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The Autistic Subject
On the Threshold of Language

LEON S. BRENNER

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Foreword

Abstract The foreword, written by Jean-Claude Maleval, introduces the reader to the abundant world of the Lacanian psychoanalysis of autism. Maleval is one of the prominent Lacanian scholars to engage the subject of autism today. In his introduction he provides a vivid description of several unique autistic traits elaborated from within the framework of Lacanian psychoanalysis. Several case studies are presented and provide an initial introduction to Lacanian notions such as the entry into language, the primacy of the sign, and the construction of the rim in autism. Maleval progresses to deliberate the work presented in the scope of this book and provides a general description of the content of each of its chapters.

This book presents a new approach to autism that does not describe it as a pathology but as a *mode of being*. It is rooted in the psychoanalytic elaboration of autism, initially presented by Rosine and Robert Lefort, who introduced the hypothesis of autism being a singular subjective structure in the 1990s; that is, a subjective structure that is distinct from the other subjective structures already elaborated by Sigmund Freud and Jacques Lacan: neurosis, perversion, and psychosis. Being rooted in this hypothesis, this book offers an original development of the conceptual foundations of the contemporary Lacanian clinic of autism.

It was the treatment of Marie-Françoise, a child exhibiting a severe form of autism, that led the Leforts (1998) to conclude that in the transference there is neither a sign for the function of the big Other nor evidence of a proper instatement of drive functionality (pp. 311–320). On top of that, the Leforts also noted that the poverty in Marie-Françoise' babbling seems to imply an interference in her alienation in the signifier.[1] On the other end of the autism spectrum, the Leforts only made use of the notion of the "double" in their attempt to explain the creative richness they identified among high-functioning autistic individuals; a notion that, in hindsight, appears to be insufficient. In order to determine the characteristic of the autistic structure, the development of a few more clinical elements seemed to be necessary. These elements, which the Leforts did not have at their disposal, have since been elaborated by several Lacanian psychoanalysts who contributed greatly to the psychoanalytic understanding of autism today. Many of these elements, like the notion of the autistic rim, the recourse to the sign, and the notion of autistic foreclosure, take center stage in this book. They are meticulously developed beyond their original designation and are presented in a comprehensive fashion in the English language for the first time.

The hypothesis of an autistic structure corroborates the notion of the "autism spectrum disorder" that replaced in the DSM-5 the previous designation of autism under the general category of "pervasive developmental disorders." The constant features that distinguish the autistic structure, despite the plurality of its manifestations, were already accounted for in the mid-twentieth century by both Leo Kanner and Hans Asperger—the pioneers of the field of autism research. Asperger (2008) argued that, from around two years of age, distinct autistic features "remain unmistakable and constant throughout the whole life-span. Naturally, intelligence and personality develop and, in the course of development, certain features predominate or recede, so that the problems presented change considerably. Nevertheless, the essential aspects of the problem remain unchanged" (pp. 67–68). Kanner had noted that out of 96 patients he diagnosed as being autistic at the Johns Hopkins Hospital, 11 had

[1] Babblings are speech sounds that a child produces at an early age and are arranged in nonsensical combinations, such as "bababa" and "deedeedee."

successfully adjusted themselves to society. Nevertheless, he emphasized that even they "have not completely shed the fundamental personality structure of early infantile autism" (Kanner, Rodriguez, & Ashenden, 1972, p. 31). This position is validated by Brigitte Harrison, a high-functioning autistic woman, who argues that "even when our autism becomes almost invisible, our structure remains autistic" (Harrisson & Saint-Charles, 2010, p. 29).

There are two opposing hypotheses as to the nature of the constant structural features that distinguish autism from other forms of "developmental disorders." According to the cognitivist approach, it is a unique form of intelligence. According to the psychoanalytic approach, it is a unique mode of subjective functioning. From the vantage point of the cognitivist approach, both these perspectives seem to be incompatible. However, by adhering to the psychoanalytic approach, the hypothesis of the specificity of autistic subjective functioning is able to account for the original way in which autistic subjects accumulate their knowledge and implement it in the development of a unique form of intelligence that characterizes high-functioning autistic individuals.

