

ATTACK OF THE SYSTEMIZERS

Autism has bedeviled psychiatric classifiers for decades because it is not a single, discrete disease. It's usually described as a "spectrum" disorder because people can be more or less autistic, and it's not clear where to draw the line between those who have a serious mental illness and those who are just not very good at reading other people. At the extreme end of the spectrum, autistic people are "mind-blind."¹² They are missing the social-cognitive software that the rest of us use to guess the intentions and desires of other people.

According to one of the leading autism researchers, Simon Baron-Cohen, there are in fact two spectra, two dimensions on which we can place each person: empathizing and systemizing. Empathizing is "the drive to identify another person's emotions and thoughts, and to respond to these with an appropriate emotion."¹³ If you prefer fiction to nonfiction, or if you often enjoy conversations about people you don't know, you are probably above average on empathizing. Systemizing is "the drive to analyse the variables in a system, to derive the underlying rules that govern the behaviour of the system."¹⁴ If you are good at reading maps and instruction manuals, or if you enjoy figuring out how machines work, you are probably above average on systemizing.

If we cross these two traits, we get a two-dimensional space (see figure 6.1), and each person can be placed at a particular spot in that space. Baron-Cohen has shown that autism is what you get when genes and prenatal factors combine to produce a brain that is exceptionally low on empathizing and exceptionally high on systemizing. Autism, including Asperger's syndrome (a subtype of high-functioning autism), is better thought of as a region of personality-space—the lower right corner of the lower right quadrant—than as a discrete

disease.¹⁵ The two leading ethical theories in Western philosophy were founded by men who were as high as could be on systemizing, and were rather low on empathizing.

BENTHAM AND THE UTILITARIAN GRILL

Jeremy Bentham was born in England in 1748. He went to Oxford at the age of twelve, trained as a lawyer, and devoted his career to reforming the mess of contradictory and often pointless rules and punishments that had accreted over many centuries to constitute English law. His most important work was titled *Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation*. In it he proposed that a single principle should govern all reforms, all laws, and even all human actions: the *principle of utility*, which he defined as "the principle which approves

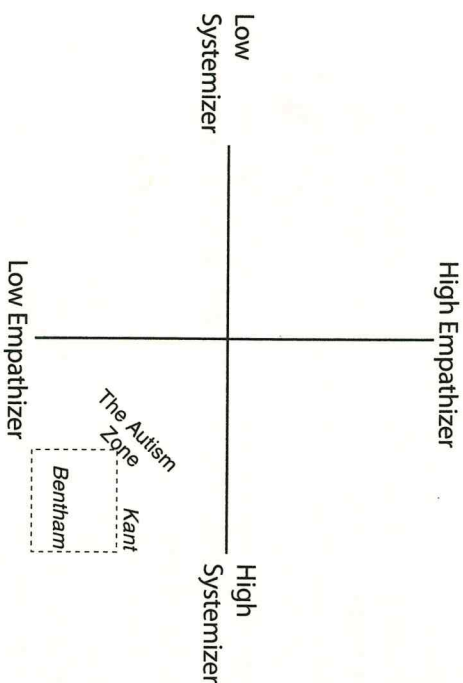


FIGURE 6.1. Two dimensions of cognitive style. People with autism are very high on systemizing and very low on empathizing. So were some important moral philosophers. (Adapted from Baron-Cohen 2009.)