprocal responsiveness to the communications of the other person. 3. Stereotyped or idiosyncratic use of word or phrase. 4. Lack of varied, spontaneous make-believe or (in the young) lack of imitative play.

*Restricted, repetitive, stereotyped behaviour and/or interests*

1. An encompassing preoccupation with one or more stereotyped and restricted patterns of interest that are abnormal in content or focus; or one or more interests that are abnormal in their intensity and circumscribed nature though not in their content and focus. 2. Compulsive routines or rituals. 3. Stereotyped motor mannerisms. 4. Preoccupation with parts of objects, non-functional elements of play materials e.g. odour, surface feel or vibration. See: World Health Organization, *Pocket Guide to*

## Bentham's childhood

The evidence suggests that Jeremy Bentham was a 'frail, nervous, impressionable boy, a prey to nightmares and afraid of ghosts, he found his main sources of enjoyment in whatever books he could lay his hands on and in flowers and music'.<sup>18</sup> As Bentham wrote much later, 'This subject of ghosts has been among the torments of my life, the devil was everywhere in it and in me too [...] how much less unhappy I should have been, could I have acknowledged my superstitious fears!'<sup>19</sup> Bentham's mother died when he was ten years old; his father was 'affectionate towards him, but demanding and insensitive'.<sup>20</sup> In the nine years which separated Jeremy from his younger brother Samuel, five other children had been born and had died in infancy or early childhood. Only Jeremy and Samuel survived. These family circumstances may have contributed to the remarkably close bond between the two brothers.<sup>21</sup>

In Bentham's case, there was no general delay in language or cognitive development, quite the reverse in fact. A delay in language development is the basis of the distinction, made by some authorities, between AS and high functioning autism.

In terms of signs of AS, there are aspects of his childhood that are compatible with the diagnosis but nothing more definite. He 'had few companions his own age'; he was 'morbidly sensitive'; 'when robbed of all his money at Oxford he did not confide in his father. He was paying by a morbid reserve for the attempts made to force him into premature activity' and '[t]he lad's diffidence and extreme youth had indeed prevented him from forming the usual connections which his father anticipated as the result of a college life'.<sup>22</sup>

Bentham's father was highly ambitious for his child prodigy of a son, and intended him to reach the summit of the legal profession. Bentham studied law but did not become a practising lawyer: he found the practice of law intolerable and rapidly

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*the ICD-10 Classification of Mental and Behavioural Disorders*, London & New York, 1994. In this international consensus classification of autistic disorders, a diagnosis of AS would require the same abnormalities of reciprocal social interaction as autism but 'no significant general delay in spoken or receptive language or cognitive development [...] Isolated special skills, often related to abnormal preoccupations, are common, but are not required for diagnosis', p. 286.

<sup>18</sup> Dinwiddy, *Bentham*, p. 1.

<sup>19</sup> *The Works of Jeremy Bentham*, ed. J. Bowring, 11 vols., Edinburgh, 1843, x. pp. 11-21.

<sup>20</sup> Dinwiddy, *Bentham*, p. 1.

<sup>21</sup> See C. Pease-Watkin, 'Jeremy and Samuel Bentham — the Private and the Public', *Journal of Bentham Studies*, 5, 2002. <http://www.ucl.ac.uk/BenthamProject/journal/cpwsam.htm>

<sup>22</sup> L. Stephen, *The English Unitarians*, 3 vols. London, 1900, i. <http://socserv2.socsci.mcmasterce/07Eecon/ugcm/3113/bentham/stephen1.htm>

developed a consuming interest in legal philosophy and the theory of legislation.<sup>23</sup>

### **William Hazlitt and John Stuart Mill on Bentham: two contemporary accounts**

William Hazlitt and John Stuart Mill, both eminent nineteenth-century thinkers, each wrote an essay on Jeremy Bentham. The portraits of Bentham that emerge are remarkably consistent with one another and, in our view, both suggest that Bentham suffered from Asperger's syndrome.

Bentham was the first subject in Hazlitt's collection of sketches of major public figures of the time, which first appeared as an article in the *New Monthly Magazine* in 1824, and was published as *The Spirit of the Age*.<sup>24</sup> Mill's essay on Bentham was first published in August 1838 (and his essay on Coleridge in March 1840) in the *London and Westminster Review*.<sup>25</sup> William Hazlitt knew Bentham personally, briefly being his tenant in York Street, London in 1819 until 'he fell behind with the rent'.<sup>26</sup>

John Stuart Mill knew Bentham well, albeit not until Bentham's sixth decade. His father, James, had a close professional relationship with Bentham, who had great influence on the manner in which James educated his son. The latter later gained exceptional knowledge of Bentham's work when he worked for Bentham and edited several volumes of his writing.

Although his essay was written at a time of Mill's life when his antipathy to Bentham was at its height, Mill did not renounce the views he expressed although he 'would later have been less cutting'.<sup>27</sup> Both essays will be discussed in some detail before we go on to present separately evidence for AS in Bentham in terms of each of the triad of impairments of autism.

To those familiar, from a clinical point of view, with autism and Asperger's syndrome it is difficult to read either Hazlitt's or Mill's essay without the thought that Bentham might suffer from AS. Clinical diagnosis of AS is made in just that way: a familiar, rather subtle, pattern is recognised and only then are more explicit questions

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<sup>23</sup> It is perhaps not purely by chance that Kamran Nazeer, an Asperger's syndrome sufferer who qualified in law, found himself following a similar course to Bentham's from law to the philosophy of law: see Nazeer, *Send in the Idiots*, p. 110.

<sup>24</sup> W. Hazlitt, *The Spirit of the Age*, ed. E.D. Mackerness, Plymouth, 1991, pp. 19-35.

<sup>25</sup> See *Utilitarianism and Other Essays: John Stuart Mill and Jeremy Bentham*, ed. A. Ryan, London, 1987, pp. 132-175.

<sup>26</sup> T. Paulin, *The Day-Star of Liberty: William Hazlitt's Radical Style*, London, 1998, p. 17.

<sup>27</sup> J. Skorupski, *Why Read Mill Today?*, London & New York, 2006, p. 67.

posed and confirmation sought. In Bentham's case, the established observation that about 10 percent of autistic individuals have special talents raises the possibility that AS can explain his genius.

Hazlitt describes Bentham's social oddness while giving a view of his world:

in general habits and in all but his professional pursuits, he is a mere child. He has lived for the last forty years in a house in Westminster, overlooking the Park, like an anchorite in his cell, reducing law to a system, and the mind of man to a machine. He scarcely ever goes out, and sees very little company. The favoured few, who have the privilege of the *entrée*, are always admitted one by one. He does not like to have witnesses to his conversation. He talks a great deal, and listens to nothing but facts.<sup>28</sup>

Mill described Bentham's striking lack of ordinary understanding of other people. He wrote of:

the incompleteness of his [Bentham's] own mind as a representative of universal human nature. In many of the most natural and strongest feelings of human nature he had no sympathy; from many of its graver experiences he was altogether cut off; and *the faculty by which one mind understands a mind different from itself, and throws itself into the feelings of that other mind, was denied him by his deficiency of Imagination.*<sup>29</sup>

Mill is describing Bentham's lack of 'the intuitive and automatic attribution of mental states to others', the ability to 'mentalize' or hold a 'theory of mind' of others and the self, which is defective to some degree in every individual diagnosed as autistic, regardless of age and ability, and, on the contrary, effortlessly present in the rest of us.<sup>30</sup> Similarly:

With Imagination in the popular sense, command of imagery and metaphorical expression, Bentham was, to a certain degree, endowed [...]

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<sup>28</sup> Hazlitt, *Spirit of the Age*, p. 20.

<sup>29</sup> Ryan, *Utilitarianism*, p. 148, italics added.

<sup>30</sup> See Frith, *Autism*, p. 206.