Today, it is generally agreed upon that two pervasive signs of autism can be detected at a very early age. The first is the avoidance of the gaze, which manifests itself at the age of three months. The second is a lack of joint attention, which starts from about the age of nine months.[2] These two signs are of the same order, as when autistic children avoid the gaze, they do so in order to refrain from communicating with others. These phenomena are not anecdotal; they persist even among high-functioning autistic individuals. However, one must emphasize that it is not only the gaze—the object of the scopic drive according to Lacan—that is problematic for the autistic child; all the drive objects that are mobilized in the first exchanges with the parents are more or less refused or retained by the autistic child—namely, the voice (invocatory drive), the stool (anal drive), and breast (oral drive). Why do we see the retention of the gaze in autism? Some autistic individuals say that it is too disturbing. Why do we see a

[2] Joint attention is attention overtly focused by two or more people on the same object, person, or action at the same time, with each being aware of the other's interest. For example, infants of around nine months of age with the capacity for joint attention can follow their parents' gaze and begin to imitate what their parents do (VandenBos, 2007).

general avoidance in all matters that have to do with defecation? One autistic child reports that it is due to a fear that his lungs will explode. Why do autistic individuals enter a state of mutism? Some say that it is due to a fear of emptying their brains. All these phenomena strongly suggest that autism is rooted in a fear of interacting with others; a fear that does not originate in a deficiency in the capacity to understand social relationships but in an irrational anxiety that the subject does not control. This anxiety brings autistic children to refuse to bring drive objects into an exchange. This is what high-functioning autistic individual and writer Donna Williams claims, when she points out that in her childhood everything that revolved "around the act of giving and receiving" remained "totally foreign to her" (Williams & Bartak, 1992, p. 66).

In the Lacanian clinic, we argue that autism originates in a retention of the drive objects (oral, anal, scopic, and invocatory). Because the yielding of the drive objects is the basis for entering into a relationship with the Other, the retention of these objects brings about a disorder of language. Thus, we see, from a very early age, that the cries of autistic babies are monotonous and lack modulation; that autistic babies are either surprisingly calm or constantly scream without stopping. In both cases, parents are not put in a position from where they could interpret these cries as demands. Therefore, we see that, unlike what the Leforts believed, autistic babbling is not utterly absent but is scarce and lacks social orientation (Chericoni et al., 2016).

Autistic children are not initiated into language through their babbling. Their entry into language takes place in solitude, independent of its communicative function, and essentially follows two paths: through echolalia or through the written word. The first path gives rise to what some call a "verbose language" (Lacan, 1989, p. 19) and others a "language of poets" (Williams & Bartak, 1992, p. 157). This form of language is barely utilized in an attempt to communicate with others but is capable of producing vocalizations or soliloquies that provide autistic individuals with a solitary form of satisfaction. The second path can be used in the creation of a "factual language" that, on the one hand, allows one to communicate with others but, on the other hand, is a language that is cut off from one's affects.

Since direct communication is a source of anxiety for autistic individuals, they tend to avoid engaging in the reciprocal exchange of invocatory jouissance. Correspondingly, Williams reports that the material of her echolalic verbose language hardly comes from messages that are addressed to her. She prefers to adopt her words from statements that are separated from their human source: "The development of my own everyday language was essentially based on repeating what I heard in recorded stories and in TV commercials" (p. 300). Thus, we see that anything that detaches the word from invocatory jouissance, whether it is a phone, a radio, a television, or a written medium, is instrumental for autistic learning.

The entry into language through echolalia is not accompanied by its subjectification. Therefore, it is a very different experience from the entry into language through babbling. First, "typical" children that communicate through babbling are in touch with their body. Through their babbling they express hunger, suffering, fatigue, well-being, and so on. For these children, certain vocalizations already appear at around two to three months of age and are used for communication with selected partners. This is not the case for autistic children. Their echolalic appropriation of language is not utilized for expressing their needs to others but for the imitation and reproduction of "sound-objects" that capture their attention. For example, Panayotis Kantzas (1987) argues that "Speaking in ready-made sentences means first and foremost that the use of verbal material does not involve the representation of the speaking subject. It is not deconstructed and reconstructed but simply reproduced as it is" (p. 108). Echolalic speech reflects the outside world without assimilating it. Therefore, it does not endanger the subject, for it does not insert the speaker into an exchange of communication. The fact that autistic echolalic speech is not utilized for communication but only for solitary satisfaction testifies to an interference in the subject's alienation in the signifier. This interference prevents the master signifier (*S1*) from being used in the subject's enunciation (Maleval, 2019, p. 218). Therefore, it takes a long time for some autistic individuals to start to actively use language from a position of enunciation.

