Autism@Aarhus & ELPP

Autum 2013 Workshop

Autism and Well-being

Date: Friday, 11 October 2013, 9:00 - 16:00

Location: Aarhus University, Building 2110, Room 124
Niels Juels Gade 84, 8200 Aarhus N

Sponsors: autism@aarhus/MindLab, Interacting Minds, and Research Unit in Ethics, Legal, and Political Philosophy (Philosophy and Intellectual History, Culture and Society Aarhus University).

Speakers: Richard Ashcroft (Queen Mary, University of London);
Eva Billstedt (Gillberg Neuropsychiatry Centre, U. of Gothenburg);
Ingrid Robeyns, (Erasmus University, Rotterdam);
Raffaele Rodogno (Aarhus University)
A panel of young autistic adults from the Århus area

Theme: Despite the exploding amount of research on well-being and on autism taken separately, there is surprisingly little research on autism and well-being taken together, that is, on questions concerning the structure and substance of well-being for autistic individuals. How do we measure how well an autistic life is going? What methods can and should we employ in order to measure the well-being of individuals on the spectrum who are not in a position to answer subjective well-being questionnaires? Are objective measures the only answer? And whose “objective” measures should it be, the neurotypicals’ or the autistics’? How do we establish the latter?

Being clear about these questions is a necessary step towards the assessment of many interventions at the personal, the family, and the public levels. This workshop aims to answer questions such as these from the point of view of philosophy, psychology, and the social sciences and will include discussion with a panel of young autistic adults.

Organizer: Raffaele Rodogno (filrr@hum.au.dk)

Participation: Send an email if you wish to join the morning session, the afternoon session, or both.
Programme:

9:00-9:45  Ingrid Robeyns “Conceptualising the Well-Being of People with Autism”

9:45-10:30  Eva Billstedt: TBA

10:30-11:00  Break

11:00-11:45  Richard Ashcroft: “Autism and the Goals of Education”

11:45-12:30  Raffaele Rodogno: “Well-Being, Autism, and the Data Problem”

12:30-13:30  Break

13:30-16:00  Autism@Aarhus Autumn 2013 Workshop: Autism and Well-Being: a discussion with the stakeholders

13:30-13:50  A brief introduction to the study of well-being

13:50-14:30  The panel discusses well-being

14:30-15:00  Break

15:00-16:00  Concrete cases and questions about well-being discussed with members of the panel and audience
ABSTRACTS

**Autism and the Goals of Education**
Richard Ashcroft

In this paper I wish to reflect on what we are trying to achieve in the education of young people with autism. One classical debate concerns inclusion and exclusion: how far should people with "learning disability" be included in "mainstream" education, for their own good and the good of others, and how far should they be directed rather at "special education" which can address their "special educational needs". The latter concept largely focusses on deficits and the potential disruption caused to the learning of others. Inclusion, on the other hand, focusses on how to bring the learner with "special educational needs" within mainstream society and to raise their performance in central educational tasks to within the normal range, however that is defined within the educational system in question. However, it is far from clear that the inclusion/exclusion debate addresses another, equally important question: what is education for? In particular, what is the education of an autistic young person for? What goals is it trying to achieve? One problem which is particularly challenging is how we unsettle the idea that autism is a learning disability - where many autistic people can do certain things extremely well. Another is how far we can or should consider autism as a social disability, where certain kinds of social interaction are difficult, even painful, as well as hard to perform to society's more general norms. How do we justify taking education in social norms as a central goal of education, especially when such education is itself painful and distressful and unnatural to the autistic young person? I cannot hope to answer all these questions, but I do want to try to tease them out with a little more clarity than currently we are managing to do.

**Aspects of Quality of Life in Adults Diagnosed with Autism in Childhood**
Eva Billstedt

**Conceptualising the Well-being of People with Autism**
Ingrid Robeyns

For centuries, philosophers have provided accounts of well-being and argued about the best conceptualization of well-being. Should well-being (or one’s quality of life) be understood as flourishing, or rather as mental states, such as happiness? Yet the reader interested in understanding the well-being of people with autism will not find much directly helpful work in the philosophy of well-being. There is some empirical research by autism researchers (psychologists, psychiatrists, and neuroscientists) on the quality of life of people with autism, yet hardly any of this is based on sound philosophical analysis. This paper tries to make some headway in developing an account of well-being for people with autism. The first task this requires is to describe what makes people with autism different from people without autism – which is much less straightforward then one might expect. I will use a combination of
egodocuments, narratives and scientific empirical literature to give an account of what the salient aspects are of the well-being of people with autism. This account will then be mapped onto the existing philosophical literature on well-being, to ask which, if any, existing accounts of well-being is best suited to account for the well-being of people with autism, and what, if any, modifications to that account are needed.

Well-Being, Autism, and the Data Problem
Raffaele Rodogno

Theories of well-being are in the business of systematizing pre-theoretical claims about well-being. These claims constitute in some sense the data or phenomenon to be explained and systematized. We do want our theories of well-being to account, for example, for claims such as these: (i) pain is bad for those who feel it; (ii) a life filled with suffering and nothing else is not good for the person whose life it is and may plausibly be considered by her as a life not worth living; (iii) achieving one’s important or central aims is good for one; (iv) having good friends is good for one; and so on and so forth. In turn, these claims involve specific and culturally driven conceptions of, say, what friendship amounts to, or what kinds of aims can in principle qualify as “central” or “important”. The point of this article is to show that systematizing this type of data is likely to give rise to theories of well-being that are inappropriate for autistic subjects. When theorizing about the well-being of special populations, the very initial data with which one begins must be sensitive to the population to which the theory is ultimately supposed to apply. Failing to take this (rather trivial) theoretical requirement into account generates the data problem. In conclusion, I discuss what I take must be the epistemological tools at our disposal to build population-sensitive data for, both, cognitively high-functioning and low-functioning autistic individuals.