[but the] Imagination which he had not, was [...] that which enables us, by a voluntary effort, to conceive the absent as if it were present, the imaginary as if it were real, and to clothe it in the feelings which, if it were indeed real, it would bring along with it. *This is the power by which one human being enters into the mind and circumstances of another. [...] Without it, nobody knows even his own nature, further than circumstances have actually tried it and called it out; nor the nature of his fellow creatures, beyond such generalizations as he may have been enabled to make from his observation of their outward conduct.*<sup>31</sup>

Mill thought, as we no longer do, that a 'voluntary effort' was required for such understanding. It is significant that he links the lack of empathic understanding of another person with knowing one's own nature as 'mentalizing in the normal case inexorably leads to awareness of yourself as agent'.<sup>32</sup> Similarly, '*Self-consciousness [...] to which this age knows so much both of its cheerful and its mournful wisdom, never was awakened in him.* How much of human nature slumbered in him he knew not, neither can we know. He had never been made alive to the unseen influences which were acting on himself, nor consequently on his fellow creatures'.<sup>33</sup>

Hazlitt wrote:

He regards the people about him no more than the flies of a summer [...] he has carried this single view of his subject too far, and not made sufficient allowance for the varieties of human nature, and the caprices and irregularities of the human will [...] it might be plausibly objected that he had struck the whole mass of fancy, prejudice, passion, sense, whim, with his petrific, leaden mace, that he had "bound volatile Hermes," and reduced the theory and practice of human life to a *caput mortuum* of reason, and dull, plodding, technical calculation'. The limitations of his understanding of other people is summed up by Hazlitt: 'his view of the human mind resembles a map, rather than a picture: the outline, the

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<sup>31</sup> See Ryan, *Utilitarianism*, pp. 148-9, italics added.

<sup>32</sup> See Frith, *Autism*, p. 208.

<sup>33</sup> See Ryan, *Utilitarianism*, p. 149. Emphasis added.



disposition is correct, but it wants colouring and relief.<sup>34</sup>

This portrayal of a missing third dimension in Bentham's understanding of others by an acute contemporary seems highly compatible with that of a sufferer from AS.

Mill also finds Bentham's philosophy inadequate as a complete explanation of 'human affairs':

a sort of estimate of what a philosophy like Bentham's can do. It can teach the means of organizing and regulating the merely *business* part of the social arrangements [...] He committed the mistake of supposing that the business part of human affairs was the whole of them.<sup>35</sup>

*Mistaking the business part for the totality of human affairs* might almost be a definition of what is at the heart of the problematic social understanding of the AS patient. AS sufferers do seem to lack a profound understanding of emotional states, both their own and those of others. Mill thought this very much applied to Bentham and limited his ability to understand the 'workings of the mind':

Knowing so little of human feelings, he knew still less of the influences by which those feelings are formed: all the more subtle workings both of the mind upon itself, and of external things upon the mind, escaped him.<sup>36</sup>

Mill appreciated Bentham's achievements: 'He found the philosophy of law a chaos, he left it a science: he found the practice of law an Augean stable, he turned the river into it which is mining and sweeping away mound after mound of its rubbish'.<sup>37</sup> To achieve this required Bentham's quite extraordinary qualities:

The honour is all his — *nothing but his peculiar qualities could have done it. There were wanted his indefatigable perseverance, his firm self-reliance, needing no support from other men's opinion; his intensely practical turn of mind, his synthetical habits-* about all, his peculiar

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<sup>34</sup> Hazlitt, *Spirit of the Age*, pp. 21-24, 33.

<sup>35</sup> See Ryan, *Utilitarianism*, p. 157.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 150.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 158.

method.<sup>38</sup>

Indefatigable perseverance, firm self reliance, massive egocentricity — all qualities prominent in descriptions of an AS sufferer obsessively and persistently following his solitary road in pursuit of his narrow preoccupation. The apparent lack of interest in other men’s opinions noted by Mill reflects the ‘pure egocentrism’ of the autistic ‘self that is not ultimately aware of itself and the selves of others’.<sup>39</sup>

Contrasting Coleridge with Bentham, Mill writes:

And as Bentham’s short and easy method of referring all to the selfish interests of aristocracies, or priests, or lawyers, or some other species of impostors, could not satisfy a man who saw so much farther into the complexities of the human intellect and feelings — [Coleridge] considered the long or extensive prevalence of any opinion as a presumption that it was not altogether a fallacy.<sup>40</sup>

Such holding on to early simplistic explanations for troubling situations is frequent in AS sufferers. In Bentham’s case he held on to a life long grievance against those who effected his signing of the Thirty-nine Articles to take his place in Queen’s College, Oxford: ‘He had to sign the Thirty-nine Articles in spite of scruples suppressed by authority. The impression made upon him by this childish compliance never left him to the end of his life’.<sup>41</sup>

Thus based on Mill’s and Hazlitt’s observations alone, a picture of Bentham is built up which is highly compatible with that of a sufferer from AS. There is a particularly clear description of his lack of intuitive understanding of the minds of others and himself, as well as his egocentrism and his obsessive persistence in pursuit of his narrow goals.

### **Problems with social interaction: other contemporary accounts**

People with autism and AS are often ‘socially active’ but unable to be ‘socially interactive’, the distinction relating to the presence or absence of the ability to

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<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 162, italics added.

<sup>39</sup> See Frith, *Autism*, p. 209.

<sup>40</sup> See Ryan, *Utilitarianism*, p. 178.

<sup>41</sup> See Stephen, *English Unitarians*, vol. I.

mentalize. An example would be the difference between forming an obsessive attachment (socially active) and forming a reciprocal friendship or relationship (socially interactive), where an extra dimension is required. A further example would be ‘showing a desire to please’ (socially active) compared with ‘choosing appropriate gifts’ (socially interactive) or using a person as a tool as opposed to using a person as a recipient of information.<sup>42</sup> The following examples suggest Jeremy Bentham may have been socially active but could often have difficulties being socially interactive.

Bentham seems to have ‘look[ed] upon friends and even more casual associates as “disciples” to his own life’s mission [...] [and with] James Mill, George Grote, John Mill and above all Etienne Dumont [...] he proved unable to sustain close or prolonged personal friendship’.<sup>43</sup>

#### *George Bentham*

George Bentham was Jeremy Bentham’s nephew, the son of his brother Samuel and eventually a celebrated botanist. He visited London with his sisters in 1823 and saw his uncle at his home in Queens Square Place. Only George was invited. He described the occasion in his autobiography:

After dinner he [...] kept me till 11, to talk to me about my sisters, about his own occupations, and many other things. I do not know how he will be persuaded to see my sisters, which he now says he is determined not to do. He says that either he will like them or he will not. If for argument sake he should not, then there would be only harm done by their meeting. If he should like them, and should see them once or twice, there would come the pain of parting, but this would be, I should think, just as good a reason for not seeing me or anyone else.<sup>44</sup>

This passage could be seen as evidence of an absence of ‘social-emotional reciprocity’ characteristic of AS. Other people are considered merely in terms of their

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<sup>42</sup> See C. Frith & U. Frith, ‘The Physiological Basis of Theory of Mind: Functional Neuroimaging Studies’, in *Understanding Other Minds*, ed. S. Baron-Cohen *et al.*, (2<sup>nd</sup> edn.) Oxford, 2000, p. 337.

<sup>43</sup> D. Lieberman, ‘Historiographical Review: from Bentham to Benthamism’, *The Historical Journal*, xxviii (1985), pp. 199-224, 201.

<sup>44</sup> G. Bentham, *Autobiography 1800-1834*, ed. M. Filipiuk, Toronto, 1997, p. 104.

effect or usefulness on the AS sufferer. Pease-Watkin suggests a reason for Bentham's interest in George: 'the only one of Samuel's children with whom Jeremy had much of a relationship [...] probably because Jeremy saw the opportunity to make use of his young nephew as an amanuensis or editor'.<sup>45</sup> The highly anxiety-provoking unpredictability of social situations to an AS sufferer may help explain a practice of Bentham's on which Hazlitt also commented: 'he never has me to meet any of these people: he does not like more than one guest at once, for he likes to have each guest [...] *all to himself*'.<sup>46</sup>

*Edinburgh Review, 1843*

In 1843, the *Edinburgh Review* published a review of Bowring's 'Memoirs of Jeremy Bentham including Autobiographical Conversations and Correspondence' by William Empson. It is of course impossible to be certain about the accuracy of the descriptions of Bentham but much rather unflattering detail about Bentham would be explicable if understood as describing a sufferer from AS. It is worth considering at some length.