Nevertheless, one must note that autistic children, even those presenting the most severe form of autism, are not out of language, nor are they

unable to communicate. When they are unable to speak, they usually know how to make themselves understood by using a language composed of gestures. They do so by mimicking the object at stake or the desired action using signs that univocally designate a referent.

The spontaneous use of signs by autistic children was already accounted for a century and a half before Kanner. Already in 1800, French pedagogue Jean Marc Gaspard Itard decided to take a mute child he named Victor de l'Aveyron as a subject in an experiment in which he sought to initiate him into civilization. Itard (1993a) found that Victor understood a "pantomime" language. For example, he recounts that Victor could be sent to fetch water by positioning a vase upside-down, thus demonstrating to him that it is empty. Itard notes:

> The most amazing thing in his disposal to this form of communication is that he needs neither preliminary lessons nor a mutual agreement to be conveyed to him. I became sure of this one day through an incontestable experiment. I chose an object that I knew he has no preconceived sign for from a very long list of objects. This was, for example, the comb that his maid used to comb him with. In order to get him to bring it to me, I stood in front of him after ruffling my hair in all directions and presenting my head to him in such a disorderly manner. He understood me and I soon had what I asked for in my hands. (p. 309)

The fact that Victor did not need any preliminary lesson or agreement in order to understand Itard testifies to his capacity to spontaneously access language. In this case it was a sign language, in which the gesture remains closely related to the designated object; a sign language that he is able to mobilize in order to communicate, even when he is unable to speak.

In order to develop Victor's language and to surpass the obstacle of his mutism, Itard offered him a box with different compartments which contained the different letters of the alphabet. Victor managed to conceive that by assembling these letters together he can construct words that refer to specific objects. However, Itard's pedagogical efforts came up against an unexpected impasse. He (1993b) notes:

> It was obvious that my student, far from having conceived a false idea of the value of signs, was simply applying them too rigorously. He had taken my lessons literally and, because I had confined myself to naming the objects in his room, he was convinced that these were the only objects to which these signs applied. Thus, any book that was not in his room was not considered to be a "book." In order to convince Victor to call a book that existed outside of his room by the same name, a perfect resemblance had to be established between the two. Therefore, one can see that, in his use words, Victor was quite different from children who began speaking by giving generic names to specific objects. He confined himself to understanding generic names in the restricted sense of specific objects. (p. 421)

The case of Victor, presented by Itard, underlines a major distinction between the autistic and non-autistic mode of access to language. Signs used by the autistic child adhere to the situation and context in which they were originally learned. In contrast, non-autistic children are initially inclined to over-generalize or hastily generalize. For example, they may call mammals and dinosaurs "dog"; they may use the word "chicken" for all birds and the word "glass" for all containers. This demonstrates that non-autistic children are initially inclined to separate the sign from the designated thing; an inclination that reveals the underlying function of the signifier, which, unlike the sign, enables generalization and abstraction. The autistic child, on the other hand, petrifies the sign to the designated thing and retains a concrete link between them. Because autistic children prefer learning language in solitude, they favor the acquisition of signs at the expense of the acquisition of signifiers. Signs are memorized one by one, object by object, situation by situation; while signifiers, incorporated in the words of the Other, are immediately situated in networks of oppositions that determine their meanings and vary according to context.

Since the acquisition of signs is not dependent on babbling, they do not possess the properties attributed to the signifier; properties that, Lacan argues, make the signifier suitable for ciphering jouissance. Accordingly, the majority of autistic individuals attest to a split between their intellect and their affects. Correspondingly, Asperger notes, as early as 1944, that "these individuals are intelligent automata. Social adaptation

has to proceed via the intellect. In fact, they have to learn everything via the intellect. One has to explain and enumerate everything… Autistic children have to learn the simple daily chores just like proper homework, systematically" (Asperger, 2008, p. 58). Furthermore, Williams argues that "Autistic children are secretly trapped in a mutilated affectivity … [they] have feelings and sensations but these have developed in isolation. They can't verbalize them in a normal way" (Williams & Bartak, 1992, p. 301). To this, Harrison adds: "The brain does not receive messages from the body, even though the brain and the body are doing their work independently" (Harrisson & Saint-Charles, 2010, p. 311). Finally, Temple Grandin, an autistic individual and notable autism advocate, enthusiastically compares her way of thinking to that of a computer (2006, p. 162).

