Review: Autistic Company

By Damian E M Milton

In this book, Ruud Hendriks explores how autistic and non-autistic people navigate a shared existence, and attempts to rethink the language in which such interactions are framed. Interactions of this nature exist, despite as Hendriks suggests of the lack of familiarity in ways in which non-autistic people attune to one another. Hendriks therefore examines the alternative ways that such interactions can emerge, and considers how one can talk about the unusual forms of interaction that take place. In so doing, Hendriks pursues an important line of enquiry within the field of autism studies, in terms of how to build interactions and relationships with neurodiverse populations.

Hendriks approaches this topic through his background in anthropology and philosophy, and through his experiences of having been a care worker for autistic people in a group home. In his review of literature on the topic, Hendriks surveys a plethora of scientific texts as well as examining works of literary criticism in the portrayal of autistic people. Although his methodology is not made fully explicit, he also reflects on ethnographic studies regarding his experience of working as a care worker and on the autobiographical work of autistic authors.

Hendriks suggests that his study was not about the lived experience of autistic people, but the forms of living that autistic and non-autistic people establish together. Without embedding oneself in autistic cultures however, other than a care home for those with additional severe learning difficulties, Hendriks produces a highly one-sided normative account of such a shared existence, furthering the ‘othering’ of autistic people within the narrative. Such difficulties highlight issues within the production of knowledge more generally regarding insider/outsider perspectives, yet especially when such insider knowledge pertains to differing dispositional perceptions of social life.
Hendriks suggests that the metaphors commonly used to describe autistic people underestimate commonalities, and indicates such dispositional differences are not irreconcilable extremes, yet non-autistic misperceptions of autistic subjectivity are framed as being unable to act in a machine-like manner. With the reason for autistic people being outsiders in society formulated as a lack of insight in context related meaning.

Hendriks concludes that a shared existence is dependent on the widening of companionship to include physical as well as mental connections. This is a somewhat fair assertion, yet unfortunately falls back into the dualistic pitfall Hendriks is attempting to escape. Hendriks suggests that a stimulus-free and controlling environment to be potentially the only way to help autistic people connect with others, and reifies behaviourist modification techniques to stimulate ‘normal development’ and reduce ‘autistic behaviour’, techniques that again are highly criticised by autistic self-advocates. Hendriks suggests that ‘leaving autistic people alone’ will lead to them becoming lost in the world. One would not recommend neglect for any child, yet building reciprocity needs mutuality of understanding and not one-sided imposition as often advocated by Hendriks.

Hendriks attempts to draw inspiration from literary fiction and philosophical work in order to try and move beyond mentalist accounts of autism, yet only does so after a largely uncritical appraisal of scientific literature. His foray into literary criticism also does little to shed light on the topic at hand. In his critique of scientific literature regarding autism, Hendriks unfortunately reifies perceptions of what autistic people ‘lack’, including assertions that have long been rejected or contested by autistic authors and commentators. For instance, Hendriks suggests that a ‘thing-like’ metaphor refers to the ‘real experiences’ of people who have dealings with autistic people. This assertion is highly stigmatising, pathologising, and unsubstantiated with evidence.

Although giving a thorough review of historical literature, there is a distinct lack of more recent research included, particularly regarding the expansion of autistic self-advocacy organisations. Occasionally the text is self-contradictory, suggesting at one point that it is unlikely that people ever ‘grow out’ of their autism and then later pronouncing that autistic people who are able to communicate and write autobiographies as having ‘outgrown’ their autism, a dangerous and inaccurate depiction of what it is to be autistic.

Hendriks asks how to prevent a non-autistic interpretation from ‘gaining the upper hand after all’. A good place to start would have been to co-research and co-write such a piece with a verbal autistic writer or scholar. In future, if interactional expertise is to be gained, such normative assumptions and impositions of non-autistic meanings need to be deconstructed. Instead, the examination of autistic autobiographies ends up being an exercise in ‘quote-mining’ to fit the claims being made, claims that are often critiqued by some of the authors cited. The understanding shown is thus highly limited and works against the activist rallying cry of ‘nothing about us, without us’ and is not attuned to the anti-normative stance of critical disability studies, despite suggesting that this is where the work is situated. Simply stated, if Hendriks’ conceptualisations were to be valid, the social awareness needed for this autistic writer to compose this review would not be possible.