The author of the review comments:

The portrait of a vain man must be ridiculous in its attitudes and smiles; and *Bentham's vanity was so excessive as to stop short, but by a very little, of that which sometimes leads to, and almost always indicates, a disordered mind.*<sup>47</sup>

Bentham's problem with ordinary friendship was obvious and puzzling: 'It was impossible to have a more devoted friend, admirer or ally [than Dumont]. How could such a friendship fall away? The only explanation Dr Bowring offers of Bentham's alienation is a story about some slight which he conceived Dumont to have put upon his dinners, by contrasting them with the dinners at Lansdowne House!'<sup>48</sup> And:

had he but enjoyed the blessing of a wiser father, and a more judicious bringing up [...] we should not have seen almost all intercourse with

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<sup>45</sup> See Pease-Watkin, 'Jeremy and Samuel Bentham'.

<sup>46</sup> Cited in J.H. Burns, 'Dreams and Destinations: Jeremy Bentham in 1828', *The Bentham Newsletter*, May 1978, No. 1, p. 26.

<sup>47</sup> W. Empson, 'Memoirs of Jeremy Bentham', *Edinburgh Review*, lxxviii (1843), p. 461. Emphasis added.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 466.

such friends as Trail, Wilson, Romilly, Dumont, Mill etc, gradually dropped, one after the other, not only with more than philosophic facility, but in almost every instance with a sneer.<sup>49</sup>

And again:

[James Mill] describes himself as his most faithful disciple and most likely successor — and protests that he can see no ground for the umbrage taken, except their long and uninterrupted intimacy, or the fact of his having ridden out a few times in the morning with Mr Joseph Hume, to see a little of the country. This is, no doubt, a poor cause for a quarrel. But what is worse is, to have lived with a man for years, and yet speak of him as Bentham speaks of Mill, on more than one occasion, in the present memoir.<sup>50</sup>

Bentham's lack of understanding of the conventions of the social world he inhabited is well illustrated in the following passage:

they [the ladies of the Shelburne family] were as desirous, one and all, to cooperate in making Bowood agreeable to their guest [Bentham]. Every thing went on for a while delightfully; until at last they discovered, when it was too late, that among them, they had overdone their kindness. [Bentham] mistook the nature of the encouragement he was receiving. In an evil hour for all parties, love first, and afterwards ambition sprang up, and got the better of philosophy and friendship [...] This disappointment must have aggravated the native peculiarities of his character.<sup>51</sup>

A few further quotes must suffice to exemplify the reviewer's view of Bentham's oddness. 'Bentham said of himself "I am so much an animal *mei generis*, that people must bear from me what they would not from others'.<sup>52</sup> And:

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<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 467.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 467.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 483.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 468.

In this as in many other instances, an ignorance of human nature was at the bottom of Bentham's overconfidence. Dr Bowring says that his bashfulness clung to him through his life like a cold garment; "and that there was never a man so desirous of shunning others, unless some strong sense of duty subdued his natural tendency to seclusion".<sup>53</sup>

Finally, '[w]e are struck with Bentham's graphic turn of mind, and his constant attempts to realize his conceptions in some positive and familiar form. Provided only the image were distinct and effective, *he was never deterred by the fear of ridicule. Indeed, the sense of the ridiculous appears to have been wanting in him*'.<sup>54</sup> To modern ears, this eccentricity, this desire 'of shunning others', this lack of 'a sense of the ridiculous' and indeed even the 'graphic turn of mind' are all consistent with the possibility of Asperger's syndrome.

#### *Lord Lansdowne*

Of all the episodes of problematic social interaction suggesting lack of 'theory of mind', one of the best-documented involved Lord Lansdowne. As Harrison puts it, 'The decade [1790s] started with an extraordinary exchange of letters with Lansdowne in which Bentham accuses his friend, with whom he had just been in close co-operation producing pamphlets for France, of not being a true patron by failing to get him into parliament. The apparently disinterested philosopher turned and bit the hand he thought had failed to feed him. Lansdowne replied in a dignified, friendly, but justifiably puzzled way'.<sup>55</sup>

Bentham's 'apology' for his attack on Lansdowne gives some sense of him in a social context:

My dear, dear Lord, Since you will neither be subdued nor terrified, will you be embraced? [...] So parliament may go to the devil, and I will take your Birmingham halfpence and make a low bow, and put them gravely into my pocket, though they are worse than I threw away before [...] Offer? - why no, to be sure it was not - why didn't I tell you I only called it so

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<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 509.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 514, italics added.

<sup>55</sup> R. Harrison, *Bentham*, London & Boston, 1983, p. 20.

for shortness? More shame for you that you never made me any [...] Now, could I, after having been counsel for J.B., and made nothing of it, be counsel for Lord L., and show how much blacker than one's hat was the behaviour of the wretch you had to deal with? and then, in the character of my Lord Judge, — how easy it was to the parties to see the matter in the different lights, and yet be both of them good sort of men in their way; but this would take sixty-one pages more, and sixty-one to that, and you seem to think the first sixty-one enough, and I am sure I do [...] it would be serving you right, if I were to tell you that that I was not half so angry as I appeared to be; [...] that the real object of what anger I really felt, was rather the situation in which I found myself than you or anybody; but that, as none but a madman would go to quarrel with a non-entity called a situation, it was necessary for me to look out for somebody who, somehow or other, was connected with it.<sup>56</sup>

However, within four months Bentham is writing to his brother:

I quarrelled with Lord L. for not having brought me in. *He made apologies*: promised to spare no pains to effect it another time, but would not give me a promise to turn out for that purpose any of his present crew, who, he has agreed with me, over and over again, are poor creatures; *so I laughed at him*, called his promises Birmingham halfpence, and so we made it up again — he styling me all this while to everybody in conversation and on paper, the first of men, diverting himself not the less with my singularities, as you may well suppose.<sup>57</sup>

After such a version of this transaction, it will be admitted that Bentham was not safely to be left alone to tell a story, in which his personal feelings were concerned. It is as impossible for Bentham to have understood Lord Shelburne to have been apologizing to him in his answer, as that Lord Shelburne could have conceived that Bentham was laughing at him in his reply.<sup>58</sup> Was Bentham lying, deceiving himself, or did he just not

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<sup>56</sup> *The Correspondence of Jeremy Bentham*, vol. iv, ed. A. T. Milne, London, 1981 (CW), pp. 183-4.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 208-09. Emphasis added.

<sup>58</sup> Empson, 'Memoirs', p. 487.

quite understand what was going on? At the least, there is much that is rather difficult to explain about Bentham's behaviour which has much in common with that of someone with AS.

### **Egocentricity**

Mill commented on Bentham's 'firm self-reliance, needing no support from other men's opinion' and, as cited above, Hazlitt suggested he 'regards the people about him no more than the flies of a summer'.<sup>59</sup>

One example relating to the Panopticon project is sufficient to indicate his tendency to justify his proposals in terms of his feeling that they would be personally acceptable to him: he shows little capacity here to put himself in the position of others. In the Panopticon Bill of 1794 he proposed that each prisoner 'would be tattooed with his name and date and place of birth on the upper part of his left arm'. He reacted with 'bewilderment [that] the idea seems to have been met with ridicule' and wrote, in 1804, that 'I intended to have set the example in my own person, and, if possible, in those of my subordinates'.<sup>60</sup>

Semple concludes her balanced and sympathetic account of the Panopticon project thus: 'Bentham does display a certain frightening arrogance. He wrote of himself:

J.B. the most ambitious of the ambitious. His empire - the empire he aspires to - extending to, and comprehending, the whole human race, in all places[...] at all future time"[...] [Bentham] lacked an imaginative tolerance for the shortcomings of others; he was over-optimistic, he was ruthless, and he was pre-eminently egocentric.<sup>61</sup>

We believe this state of arrogant omnipotence might well have arisen as a consequence of his inability to relate to others as persons like himself, in other words a result of Asperger's syndrome.

Another aspect of his perhaps autistic self reliance was his propensity to isolate himself and work intensively, alone. As Harrison puts it:

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<sup>59</sup> Ryan, *Utilitarianism*, p. 162.

<sup>60</sup> J. Semple, *Bentham's Prison: a Study of the Panopticon Penitentiary*, Oxford, 1993, pp. 181-82.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 301, 322.