The early refusal to bring the voice into an exchange leads autistic children to a solitary appropriation of language that results in its further development using the written word. Is it possible to incorporate oneself in a language that is cut off from invocatory jouissance? According to Lacan, this is certainly possible. He argues:

> The ordinary experience is that everything the subject receives from the Other in terms of language is received in a vocal form … [However] The experience of cases that are not so rare, though people always bring up striking cases like that of Helen Keller, show that there are other pathways besides the vocal path by which to receive language. Language is not vocalization. Take a look at the deaf. (SX p. 274; brackets added)

While being deaf, mute, and blind, Helen Keller managed to obtain a university degree in 1904 and subsequently wrote a dozen books. Initially, she gained access to language through tactile sensations. This is how, according to her testimony, the mystery of language was revealed to her:

> Someone was drawing water and my teacher placed my hand under the spout. As the cool stream gushed over one hand, she spelled into the other the word water, first slowly, then rapidly. I stood still; my whole attention fixed upon the motions of her fingers. Suddenly I felt a misty consciousness as of something forgotten—a thrill of returning thought; and somehow the

> mystery of language was revealed to me. I knew then that "w-a-t-e-r" meant the wonderful cool something that was flowing over my hand. (Keller & Sullivan, 1905, p. 11)

Such an apprehension of language can be described as "pointillistic" and "intellectual." It is distinguished from the entry into language through babbling. The latter form of language is rich in structured oppositions that already embody the properties of a mother tongue. Accordingly, the babbling of a Japanese baby is different from that of an English or a French baby. Moreover, the babbling of a baby conveys its emotions: joy, suffering, and the call to be heard. Therefore, we see that there is a clear distinction between assuming a language that is already structured and in touch with affects through babbling and assuming language in a pointillistic and intellectual way.

It should be noted that despite her extreme cognitive deficits, Helen Keller was not autistic. She felt the need to communicate and for this she invented a language of gestures. There was no evidence of her ever having eating disorders, or problems with defecation and, above all, she had a strong will to communicate which eventually led her to articulate herself in writting. Accordingly, one must note that, no matter how severe cognitive deficits may be, this does not necessarily mean that a child is autistic. If the child does not refuse entering social exchange and does not retain the objects of the drive, we are most likely not dealing with autism. Correspondingly, we see that, unlike autistic individuals who acquire language in solitude and through imitation, Helen Keller gained access to language through her interactive relationship with her teacher—Miss Sullivan.

Do autistic individuals learn language like the deaf? Laurent Mottron (2004) points out a crucial difference: "the deaf achieve socialization through gestures, while autistic individuals achieve socialization through writing" (p. 149). Many case studies demonstrate that autistic individuals prefer to access language in a way other than through social interactions. Moreover, while definitely preferring a language that is composed of gestures, autistic individuals do not use signs like the deaf-mute do. The former use a language that is composed of sound-forms that are closely linked to images of referents of visual or tactile origin. Thus, a

sound-form can be a word, a sentence, a piece of language, a phoneme, a number, and so on. The signs used by autistic individuals oscillate between the iconization of sound-forms—when the subject translates them into images—and the naming of icons—when the sound-form corresponds to an image. Harrison's testimony corraborates this notion: "You take the 'visual' and convert it to a verbal language thus coordinating between the two" (Harrisson & Saint-Charles, 2010, p. 46). This use of signs corresponds with Lacan's definition of the sign provided in 1961: "a sign represents something for someone" (SXI, p. 207).[3] Unlike the signifier, the sign does not erase the trace of the thing, since its image remains; moreover, it does not cipher jouissance and it hardly can be used to signify any form of equivocation.

The signs used by autistic individuals are fundamentally distinct from signifiers on two levels: first—and this is essentially what Grandin describes in her book *Thinking in Pictures* (2006)—they remain attached to their referent—not erasing the trace of the thing represented. Second, they do not function as deposits of jouissance: a phenomenon that autistic individuals testify to by noting the disconnection between language and their affective life. The Leforts (2003) emphasized this point when they argued that "in the autistic structure the signifier fails to be embodied and thus fails to create an affect" (p. 87).

