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Note from the Editors: Autism and Neurodiversity

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Note from the Editors: Autism and Neurodiversity

“The promise of the country,” President-elect Biden said in his long-awaited acceptance speech, should be “real for everybody—no matter their race, their ethnicity, their faith, their identity, or their disability.” On a night filled with firsts, it seemed fitting that the incoming President should include the disability community in his vision for America—an America that would regard individuals with disabilities as full citizens, protecting their civil rights as it would for Muslim, transgender, and black and brown Americans. Biden’s advocacy for people with disabilities felt all the weightier after four years of Donald Trump, whose policies actively discriminated against them, and whose repugnant mockery of Serge Kovalski, the *New York Times* reporter with arthrogryposis, remains seared in memory. At the same time, Biden’s speech signaled the growing political power of the disabled community, an enormous constituency of over 50 million Americans. While their politics of disability are not monolithic, many united around the election, using social media channels (e.g., #cripthevote) to turn out the vote.

Political empowerment was also the primary goal of the neurodiversity movement sparked by Judy Singer and others in the late 1990s. As Singer (2016) recalls, “I was dreaming of a grand new social movement for neurologically marginalized groups in the mold of feminist, gay liberation, or disability movements” (p.19). The central objective of the movement, for Singer, was to establish that neurological difference was a normal and necessary part of human variation, much as biodiversity is normal and necessary to an ecosystem. By extension of the analogy, human society should be considered a neurological habitat—and if it does not support a neurodiverse population, then society must adapt.

The need for society to adapt is a recurring theme in this third issue of *Ought: The Journal of Autistic Culture*. The autistic scholar Peter Smagorinsky argues that our schools—a critical part of our social ecosystem—are inherently and deeply ableist, reinforcing and rewarding neurotypical norms and behaviors. Alexa Baird, an autistic high school English teacher, explains how she has negotiated her own disabled identity within an educational space that seeks to exclude divergent minds and bodies. Special education

teacher and professor Suzanne J. Gikas imagines what school must be like for an autistic child. And Morénike Giwa Onaiwu, an autistic scholar of color, convincingly argues that the neurodiverse community itself has still not reckoned with people of color within its own ranks, even decades after the movement began.

The rise of the neurodiversity movement was kindled by the two developments in the early 1990s: the commercial success of the internet and the emergence of a “new” kind of autism—Asperger syndrome. The inclusion of Asperger syndrome in the DSM-4 gave many autistic individuals a vocabulary for discussing their disability, and early listservs and Usenet forums gave them a platform. Asperger’s life and work are thus inextricably tied to autistic advocacy and self-determination, but his reputation has been challenged by recent archival research that convincingly shows his complicity in Nazi euthanasia programs. The most significant examination of Asperger comes in Edith Sheffer’s *Asperger’s Children* (2018), which is reviewed in this issue by the autistic cultural critic Donald Brackett.

This issue also includes several creative works that address the theme of neurodiversity. In the film *S/pace*, a collaboration between Estée Klar and her non-verbal son, Adam Wolfond, we see Adam using movement, language, and objects to communicate and to relate to his surrounding world. Wolfond also provides two poems in the issue. Finally, *Ought’s* Visual Arts Editor Pernille Fraser offers a short film of her three-dimensional installation *Beyond the Bell Curve*. Fraser’s artist’s statement provides a fitting conclusion to this brief introduction: “This piece,” she writes, “invites the infinite constellations and variables of our minds back into view.” With this issue, we hope that *Ought* extends the same invitation to its readers.

—Robert Rozema and Chris Bass

References

Singer, J. (2016). *NeuroDiversity: The birth of an idea*. Self-published.