On many occasions in his later life he referred to himself as a hermit, and when he could he buried himself in “colleges, chambers, and cottages”. Even when he visited his brother in a fairly remote part of Russia, he went off to live in an even more remote cottage where, secure from all interruption, he could work “double tides” from sunrise until eight each evening. On return to England, both before and after he inherited his father’s large, central, house, he buried himself for long periods in a room in a dilapidated farm at Hendon, eight miles from London.<sup>62</sup>

### **‘Normal’ social understanding: the case against autism in Bentham**

There is agreement that Jeremy Bentham’s relationship with his brother Samuel was the most sustained and, probably, the most important to him of his life. In the following letter, written to his father at the age of twelve when Samuel was almost four, Jeremy Bentham imagines his brother’s responses to his absence and to his return:

I imagine myself too just returned, finding you and my Grandmama and dear little Sammy sitting by the fireside when I come in, and his little Heart exulting and crying Brother Jery is come.— I suppose he often asks you where I am, and what I stay away for? and suppose I should come home, what harm will it do? or what then?<sup>63</sup>

As Semple writes, ‘for Jeremy, love of Samuel was probably the strongest emotion in his life. He wished to protect, guide, and provide for his young brother’.<sup>64</sup> While it is clear from the quotation above that the twelve year old Jeremy imagines his younger brother missing him in his absence and being glad when he returns, we do not know whether this bears any relation to what his brother is actually thinking and feeling. We know that Jeremy was strongly attached to Samuel. Autistic children have been shown to react in the same way as non- autistic children to the absence of and reunion

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<sup>62</sup> Harrison, *Bentham*, p. 15.

<sup>63</sup> 16 December 1760. *Correspondence (CW)*, i. ed. T.L.S. Sprigge, London, 1968, p. 31.

<sup>64</sup> Semple, *Bentham’s Prison*, p. 105.

with their mothers.<sup>65</sup> As Frith puts it ‘an awareness of mental states is not required for attachment behaviour’.<sup>66</sup> There are clearly cases where Bentham tries to put himself into other people’s shoes, at least in a theoretical context. Semple cites Bentham reflecting on the reaction of ‘a sentimental gentleman’ to the fact that in the Panopticon, men were to be stripped of all privacy (she comments that ‘the identity of this gentleman of sensibility has yet to be determined’):

[t]o a temper formed to humanity [who] happens to have added the elevated birth, the refinements of education and an enthusiastic love of liberty, inflamed by the circumstances of the time; a never-closing inquisitorial eye figured itself to him as a new invented instrument, the only one yet wanting to be added to the horrors of the Bastille. Not to have a moment exempt from scrutiny of an inquisitorial eye! Not to have a moment of liberty even of that scanty and melancholy remnant of liberty which till now has been respected even in a prison! This punishment is a punishment worse than death: a punishment too horrible, too intolerable even for the worst of criminals.

His own belief was that if he, Bentham, had nothing to hide, such constant inspection would be ‘a matter of indifference’ to him or ‘even of comfort’ if he feared abuse of power by his gaoler.<sup>67</sup>

There are many, many other examples of Bentham recording what he takes to be the responses of others and responding in his turn. His correspondence with Lord Lansdowne cited above is a good example. Perhaps this constitutes an argument against our AS hypothesis. Similarly, it could be argued that it is difficult to imagine Bentham’s painstakingly detailed analysis and classification of human motivation in *An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation* (1789) and *A Table of the Springs of Action* (1815) originating in the mind of a man incapable of empathic understanding. But as will be explained below, it has been well established that the ability to infer the content of someone else’s mind may be acquired, rather as a foreign language is learnt, by individuals with AS who have sufficient cognitive and

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<sup>65</sup> See C. Dissanayake & S.A. Crossley, ‘Proximity and sociable behaviour in autism: evidence in autism’, *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry*, xxxvii (1996), pp. 149-156.

<sup>66</sup> Frith, *Autism*, p. 109.

<sup>67</sup> Semple, *Bentham’s Prison*, pp. 144, 145.

language capability.<sup>68</sup> Furthermore, Bentham's achievements in the works mentioned can be seen as those of an exceptional 'systemiser' rather than those of an 'empathiser'.<sup>69</sup>

### Communication difficulties

Bentham's communicative dysfunction is exemplified by his prose style. Marx described him as 'the insipid, pedantic, leather-tongued oracle of the commonplace bourgeois intelligence of the nineteenth century, a genius in the way of bourgeois stupidity'.<sup>70</sup> Hazlitt's remark is well-known:

his style is unpopular, not to say unintelligible. He writes a language of his own that *darkens knowledge*. His works have been translated into French — they ought to have been translated into English'.

Hazlitt summarises thus:

he writes a cypher-hand, which the vulgar have no key to. The construction of his sentences is a curious frame-work with pegs and hooks to hang his thoughts upon, for his own use and guidance, but almost out of the reach of everybody else. It is a barbarous philosophical jargon, with all the repetitions, parentheses, formalities, uncouth nomenclature and verbiage of law-Latin [...] Mr Bentham writes as if he was allowed but a single sentence to express his whole view of a subject in, and as if, should he omit a single circumstance or step of the argument, it would be lost to the world for ever, like an estate by a flaw in the title-deeds. This is over-rating the importance of our own discoveries and mistaking the nature and object of language altogether [...] The best of it is, he thinks his present mode of expressing himself perfect, and that whatever may be objected to his law or logic, no one can find the least fault with the purity, simplicity and perspicuity of his style.<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>68</sup> See Baron-Cohen, 'Theory of mind and autism: a fifteen year review' in *Understanding Other Minds*, ed. S. Baron-Cohen, H. Tager-Flusberg & D. Cohen, (2<sup>nd</sup> edn.), Oxford, 2000 p. 15.

<sup>69</sup> See the section on 'Empathising-Systemising Theory', below.

<sup>70</sup> In *Das Kapital*, cited in Dinwiddy, *Bentham*, p. 115.

<sup>71</sup> Hazlitt, *Spirit of the Age*, pp. 33-4.

A *Times* leading article of 28 November 1829 discusses Bentham's writing style. It starts by noting contemporary criticisms of Edward Gibbon's style but goes on to say:

if this might be said of EDWARD GIBBON, what shall anyone say of the much inferior, but infinitely more perplexed and un-Anglican writer JEREMY BENTHAM? Neither man, nor hog, nor dog, ever produced such sounds or expressions, or things so far removed from nature, as are poor JEREMY'S writings.

And in the review of Bowring's 'Memoirs of Jeremy Bentham' (see p.9 above) the reviewer comments on Bentham's language: 'words all but incapable of being pronounced. The strange language which he invented, was the result of considerable pains as well as deliberation. When he had once adopted it, laughing at it only made him the more obstinate in placing it among his most valuable inventions'.<sup>72</sup>

Bentham's inability readily to communicate the results of work despite intense efforts is well-known. In part it was a result of constantly revisiting problems and a lack of a sense that his contribution was complete. As Harrison put it:

This sense of parts, fragments, uncompleted projects, which is already present in the early Bentham, forms a constant theme throughout his life. However much analysis and thought had been given to a particular area, there was always more that was possible; and Bentham always wished to fill up all the gaps and explore all relevant by-ways.<sup>73</sup>

Snyder's observation that the 'autistic mind seems to be suited to working algorithmically within a closed system of specified rules' would seem an apt description of Bentham's working methods. Our hypothesis that Bentham's was 'an autistic mind' would make sense of his rather obsessional urge to 'fill up all the gaps and explore all relevant by-ways' within the closed system.<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>72</sup> Empson, 'Memoirs' p. 510.

<sup>73</sup> Harrison, *Bentham*, p. 16.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, p.16.