While thinking with signs is not all bad, they do not possess the capacity of signifiers to interchangeably combine together into different formations. Accordingly, their ability to convey abstraction is practically diminished, as they impose a rigid and continuous relationship between unrelated elements. This can result in the stimulation of a child's memory up to a point where the autistic child becomes a mnemonic genius that can sometimes acquire outstanding intellectual and linguistic skills, and even gain access to affects. That is while a typical child becomes a "grammatical genius," around the age of three years, when he or she learns the complexities of grammar without being taught anything about them.

[3] In *Television* (Lacan, 1990), Lacan introduced a new definition of the sign. According to Jacques-Alain Miller, this definition was introduced in order to complement the signifier in terms of jouissance. It is not this later definition of the sign that is referred to here.

Signifiers are adopted from a predetermined system that organizes them; whereas signs are initially apprehended by the autistic child one by one. However, they do not remain isolated units, they are not just labels, the subject gradually organizes them in memory in a particular way which allows him or her to compose them into a set of oppositional relationships. When Grandin (2006) uses the icons of "a dove or a pipe" to represent the abstract notion of "peace," she does not only attach these words to an image of a referent; she inserts the image of the dove into an oppositional relationship with other birds, and the image of the pipe with other objects that emit smoke (p. 17).

Not being able to spontaneously learn the grammar of language due to their isolated appropriation of signs, autistic individuals search for rules that organize the relationships between signs. They mainly find these rules in the order they discover in the world. This is why they find the immutability of these rules to be so important. Breaking the immutability of the order of the world damages the fragile organization of signs. The immutable circuits actualize the rules they invent for themselves and the regularities they observe in the world. Accordingly, Williams argues, that she was always "under the rule of a lot of very strict principles." She adds that she is aware that these were "her own rules" and that they were "not compatible with the carefree life of well-adjusted people" (Williams & Bartak, 1992, p. 139).

There is no doubt that high-functioning autistic individuals are capable of learning grammar intellectually. Moreover, they are able to elevate the sign to the level of a concept. They do so by detaching the sign from the situation in which it was originally acquired through the memorization of multiple references. Correspondingly, Grandin (2006) explains that she can attach a multiplicity of particular images to the same sign:

> My concept of dogs is inextricably linked to every dog I've ever known. It's as if I have a card catalogue of dogs I have seen, complete with pictures, which continually grows as I add more examples to my video library. If I think about Great Danes, the first memory that pops into my head is Dansk, the Great Dane owned by the headmaster at my high school. The next Great Dane I visualize is Helga, who was Dansk's replacement. The next is my aunt's dog in Arizona, and my final image comes from an advertisement for Fitwell seat covers that featured that kind of dog. (p. 12)

In addition to learning grammar and constructing concepts, some autistic individuals can also gain access to affects through memorization. For instance, Williams (2015) asks some of her peers to show her how emotions look like in order to memorize them by heart (p. 161). Harrison adds to this that autistic individuals "must first 'import' the meaning of emotions in order to conceptualize them" (Harrisson & Saint-Charles, 2010, p. 333).

The combination of learning grammar, constructing concepts, and memorizing affects leads some high-functioning autistic individuals to engage their bodies in their enunciation as well as to gain access to humor. They develop these capacities up to a level where it is difficult to distinguish their behavior from that of non-autistic people. Nevertheless, they might be distinguished on the basis of the difficulties they have in acquiring these capacities and through the subsistence of the traces of their sign language. On the high-functioning pole of the autism spectrum, the use of signs can develop up to a point where it can be referred to as a language composed of signifiers. That is, a verbose language that seems to allow subjects to express their affects, leading to a transmutation of the linguistic signifier into a psychoanalytic signifier—a sensor of jouissance. However, only few high-functioning autistic individuals reach this level, as even Grandin points out that a clear split persists between her intellect and her affects. On the other hand, this split is less prominent for Daniel Tammet and for Williams. Both have achieved a better apprehension of their emotions and feelings, as their inability to recognize and express them has greatly diminished and they attest to a new feeling of inhabiting their bodies. This feeling is manifest in what Williams (2015) calls the language of "simply being" (p. 285).

