

Change Your Mind

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My brain is not like your brain. This becomes more true if, unlike me, you are not afflicted by chronic depression. It becomes more true if you are a child. It also becomes more true if you are on the autistic spectrum. But even if you do not suffer from chronic depression, or if you are a child, or on the autistic spectrum, that does not make your brain like others who share those differences from me. You might be right or left-handed, you might possess some other chemical difference that gives you mood swings, or causes you to hear or see things others don't, or any other number of effects. Hell, maybe someday some heretofore unknown sentience will be consuming these words with the half-interest of an archaeologist who knows how wrong we all are about so many things, but still wants to know in just what way we were all wrong.

Autism, though, is not a single difference. That's the whole reason there's a spectrum. Autism manifests in many different ways, and can be subtle enough to never be diagnosed, or something that is much harder to miss. Even within the autistic spectrum, there are such great differences that it can be hard for one person to even understand what is going through the mind of another.

All of this is why the concept of neurodiversity needs to exist. Because we all have to acknowledge these differences, and it's important to know just how different one human mind can be from another. And it is also important that we not fall into a hierarchical mode of thinking about minds; the longstanding approach that has kept countless people locked away because no one knew how to reach them through their schizophrenia, or their manic-depression, or any other thing that made their mind different. Because different is not worse, it's just different.

But the current movement towards this egalitarian approach has some problematic elements that really cannot be ignored. Some of it is the usual – opportunistic elements that take advantage of the noble core, the occasional focus on particular language over nuanced understanding, and a few folks here and there who just don't get it but can hum the right tune – but some is deeper and more concerning. And from what I've observed, one problem stands above the rest.

Neurodiversity should not stand in the way of people taking agency over their own minds.

At the very core of transhumanism is this: we should all have full control over ourselves. But if that agency doesn't extend to our minds, then it is incomplete. We all must have the ability and the choice to think however we so choose. And that doesn't just mean having our own thoughts and opinions. It must include our modes of thinking, our hardware and our software. To advocate anything less is a failure of this core value.

And so, we run into the issue that I have with a number of folks talking about neurodiversity. They have gone from demanding that people of all braintypes be treated with respect and decency, to jealously protecting their own particular neurological structures. And if that were the extent of it, that would be acceptable. I'm suspicious of anyone who is 100% OK with their brain all day every day, but fine – it's your brain, do what you want with it.

But some of these folks have such hostility to the idea of their minds being changed that they take umbrage at other people who express a desire to change their own. And that, I cannot abide. Imagine if there were a contingent of clinically depressed people standing in the way of research that could alter the brains of depressed people in such a way to make them not depressed, all because they were fighting for the rights of depressed people not to be marginalized. I don't know about you, but I would be fucking pissed. Well, this is going on right now in regards to research about autism.

Obviously autism is not depression, but the comparison is not meant to be an equivocation. Besides which, I can't speak for autistic people, but I can speak to my personal experience with depression, which is similarly invisible, and happens to have its own stereotypes and misunderstandings to contend with. I can only hope that this comparison is taken in good faith, as an attempt to empathize, by people with autism. (And yes, I am going to alternate my terms, because there's basically no real consensus on which is better and I sure as hell am not going to be the one to crack that particular code... also every person I've met who has been diagnosed as being on the spectrum could not give less of a shit about that particular dilemma.)

Let's talk for a bit about John Elder Robinson. He is by no means the only autistic person who advocates for people with autism. But his particular story happens to involve a possible method for altering a person's brain so that they are no longer autistic. In his case, transcranial magnetic stimulation had an effect on his mind that allowed him to experience a perspective he had previously been unaware of. I won't speak for him, since when the story broke enough people already did that. (Plus you can read all about his experiences in his books and this article <http://well.blogs.nytimes.com/2016/03/18/an-experimental-autism-treatment-cost-me-my-marriage>)

But whatever his personal journey was like, he willingly entered the experimental procedure knowing full well what the intent was. And not once has he denounced that line of research. From everything I know, the man is decidedly pro-science. And this has gotten him a lot of hate. There have been death threats due to his stance on the procedure. People want to kill a man because he believes that autistic people deserve the chance to choose whether or not they remain autistic. People with autism certainly should have the choice to remain autistic, and it is viscerally sickening to hear some parents speak about their children as if being diagnosed with autism is a fate worse than death. But being against the possibility of autistic people (or people who are allistic, I.E. neurotypical) changing themselves is fundamentally not transhuman, and it is a spit in the face of people with autism who might choose to experience life as an allistic person.

The bottom line is this; It's not your fucking choice. You don't get to decide what is right for a marginalized group you are not a part of, and for that matter, being in that group doesn't mean you get to decide what is right for individuals within that group. Not to mention that this sort of mentality is at the festering heart of the disgusting tendency to claim to stand for a marginalized group at the same time as denying a voice to that same group. I'm looking at you, Autism Speaks.

If a blind person wishes to see, don't stand in the way. If a person feels their body doesn't match their gender, let them change. If someone wants an implant to increase their memory,

don't tell them to get a fucking notepad. And if someone decides they no longer want their mind to function in a particular way, and you say "No, you cant!" then you're just an asshole, plain and simple. Let science help everyone to change their minds all they want. Because one day, when we've finally won against the enemies of birth control and cyborgs and bodyhackers and transgender folk, that is going to be the next boundary that we, as transhumanists, must break through.

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