Semple writes aptly about objections to Bentham's proposals for the Panopticon and the National Charity Company:

In many ways Bentham himself is to blame for these profound misunderstandings. By a strange irony, he who was so acutely aware of the delusive power of language, used words in such a way as to create an impression of ossified, frigid, rule-bound bureaucracy.<sup>75</sup>

### **Circumscribed interests**

In a sense, a description of the whole of Bentham's output would provide a complete list of examples of his 'obsessive preoccupations with circumscribed interests' such as would be required for a diagnosis of autism or AS. As an example of obsessive preoccupation with a circumscribed interest, the Panopticon cannot be bettered. For more than two decades, and using much of his personal fortune, Bentham strove to make real his dream of a penitentiary which he believed would be 'a way of obtaining power, power of mind over mind, in a quantity hitherto without example'.<sup>76</sup> It was 'an attempt to reinforce this structuring of human relationships through architecture', and 'an opportunity for the practice of omniscience and omnipotence, for as gaoler he would be the Deity in a microcosm of his own making'.<sup>77</sup> But 'there were probably few men in England less capable of managing a thousand convicts, in spite of his theories about "springs of action"'.<sup>78</sup> Because his attachment to the idea of the Panopticon has been found scarcely comprehensible,

Bentham's anguish has met with little sympathy, yet it was real enough. In the nadir of the panopticon's fortunes, he felt he would die "like a rat in a hole" and he clung to memories of childhood in his lonely misery; a friend, "gave me once a loaf, which reminded me of my boyhood, and I kept it till it grew green, during Panopticon distress".<sup>79</sup>

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<sup>75</sup> Semple, *Bentham's Prison*, p. 316.

<sup>76</sup> *Panopticon: or the Inspection House*, London, 1791, Letter I, cited in R. Evans, *The Fabrication of Virtue: English prison architecture 1750-1840*, Cambridge, 1982, p. 199.

<sup>77</sup> Evans, *Fabrication of Virtue*, pp. 207, 199.

<sup>78</sup> See Stephen, *English Unitarians*, Vol. I.

<sup>79</sup> Semple, *Bentham's Prison*, p. 16, quoting Bentham.

As Evans puts it, ‘the question of why such a project should take up so much of a great philosopher’s time has perplexed many of his biographers’.<sup>80</sup> We suggest that AS may provide the answer to that question. According to Semple, Bentham ‘lacked an imaginative tolerance for the shortcomings of others: he was over-optimistic, he was ruthless, and he was pre-eminently egocentric. The panopticon mirrors these faults’.<sup>81</sup>

### **Bentham’s psychological theory: individualistic behaviourism**

Does the hypothesis that Bentham suffered from AS shed light on Bentham’s theory of human nature and motivation, his psychological theory?

As mentioned above, both Hazlitt and J.S. Mill judged Bentham’s view of human nature impoverished and inadequate. Hazlitt’s view was that Bentham has ‘not made sufficient allowance for the varieties of human nature, and the caprices and irregularities of the human will’ Mill’s that he

saw [...] in man little but what the vulgarest eye can see; recognized no diversities of character but such as he who runs may read [...] and no one, probably, who [...] ever attempted to give a rule to all human conduct, set out with a more limited conception either of the agencies by which human conduct *is*, or of those by which it *should* be, influenced.<sup>82</sup>

Mill continued that Bentham’s ‘general conception of human nature and life, furnished him with an unusually slender stock of premises’. He was particularly struck by the apparent absence of any concept of ‘conscience’.

Nothing is more curious than the absence of recognition in any of [Bentham’s] writings of the existence of conscience, as a thing distinct from philanthropy, from affection for God or man, and from self-interest in this world or in the next.

Mill writes that Bentham’s

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<sup>80</sup> Evans, *Fabrication of Virtue*, p. 438, n. 4.

<sup>81</sup> Semple, *Bentham’s Prison*, p. 322.

<sup>82</sup> Hazlitt, *Spirit of the Age*, p. 23.

view of human nature and life[...].overlooks the existence of about half of the whole number of mental feelings which human beings are capable of, including all those of which the direct objects are states of their own mind.<sup>83</sup>

Mill describes the lack of psychological complexity of Bentham's model of the mind. In the place in Bentham's theory where Mill believes Bentham should recognise 'conscience', Mill finds a gaping absence, a glaring example, perhaps, of Bentham's lack of recognition of internal divisions, inner conflicts within the human mind.

In the twenty-first century, it would be difficult not to be influenced by what Dinwiddy terms 'the emphasis on the unconscious and the irrational in modern psychology' and to see Bentham's view of the mind as two-dimensional.<sup>84</sup> Mill's essay on Bentham makes it clear that his near-contemporary held a similar view. We believe there is a strong argument that the specific lack of complexity and incompleteness of Bentham's psychological theories could be the result of AS. Indeed, the link between autism and a 'behaviourist' view has been shown experimentally. Autistic subjects are significantly less likely than controls to refer spontaneously to mental functions of the brain (such as 'thinking') when asked what it is for. Most autistic subjects referred to its role as the cause of behaviour such as 'walking and running'.<sup>85</sup>

Extreme behaviourists of the twentieth century such as J.B. Watson (1878-1958) and B.F. Skinner (1904-1990) did not believe anything useful could be said about what went on within the human mind: their interest was in stimuli and responses, inputs and outputs and not in the 'black box' between. Bentham did not go so far in denying the importance of mental states in affecting behaviour. But he did believe that it was at least theoretically possible to reduce all such states to a single dimension — greater or lesser degrees of happiness; more or less punishment, more or less reward; quantities of aversive and quantities of positive stimuli.

In *An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation* and *A Table of the Springs of Action*, Bentham set out his scheme of human motivation in meticulous detail, analysing into many categories the positive and negative emotions. However,

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<sup>83</sup> Ryan, *Utilitarianism*, pp. 150, 152, 155.

<sup>84</sup> Dinwiddy, *Bentham*, p. 122.

<sup>85</sup> S. Baron-Cohen, 'Are autistic children "behaviourists"? An example of their mental-physical and appearance-reality distinctions', *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorder*, xix (1989), pp. 579-600.

the ‘essential purpose of Bentham’s attempt to produce an exhaustive analysis of pains and pleasures, motives and sanctions, was to lay out before the legislator the factors that determined the conduct of human beings, and the possible means of influencing it. What needed to be contrived was that people should pursue their own happiness in ways that were either innocuous, or actually conducive, to the happiness of others; and the basic means available to the legislator for achieving this were punishments and rewards’.<sup>86</sup>

His psychology was elaborated for the purpose of allowing the legislator to influence individual behaviour in order to maximise happiness (utility) of society as a whole. Bentham’s behaviourist descendants would have a similar approach to the individual. Indeed, in the Panopticon, ‘a new mode of obtaining power of mind over mind, in a quantity hitherto without example’, Bentham sought to change behaviour in a manner that was to become the hallmark of the behaviourists.<sup>87</sup> Watson, for example, wrote as follows:

Give me a dozen healthy infants and my own specified world to bring them up in, and I’ll guarantee to take any one at random and train him to become any kind of specialist I might select — doctor, lawyer, merchant chief, and yes, even beggarman and thief, regardless of his talents, penchants, tendencies, abilities, vocations, and race of his ancestors.<sup>88</sup>

In experiments, people with AS can recognise happiness and sadness but have more trouble with more subtle emotions such as surprise, embarrassment and jubilation which require the understanding of the mental states of those experiencing the emotions.<sup>89</sup> This might suggest the existence of basic positive and negative emotional states, accessible without deep awareness of self or other. One could speculate that reducing all motivation to pleasure and pain would appear to make sense if other emotional states felt less ‘real’. It is thus possible that Bentham’s restricted, one-dimensional view of human motivation emerged from a basic constriction in his understanding of the nature of emotion linked to AS.

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<sup>86</sup> Dinwiddy, *Bentham*, p. 30.

<sup>87</sup> Bowring, iv, p. 39.

<sup>88</sup> J.B. Watson, cited in I. McEwan, ‘The Great Odyssey’, *The Guardian, Saturday Review* (9 June 2001), pp. 1-3.

<sup>89</sup> See S. Baron-Cohen, A. Spitz & P. Cross, ‘Do children with autism recognise surprise — a research note’, *Cognition and Emotion*, vii (1993), pp. 507-16.



### **Three psychological models of AS: lack of ‘theory of mind’, ‘weak central coherence’ and ‘impaired executive function’**

There are currently three main broad based psychological models of the autistic spectrum disorders which are not mutually exclusive and together try to account for the different aspects of autistic disorder: 1. the AS sufferer lacks ‘theory of mind’: there is a lack of intuitive and automatic attribution of mental states to others, the ability to do what cognitive scientists and psychotherapists have come to call ‘mentalizing’; 2. the AS sufferer employs a cognitive style of ‘weak central coherence’ focusing on detail (this theory addresses the strengths of the autistic mind); and 3. the AS sufferer has impaired ‘executive’ function: top-down organization of non-routine behaviour is impaired. This may account for the perseverative aspect of the psychopathology.<sup>90</sup> It is our contention that there is evidence supporting all three in Bentham’s case in addition to evidence for the classic triad of impairments of autism.