Frances Tustin's account of the "protective shell" had led Éric Laurent (1992) to suggest that one of the major characteristics of autistic functioning is the return of jouissance on the rim (p. 156). Three elements usually compose the autistic rim: the autistic object, the double, and specific interests. These will be thoroughly elaborated in this book. Joey's machine, for example, is composed of both an autistic object and a double. Joey cannot separate himself from his machine, which is supposed to provide him with the electricity that animates him. Later on, it becomes

the source of his specific interest when he chooses to become an electrician (Bettelheim, 1967, pp. 250–260).

Laurent argues that the return of jouissance on the rim consists in a diversion of an excess of jouissance to the autistic object, which in turn animates the subject. For example, when Joey was plugged into his machine at the Chicago Orthopedic School, he became dependent on its ability to provide him with electricity. With the help of this machine Joey managed to harness the jouissance of the drive, enabling him, for example, to defecate by heating his stools and to regulate his diet when it accompanied him to the toilet. It had a speaker that helped him process his voice and many eye-catching light bulbs with other functions.

By plugging into a machine, or a double, the autistic child treats the feeling of lifelessness, of not having any vital energy, and relieves himself of having to make decisions. Without the elements of the rim, autistic individuals are not capable of interpreting their affects using signs and experience them as surges of anxiety. By plugging into a puppet, for instance, they attempt to regulate their jouissance on the rim. That is why many autistic individuals say that they want to be a machine or a robot—so that they will not feel any affects.

Operating on the basis of the rim, respecting and developing its protective function as well as its capacity to subdue anxiety, to regulate affects, and to provide a point of access to the social bond: these are the principles that guide the Lacanian psychoanalytic approach to autism today.

However, in a recent publication presented by the American Academy of Pediatrics, which concerns the identification, evaluation, and management of autism, psychoanalysis is not mentioned at all, seemingly sealing its fate in all matters that have to do with the clinical work done with autistic children (Hyman, Levy, & Myers, 2020). Admittedly, in the field of autism research, the most fundamental Freudian principles seem to be irrelevant. Nevertheless, the Lacanian approach to autism is not limited to these fundamental principles, as it entails neither the recollection of one's history nor the interpretations of the unconscious. Accordingly, one might even wonder in what way does the Lacanian approach to autism still refer to psychoanalysis. The Lacanian approach to autism is based on

the inventions and passions of the child and not on the knowledge of the educator. Accordingly, it can definitely be described as a psychodynamic method. However, the Lacanian approach to autism does owe a lot to the Freudian discovery. We must acknowledge the fact that it was a psychoanalyst, Frances Tustin, who introduced the notion of autistic object. Moreover, the field of study of psychoanalysis begins when one realizes that some of our own actions lie beyond our control. Sometimes we even disapprove of them but cannot help repeating them. Correspondingly, the use of autistic objects, the double and specific interests are part and parcel of the autistic mode of functioning, but they exceed the individual's choice, even if each individual embodies them in his or her own way. Similarly, most autistic individuals have immutable behaviors that aim to create a local coherence in the world and are precursors for their specific interests. They serve the same purpose as the former. All these phenomena are the result of a unique mode of unconscious functioning that is specific to autistic subjects. They appropriate these behaviors in their own way, but their dynamic qualities originate from a source they do not control. This source is unknown to them but determines them much more than they can imagine.

What Lacanian psychoanalysis advocates today with regard to the treatment of autism (when it is necessary and desired) could more or less be described as "nondirective interactive strategies to foster interaction and development of communication in the context of play" (Hyman et al., p. 23). For American pediatricians, such an approach is consistent with methods based on developmental theories. According to these theories, interventions that treat autistic symptoms can fall into two main categories: interventions that are based on the Applied Behavior Analysis (ABA) approach—which seek to change behavior—and interventions that concern a child's development and focus on stimulating interaction dynamics. The Lacanian clinic of autism is similar to the latter, yet it is not based on a developmental framework but on a framework that develops a theory of the subject. It does not trace the steps to be taken in treating autistic subjects; it aims at a finer understanding—that of the autistic modes of defense against anxiety and of strategies aimed to protect oneself from the Other's desire. The latter are consistent: immutable behaviors and the election of the various incarnations of the rim. However, this

approach takes into account that the inventions of each autistic subject are different, unavoidably dictating the assumption of a case-by-case approach. This is an approach that psychoanalysis has never ceased to advocate in order to detach itself from the universalizing reductive psychiatric discourses. The psychoanalytic treatment of autistic individuals does not aim at elucidating the past but at the construction of the subject. In it, the interpretations the psychoanalyst provides do not aim to contribute meaning but aim at a lack, as Rosine Lefort argued, in order to temper the excess of jouissance initially attached to the rim (1994, p. 281).