#### *Theory of mind*

Bentham’s apparently deficient ‘theory of mind’ and his resulting inability to ‘mentalize’ have been discussed in the preceding sections. It is important to emphasise that it is the *intuitive, near-effortless capacity* to appreciate what is going on in another’s mind that is lacking in autistic conditions. AS sufferers, with normal or high cognitive abilities, can sometimes acquire such abilities to an extremely high degree of proficiency but the acquisition requires hard work, rather in the way a second language is acquired with so much more effort than the mother tongue.<sup>91</sup>

A large number of different experimental tests have been used to determine ‘theory of mind’ functioning. Many rely on ‘false-belief’ tests: whether the (autistic) subject can understand that different people can have different beliefs about the same situation. So-called ‘first-order’ tests involve inferring one person’s mental state. ‘Second-order’ tests involve considering embedded mental states (i.e. one person’s mental state about the mental states of others).

Baron-Cohen points out that ‘there are no reported cases of autism spectrum

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<sup>90</sup> See Frith, *Autism*, Chapter 10.

<sup>91</sup> See Nazeer, *Send in the Idiots* for an account of an autistic individual very successfully acquiring theory of mind.

disorder who pass first-order theory of mind tests at the right mental age' while acknowledging that a proportion of such cases do pass such tests at a later stage:

Whereas first-order tests correspond to a four year old mental age level, second order tests correspond to a six year old mental age level [...] some individuals with autism or Asperger's Syndrome who are high functioning (in terms of IQ and language level) and who are usually adults, may even pass second order false-belief tests. Those who can pass such second order tests may have difficulties in more advanced theory of mind tests, such as inferring complex mental states such as bluff and double bluff in story characters — an eight year old mental age level test.<sup>92</sup>

In summary, the fact that Bentham shows himself on many occasions capable of making accurate assessments of the contents of other people's minds does not rule out the contention that this did not come easily or 'naturally' to him, that he had to work to establish this ability which, as the examples above show, remained inconsistently established in his adult life.

*'Weak central coherence' and 'impaired executive function'*

Other psychological aspects of autism have been less emphasised. As just mentioned, particular neurocognitive styles have been discovered to be associated with autism. We hypothesize that 'weak central coherence' may help explain Bentham's enthusiasm for detail and that 'impaired executive function' may be manifest in his lack of organizing capacity and the almost perseverative quality of his working style.<sup>93</sup>

Harrison's description indicates weak central coherence and relatively impaired executive function in Bentham's working style: 'publishing parts or fragments, starting things without completing them, was something which persisted[...]. Bentham was temperamentally more inclined to take on new projects than finish old ones, and in any case his main overall project kept sprouting new limbs which he felt had to be

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<sup>92</sup> See Baron-Cohen, *Theory of Mind*, pp. 14, 15.

<sup>93</sup> F. Happé 'Parts and wholes, meaning and minds: central coherence and its relation to theory of mind', in *Understanding Other Minds*, ed. S. Baron-Cohen, H. Tager-Flusberg & D. Cohen, (2<sup>nd</sup> edn.), Oxford, 2000.

properly developed before publication'.<sup>94</sup>

Similarly Lieberman says:

yet the most basic question about his biography is how a man who at the age of 21 “fearfully and tremblingly” recognized a lifetime’s vocation in legislative science and then proceeded to devote the next sixty years to “writing at the rate of ten to twenty pages a day”, still contrived to leave each of the main branches of his legislative system unfinished and unrealized when death finally came in his 84th year in 1832.<sup>95</sup>

Dumont provided the executive organizational control that Bentham lacked:

Dumont, in the *Traitds de legislation* which he produced on the basis of Bentham’s unpublished writings in 1802, was remarkably effective in presenting his ideas in a coherent, comprehensible, and readable form, and the work was quickly recognized as one of major importance.<sup>96</sup>

### **Empathising-Systemising theory**

Baron-Cohen has proposed a two-dimensional psychological model of normal socio-cognitive function. One dimension, empathising - the drive to identify emotions and thoughts in others and to respond to them appropriately - includes not only inference about the thoughts and feelings of others but also appropriate spontaneous emotional reactions, enabling an understanding of the behaviour of others and natural ways of responding. The other dimension, systemising, is defined as the drive to analyse and build systems in order to understand and predict non-agentive events. The identification of the relationships between components and the correlations between events enables the understanding of relevant underlying ‘rules’. In people with extreme ‘systemising’ bias, these capacities are much greater than ‘empathising’ skills.<sup>97</sup>

One research study found that males with AS performed poorly on empathising tasks compared with non-AS males, who in turn performed poorly

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<sup>94</sup> R. Harrison, *Jeremy Bentham: A Fragment on Government*, Cambridge, 1988, p. xiii.

<sup>95</sup> Lieberman, ‘Bentham to Benthamism’, p. 201.

<sup>96</sup> Dinwiddy, *Bentham*, p. 10.

<sup>97</sup> S. Baron-Cohen, ‘Is Asperger Syndrome Necessarily Viewed as a Disability?’ *Focus on Autism and Other Developmental Disabilities*, xvii (2002), pp. 186-91.

compared to non-AS females.<sup>98</sup> Although Lawson *et al* believe their results do not support the weak central coherence model, Frith argues that the weak central coherence model is compatible with the two dimensional model of AS because, although at first sight concern with structure would seem inimical to weak central coherence, in fact ‘systemisers’, including those with AS, collect information in ‘self-limiting taxonomies that do not link up with each other’. Jeremy Bentham can be seen to exemplify this approach.

The autistic mind seems to be suited to working algorithmically within a closed system of specified rules’.<sup>99</sup> This seems admirably to describe Bentham’s method of ‘bifurcation’ or ‘bipartite analysis’ to which he attached great value. As Dinwiddy states, ‘It was certainly novel as applied to the field of legislation, and one can see why, as a believer in codification, Bentham found it so attractive. He thought that by means of it he could produce a systematic and exhaustive catalogue of offences or crimes, which would in turn provide the basis for an ordered and comprehensive code of penal law’.<sup>100</sup>

Bentham as the arch ‘systemiser’ is here on display. It is of note that this theory of the ‘empathising’/ ‘systemising’ divide in cognitive processing has close parallels with the contrast Mill stresses between Coleridge and Bentham.<sup>101</sup>

### **Jeremy Bentham and John Howard**

Lucas brought together the available evidence and concluded, despite the limitations of retrospective diagnosis, that John Howard suffered from Asperger’s Syndrome.<sup>102</sup> Frith included a section on Howard in the most recent edition of her book on autism.<sup>103</sup> As Semple writes:

Despite his saintly qualities, Howard left an ambiguous legacy; there is no adequate modern biography, so the contradictions in his personality

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<sup>98</sup> J. Lawson, S. Baron-Cohen, & S. Wheelwright, ‘Empathising and Systemising in Adults with and without Asperger Syndrome’, *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders*, xxxiv (2004), pp. 301-10.

<sup>99</sup> Snyder, ‘Autistic Genius’, p. 471.

<sup>100</sup> Dinwiddy, *Bentham*, p. 48.

<sup>101</sup> See Ryan, *Utilitarianism*. For a modern account of the experience of a high-functioning AS sufferer, see Grandin, *Thinking in Pictures*. Many parallels may be drawn between Bentham and Grandin.

<sup>102</sup> P. Lucas, ‘John Howard and Asperger’s Syndrome: psychopathology and philanthropy’, *History of Psychiatry*, xii (2001), pp. 73-101. (A version of this paper is available at [www.palucas.co.uk](http://www.palucas.co.uk)).

<sup>103</sup> Frith, *Autism*, pp. 55-7.

and his achievements have yet to be explored [...] His obituary in the *Gentleman's Magazine* condescendingly deplored the “not unexpected, yet certainly untimely, death of the eccentric, but truly worthy, John Howard”.

She cites a draft preface written by Bentham which ‘shows how close he believed their affinity to be’: The obligations I owe to you [Howard] are great and many[...]. From your example I have derived encouragement in many a fit of despondency, and argument in many a debate.<sup>104</sup>

Probably mindful of charges levelled at both him and Howard, Bentham wrote of Howard:

He is no crack-brained enthusiast: the qualities of his head are scarcely inferior to those of his heart [...] From all this rhapsody you would be apt to infer that I fancied myself a great man. The fact is, I live in the same dirty chambers, and am as poor as when you knew me [...] Mr Howard and the public honour he has met with, are of more use to me than you would imagine to prove to my friends that I am not crazy.<sup>105</sup>

It seems significant that Semple perceived a degree of identification by Bentham with Howard. There were similarities between Howard and Bentham in some of the content of their prison projects, in their persistence in the face of an unresponsive public, and in the reputations each attracted as ‘eccentric’. Underlying Bentham’s sympathy and respect for Howard may have been a sense that Howard and he shared something fundamental: perhaps their mutual AS.

Lucas noted a lack of a ‘psychologically coherent human portrait’ of John Howard and Semple the lack of an ‘adequate modern biography’.<sup>106</sup> Burns made a similar point with regard to Bentham.<sup>107</sup> The fact that both books remain unwritten may have the same cause and connect with a fundamentally ‘absent self’ at the heart of

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<sup>104</sup> Semple, *Bentham's Prison*, pp. 77, 74.

<sup>105</sup> *Correspondence (CW)*, ii. ed. T.L.S. Sprigge, London, 1968, pp. 106-8 (cited in Semple, *Bentham's Prison*, p. 75).

<sup>106</sup> Lucas, ‘Howard and Asperger’s’, p. 73, Semple, *Bentham's Prison*, p. 77.

<sup>107</sup> Burns, ‘Dreams and Destinations’, p. 24.

the personality in AS and autism.<sup>108</sup>

### **AS and the nature of Bentham's preoccupations**

The thrust of the paper up to this point has been to provide the evidence in favour of the hypothesis that Bentham may have suffered from AS. In the present section we will explore the links between Bentham's putative AS and the particular goals he pursued in his work. It is of course highly speculative. We hypothesise that the nature of Bentham's particular experience of life was profoundly influenced by AS and that this experience played an important part in determining what he sought to do.

#### *Clarification, demystification and the abolition of uncertainty*

As Porter put it, 'irregularity was Jeremy Bentham's *bête noir* and the rationalization of the legal and administrative systems his *raison d'être*'.<sup>109</sup> It is our suggestion that Bentham's hatred of mystification and obscurity in laws and language might be related to the AS sufferer's experience of the social world as obscure and mysterious. His lifelong relentless determination to render transparent and illuminated what was to him opaque may have arisen from a sense that there were rules to the social interaction around him, rules that others took for granted but that he had to struggle to render visible.

As Bentham wrote in 1792, 'the lies and nonsense that law is stuffed with, form so thick a mist, that a plain man, nay even a man of sense and learning, who is not in the trade, can see neither through it or into it'.<sup>110</sup>

To what has been called Bentham's 'cast of mind far more practical than Hume's it appeared a matter of belief that reality could be truly apprehended'.<sup>111</sup> As Harrison puts it:

Bentham, in his criticism, is supposing that there is, in principle, a way in which things can be made ideally clear and so described really as they are without any trace of fiction.<sup>112</sup>

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<sup>108</sup> See Frith, *Autism*, p. 208.

<sup>109</sup> R. Porter, *Enlightenment: Britain and the creation of the Modern World*, London, 2000, p. 213.

<sup>110</sup> Cited in Harrison, *Bentham*, p. 13.

<sup>111</sup> J. Bender, *Imagining the Penitentiary: Fiction and the Architecture of Mind in Eighteenth Century England*, Chicago & London, 1987, p. 37.

<sup>112</sup> Harrison, *Bentham*, p. 25.

Such ‘concrete’ thinking is seen in Bentham’s beliefs about the ‘reality’ of pleasure and pain.

For Hume, and later for Bentham, reality as ordinarily conceived was just a special form of fiction [...] Bentham, inspired by Hume but stopping short of his radical skepticism, instead accepted as irreducibly “real” the mechanisms of pleasure and pain founded in sensory experience and material circumstance.<sup>113</sup>

The other prime motivation for Bentham was what Bahmueller called ‘the banishment of chance and the consolidation of certainty’.<sup>114</sup> He struggled throughout his life and work to impose order on chaos, and to increase security in the face of unpredictability and disorder. It does not seem far-fetched to ascribe such profoundly influential urges within Bentham to his AS: to suggest that the world experienced as unpredictable and chaotic by a young AS sufferer might leave such a deep and lasting antipathy to disorder and uncertainty as to generate long lasting desire to improve matters.

### *Context*

In a discussion of the difficulty which people with autism or AS have in social interaction, Frith stresses the problem such individuals have in understanding the meaning of implicit communication — for example, incomplete phrases, gestures or facial expressions. Context is everything, and such people are unable to contextualise and then understand. ‘The meaning of any utterance in word or gesture can only be properly understood by *not* treating it piecemeal, but by placing it in context’.<sup>115</sup>

Frith points out that it is precisely the normally shared assumptions that autistic people lack:

The set of premises used in interpreting an utterance constitutes what is generally known as the *context*. A context is a psychological construct,

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<sup>113</sup> Bender, *Imagining the Penitentiary*, pp. 35-6. See the section on Bentham’s psychological theories above.

<sup>114</sup> C.F. Bahmueller, *The National Charity Company: Jeremy Bentham’s Silent Revolution*, Berkeley, 1981, p. 56.

<sup>115</sup> Frith, *Autism*, p. 216.

a subset of the hearer's assumptions about the world. It is these assumptions, of course, rather than the actual state of the world, that affect interpretation of an utterance.<sup>116</sup>

According to Bender,

Paraphrasis consists in the definition of meaning through its restatement in alternate sentences employing both the simplest possible elements and reordered syntax. Bentham is thought to have been the first to see the sentence rather than the word as the primary integer of linguistic significance, and he worked to ground fictions in referentiality by harnessing the expository power of sentences.<sup>117</sup>

In the light of AS sufferers' inherent difficulty in contextualising, it may be significant for our hypothesis that Bentham arrived at the means of contextualising which he called 'paraphrasis' to determine meanings where these appeared to him opaque. As with his other preoccupying themes discussed above, Bentham seems to have arrived by conscious intellectual work at illumination that non-autistic people understand intuitively.

### *Inspection and the Panopticon*

According to Pease-Watkin,

The Panopticon, or Inspection-House — the great circular building made up of many cells arranged around a central observation tower, from which one warden could supervise numerous inmates simultaneously— is in some senses an embodiment, albeit a rather paradoxical one, of the inventive imagination of Jeremy Bentham. [...] it is frequently perceived as a concrete manifestation of his philosophy. The inspection principle working in two ways at once — the warden keeps the inmates under constant inspection, and the public are free to

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<sup>116</sup> *Ibid.*, p 216. Citing D. Sperber & D. Wilson, *Relevance, Communication and Cognition*, (2<sup>nd</sup> edn.), Oxford, 1995, pp. 15-16.

<sup>117</sup> Sperber and Wilson, *Relevance*, p. 40.



inspect the warder at any time — emphasises the Benthamic hallmarks of openness and accountability; and the rehabilitatory aspect of the Panopticon penitentiary draws on and develops Bentham's favourite themes of reform and improvement of the human condition. The huge scale of the project, with a wealth of detail to be considered and provided for, gave free rein to Bentham's peculiar genius.<sup>118</sup>

It is fascinating that in Bentham's conception of the Panopticon, the three separate, motivational strands discussed above as linked to AS are combined: 'order' is imposed on unruliness, by means of 'transparency', which leads to a restructuring and 'reform' of the criminals' personalities. The mechanism is 'inspection'.