The Lacanian approach is not genealogical in the strict sense of the term. It does not search for the underlying biological cause of a certain mode of subjective structuring. Nevertheless, it does provide an insight into the functional causation of the psyche. Accordingly, it is fundamentally based on a conception of an autistic structure that is determined by three pivots: an initial retention of the objects of the drive, a restricted alienation in language, and an apparatus of jouissance that returns on the rim. In this book, these fundamental pivots of the autistic structure are elaborated in relation to a singular psychic constitutive mechanism the writer terms *autistic foreclosure*. This book comes to elaborate the causal properties of this mechanism on the basis of published clinical case studies but mostly entails meticulous conceptual work that is well versed in both the Freudian and Lacanian edifice. Accordingly, the functioning of autistic foreclosure is elaborated in comparison to other constitutive psychic mechanisms such as repression in neurosis and foreclosure in psychosis. Moreover, the functioning of autistic foreclosure is explicated in terms of its effect on the subject's mode of access to language and the functioning of the drive. By demonstrating that autistic foreclosure is indeed singular and not reducible to the functioning of neurotic repression or psychotic foreclosure, this book emphasizes the singularity of the autistic subjective structure. By doing so, it dictates the adaptation of a singular clinic for autism and progresses an ethical perspective that designates autism as a legitimate *mode of being* rather than a pathology. In the contemporary discourse of autism research, where clinical frameworks that disregard the notion of the subject predominate, this book comes to fill a crucial gap. It introduces—implementing the heuristic richness of

the Lacanian approach to autism—a new notion of autistic subjectivity and the clinic of autism that has not yet become very accessible to the English-speaking reader.

* * *

This book will be divided into three major parts composed of eight chapters. Part I of this book will establish the perspective through which autism will be elaborated in this book. Chapter 1 will provide a glimpse into the world of autism research. It will begin by presenting a general description of autism in terms borrowed from its elaboration as an object of scientific research. This description will be contrasted with the designation of autism as a *mode of being* progressed by many high-functioning autistic individuals and autism advocates. The perspective through which autism will be designated in this book will then be situated in the intersection between the *realist* scientific approach and *normative* approach. This perspective, rooted in the psychoanalysis of Sigmund Freud and Jacques Lacan, will designate autism as a singular subjective structure that is not reducible to the major structures of subjectivity elaborated in psychoanalysis so far: neurosis, perversion, and psychosis. Chapter 2 will provide conceptual support for the general methodology adopted in this book. It will explicate the conceptual roots of the notion of *constitutive exclusion* developed in relation to neurosis, psychosis, and autism. In this chapter, Freud's account of negation will be associated with the constitutive function of repression and the structure of the subject in psychoanalysis. Relying on Freud's paper "Negation" (1925), this chapter will demonstrate how a psychic mechanism of *constitutive exclusion* is necessarily situated at the origin of all subjective structures accounted for in psychoanalysis. By doing so it will pave the way for the elaboration of a singular autistic mechanism of *constitutive exclusion*—autistic foreclosure.

Part II of this book will go on to elaborate the structure and internal functioning of two major psychic mechanisms of *constitutive exclusion* accounted for by Freud and Lacan—*neurotic repression* and *psychotic foreclosure*. It will do so due to the fact that the elaboration of the mechanism of autistic foreclosure is rooted in the specification of both these

mechanisms. This part will be divided into two chapters. Chapter 3 will be devoted to the elaboration of the mechanism of repression according to Freud and Lacan and its role in the constitution of the neurotic subjective structure. It will mostly aim to provide a clear structural distinction between two mechanisms of repression: a primal *constitutive* repression and a secondary repression; that is, repression as *defense*. This distinction will be crucial for the further elaboration of psychotic foreclosure in relation to primal repression in the following chapter. Chapter 4 will be devoted to the elaboration of the mechanism of psychotic foreclosure according to Freud and Lacan and its role in the constitution of the psychotic subjective structure. The similarities and differences in the functioning of neurotic repression and psychotic foreclosure will set the ground for the elaboration of autistic foreclosure in the following chapters.