The importance of 'inspection' in this process is an additional possible link to the hypothesis that Bentham may have suffered AS. As mentioned above, AS is characterised by impairment in the use of a range non-verbal behaviours, notably eye to eye gaze.<sup>119</sup> As Frith puts it, 'in autism, the inability to understand other minds is deeply linked to abnormalities in the use and interpretation of eye gaze'.<sup>120</sup> It has in fact been hypothesised that failure in development of the normally innate gaze reflex is at the root of AS.<sup>121</sup> In one experiment, eye gaze turned out to be a better measure of mentalizing ability than the standard verbal response.<sup>122</sup> One highly articulate AS sufferer describes her experience of eye contact: 'Looking at people's faces, particularly into their eyes, is one of the hardest things for me to do. It is almost as bad having other people looking at me as it is me looking at them'.<sup>123</sup>

As Semple writes: 'Bentham's emblem for his inspection house was an ever-open eye encircled by the words, "Mercy, Justice, Vigilance". This image reverberates chillingly down the centuries'.<sup>124</sup> She quotes Bentham writing of enforcing discipline through continuous inspection:

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<sup>118</sup> C. Pease-Watkin, 'Bentham's Panopticon and Dumont's *Panoptique*', *Journal of Bentham Studies*, 6, 2003.

<sup>119</sup> See World Health Organization, *Pocket Guide to the ICD-10 Classification*, p. 105.

<sup>120</sup> Frith, *Autism*, p. 105.

<sup>121</sup> S. Baron-Cohen, *Mindblindness: an Essay on Autism and Theory of Mind*, Cambridge MA, 1995.

<sup>122</sup> See T. Ruffman, W. Garnham & P. Rideout, 'Social understanding in autism: Eye gaze as a measure of core insights', *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry*, xlii (2001), pp. 1083-94.

<sup>123</sup> See T. Jolliffe *et al.*, 'Autism: a Personal Account', *Communication: Journal of the National Autistic Society*, xxvi, (1992), pp. 12-19.

<sup>124</sup> Semple, *Bentham's Prison*, p 143.

I will keep an unintermitted watch upon him, I will watch until I observe a transgression. I will minute it down. I will wait for another: I will note that down too. I will lie by for a whole day[...]. The next day I produce the list to him. You thought yourself undiscovered: you abused my indulgence: see how you were mistaken. Another time, you may have rope for two days, ten days: the longer it is, the heavier it will fall upon you. Learn from this, all of you, that in this house transgression never can be safe.<sup>125</sup>

The sense of Bentham's highly charged personal involvement is hard to avoid. One might speculate that its origin is in the childhood internal experience of the young Bentham, feeling on the receiving end of persistent discomfiting observation.

We hypothesize that the salience of the principle of inspection for Bentham could have arisen from AS. As suggested above in relation to incomprehensible social rules and uncertainty, he may have engaged with the domain he found highly problematic with such intensity and perseverance that it eventually became transformed, for him, into a source of personal power.

The impressive congruence between transparency, order, reformation and inspection may go some way to explain Bentham's reluctance to give up the Panopticon project despite enormous setbacks. Bentham was only able to explain the ultimate failure of the project by ascribing hostile intent to George 111. This latter response seems akin to Bentham's simplistic mode of explanation noted by Mill, and is further evidence of a tendency to an un-nuanced, somewhat paranoid and two-dimensional view of the social world not infrequently encountered in AS.<sup>126</sup>

### *Utilitarianism*

Writing of the 'unmitigated egocentrism' of those with AS and autism, Frith suggests that when young 'they simply did not know that their inner experiences were different from the inner experiences of other people'. She goes on to contrast 'normal children [who] get this fundamental insight early and for free, by virtue of their intuitive mentalizing ability. With a late-acquired conscious theory of mind, this insight is hard won'.<sup>127</sup> It seems there could be a relationship between Bentham's egocentricity, his lack of an intuitive understanding of the

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<sup>125</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 141.

<sup>126</sup> See above.

<sup>127</sup> Frith, *Autism*, p. 211.

profound differences between the inner experiences of individual people, putatively caused by AS, and his belief in the possibility of the ‘identification of social and individual interest’. As Bender points out, ‘The identification of social and individual interest is perhaps the central mystification of utilitarianism’.<sup>128</sup> Such identification between the individual and society might seem more credible to an AS sufferer who cannot but have a restricted awareness of conflicting motives within himself or herself, within others, and of conflicting motivations in society as a whole.

## Conclusion

Our contention that Jeremy Bentham may have suffered from Asperger’s syndrome is supported by contemporary accounts of his social oddness, and by the particular nature of his achievements. We have analysed aspects of his behaviour in each of the three relevant domains and found it generally consistent with Asperger’s syndrome. We have discussed Bentham’s egocentricity, his psychological theories, and the congruence between his preoccupations and the specific difficulties suffered by those with Asperger’s syndrome.

As Sacks puts it, ‘while a single glance may suffice for clinical diagnosis, if we hope to understand the autistic individual, nothing less than a total biography will do’.<sup>129</sup> Sacks is drawing attention to the reality that each patient [...] has, interwoven with their autism, an intact, non-autistic part of their personality’.<sup>130</sup> But in Bentham’s case,

It is striking, yet hardly surprising, that no one has even yet written a thorough biographical account of Bentham’s later years — or indeed of the second half of his long life. To anyone in sympathy with his ideas such a task would often be painful; to anyone else much of it would be inexpressedly tedious.<sup>131</sup>

Amongst others, Alvarez and Reid have pointed out that the lack of a clear ‘personality’ is somehow at the very heart of the condition of AS. ‘There is

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<sup>128</sup> Bender, *Imagining the Penitentiary*, p. 306, n. 37.

<sup>129</sup> Sacks, *Anthropologist on Mars*, p. 238.

<sup>130</sup> See A. Alvarez & S. Reid, *Autism and Personality: Findings from the Tavistock Autism Workshop*, London, 1999, p. 1.

<sup>131</sup> Burns, ‘Dreams and Destinations’, p. 24. For a biographical outline see F. Rosen, *Bentham, Jeremy (1748-1832), philosopher, jurist, and reformer* Oxford Dictionary of National Biography, Oxford, 2004-2006.

something so striking, so mysterious and disturbing about the condition of autism, especially the reduction of personhood in the sufferer'.<sup>132</sup> The fact that there is still no 'total biography' of Bentham may connect with this fundamental diminution in the quality of his 'personhood'.

'The banishment of chance and the consolidation of certainty is what Bentham's work is all about'.<sup>133</sup> This assessment resounds strikingly with the typical AS sufferer's efforts to find security and to manage uncertainty. Bentham's lifetime of indefatigable effort to codify and render clear and unambiguous the vast areas of jurisprudence, ethics, political theory, welfare and social administration and, particularly, language, can be seen as having just such motivation. The Panopticon project in particular could have reflected Bentham's 'infantile' desires for omniscience and omnipotence as an AS sufferer's reaction to helpless confusion in the social world.

Mill wrote in his essay on Bentham that:

The truths which are not Bentham's, which his philosophy takes no account of, are many and important [...] [but] almost all rich veins of original and striking speculation have been opened by systematic half-thinkers.<sup>134</sup>

We contend that AS was the underlying explanation for the fact that Bentham could be viewed as a 'half-thinker': AS may have prevented him from having ordinary access to that part of human experience that Mill found so well-understood and expressed by Coleridge.

It is striking how well current psychological theories of AS and of 'autistic genius', particularly those that highlight 'weak central coherence', appear to fit Bentham's mode of working, both in terms of his specific achievements and in terms of his difficulties in completing and publishing his work.<sup>135</sup> At the same time, the difficulties in social interaction (illustrated in the present paper) indicate his impairment in the realm of 'theory of mind' — the intuitive understanding of other people.

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<sup>132</sup> Alvarez and Reid, *Autism and Personality*, p. 1.

<sup>133</sup> Bahmueller, *National Charity Company*, p. 56.

<sup>134</sup> Quoted in Ryan, *Utilitarianism*, p. 151.

<sup>135</sup> See Snyder, 'Autistic Genius'; and Happé, 'Parts and Wholes'.

We conclude that AS appears to represent the most parsimonious explanation for Bentham's particular combination of social oddness and striking intellectual abilities. AS may prove to be the underlying explanation for the fact that from the start his ideas have been particularly prone to misunderstanding and caricature. By rendering him incapable of sharing so many of his contemporaries' common-sense assumptions, AS may have enabled Bentham to continue articulating, with extraordinary persistence, Enlightenment critiques of the status quo in various domains, pushing them to what he saw as their logical conclusions. AS may help to explain Bentham's genius insofar as it led him, partly as a result of particular anxieties and preoccupations, to formulate questions unanticipated by his contemporaries, at the same time as 'motivating' him to pursue the answers to those questions so relentlessly and indefatigably.

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