Part III of this book will present an explicit and thorough account of the structure and internal functioning of autistic foreclosure. This part will be divided into three major chapters. Chapter 5 will account for the functioning of autistic foreclosure on the basis of the model of repression provided by Freud and Lacan. It is through the explication of the different levels internal to the functioning of primal repression that autistic foreclosure will be situated on a level preceding that of the functioning of psychotic foreclosure: in comparison to psychotic foreclosure that is situated in opposition to *Bejahung*, autistic foreclosure will be situated in opposition to *Ausstoßung*. Chapter 6 will present three different frameworks through which the psychic object that is radically excluded in autistic foreclosure can be accounted for. These will include an account of the object of autistic foreclosure as the unary trait, as the hole in the topological figure of the torus, and as the voice—the object of the invocatory drive. In these three sections, an exclusive interpretation as to the nature of the object of autistic foreclosure will be presented as well as provided with further conceptual support, interpretation, and critique. The conclusions reached in Chaps. 5 and 6 will provide the conceptual foundation for the elaboration of the unique mode of linguistic functionality enabled by autistic foreclosure in the next chapter. Chapter 7 will account for the consequences of the functioning of autistic foreclosure on the structuring of autistic linguistic functionality. Firstly, it will account for

the lack of access to the symbolic order in autism, described by many contemporary psychoanalysts in terms of the "lack of the Other." Following this section, the chapter will go on to contend that autistic subjects are still considered to be subjects of language but base their linguistic functionality on the logic and laws of the "sign" and not of the "signifier." This exact mode of linguistic functionality will be elaborated and will form the basis for the articulation of a model explicating the varying modalities in the construction of the supplementary rim in autism. This model will be posed as an alternative framework for the development of the clinic of autism. The conclusions reached in this chapter, alongside the conclusions reached in previous chapters, will provide strong support for the designation of autism as a singular subjective structure in Chap. 8. This chapter will summarize all the conclusions reached in the previous chapters and substantiate the hypothesis that autism is a singular subjective structure. It will include a section that highlights the significance of these conclusions in the field of autism research. Finally, it will disclose several prospects for further research in the fields of psychoanalysis as well as empirical psychology.

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* Translated from French by Leon S. Brenner.

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Cover artwork by Joshua Mößmer

About the Book

This book investigates the notion of autistic subjectivity. It aims to designate autism as a singular *mode of being* that is fundamentally linked to one's identity and basic practices of existence; this designation is posed as an alternative to its general determination as a mental or physical disorder. This alternative perspective on autism finds its origin in the psychoanalytic understanding of the *subject* according to Sigmund Freud and Jacques Lacan. On the basis of this psychoanalytic framework, autism is associated with what Freud defines as a mental structure and Lacan as a subjective structure. Accordingly, the unique features of the autistic subjective structure are investigated and conceptually developed. These features are compared to those of the neurotic and the psychotic subjective structures in order to provide sufficient evidence that attests to the singularity of the autistic subjective structure. This singularization of autism finds its point of departure in the notion of a unique *constitutive exclusion* at the origin of autism. The development of this notion hinges on the psychoanalytic position according to which the defining characteristics of a subjective structure are determined by a constitutive psychic mechanism of exclusion. Accordingly, the lion's share of the work in this book is invested in the structural elaboration of the constitutive psychic mechanism at the origin of autism—*autistic foreclosure*; this elaboration entails its distinction from two constitutive psychic mechanisms at the origin of

neurosis and psychosis—repression (*Verdrängung*) and foreclosure (*Verwerfung*), respectively. In order to substantiate the singularity of autistic foreclosure, three decisive factors of its functioning are investigated: (1) its position in the model of repression presented by Freud, (2) the exact nature of its object of exclusion, and (3) the unique mode of linguistic functionality it enables. By distinguishing autistic foreclosure in this way, its singularity as well as that of the autistic subjective structure is substantiated; therefore, autism is designated as a singular subjective structure—irreducible to any of the three major subjective structures elaborated by Freud and Lacan. This warrants the postulation of a new clinical approach to autism offered at the conclusion of this book based on the notion of the "autistic linguistic spectrum."