

## The Boon (e) of the Asperger Language: A Character Review

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### ABSTRACT

Theory of Mind is the ability to attribute different mental states like beliefs, desires, interests, pretence, to oneself and others. It also helps one to understand that others have beliefs, knowledge, interests which are completely different from one's own. In a cyclical way Theory of Mind depends a lot on being able to communicate with others as it also develops with experience. Its absence tends to affect development of empathy, negatively. One of the main problems of Autism Spectrum Disorder is the lack of Theory of Mind. Even with well-developed language skills and comparatively higher level of intelligence, children having Asperger's syndrome have poor Theory of Mind which hampers their basic social relationships, forcing them to coop within their familiar surroundings. The present work is an attempt to understand how mind blindness contributes to the social impairments of an Asperger's child as depicted in the book "The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Nighttime" by Mark Haddon. This novel portrays the life of a 15 year old savant child, Christopher Boone, who has problems in understanding the social relationships and metaphorical languages of other people because of Asperger's syndrome. This paper delineates the features of mindreading and mind blindness as narrated in the first person writing of the book with the method of literary analysis to help understand the social, behavioural and relational impairments caused by such disabilities.

**Key Words:** autism spectrum disorder, theory of mind, asperger's syndrome

### Introduction

Human beings are social animals requiring the need to live in a group. Living in groups has been adapted by humans from the evolutionary ladder since prehistoric times to facilitate survival. We have picked up this lifestyle from the primates. But there are certain distinct differences between primates and humans amongst which language, planning for the future, ability to make complex inferences, etc. helps humans specifically in social cognition and interaction.

The capacity of human beings for executive control over cognition, for meta-representation, and for recursion enables not only complex social cognition, but also many other uniquely human abilities like use of symbolic language, syntax, planning for future, and episodic memory (Suddendorf, 1999; Corballis, 2003). Along with the capacity to communicate and express one's desires and internal thoughts, the ability to understand another person's speech, actions and thought are equally important for successful interaction as a part

of such social cognition. Such an ability to understand other people's mental states is termed as Theory of Mind. People interpret other's behaviour and make inferences about it in terms of their mental states which consist of emotions, desires, goals, intentions, attention, knowledge, and beliefs. Therefore, Theory of Mind encompasses a variety of cognitive processes and takes several years to unfold in human development (Baron-Cohen, 1995; Wellman & Liu et al, 2004).

Premack and Woodruffs (1978) defined the term as a system of inferences that can be used to predict behavior by attributing mental states to individuals. The children suffering from Asperger's syndrome have poor Theory of Mind or a lack of it because of which their social relationships and emotional communication remains underdeveloped. Asperger's syndrome is an Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) that is characterized by significant difficulties in social interaction and non-verbal communication, along with restricted and repetitive patterns of

behavior and interests but having a higher cognitive and linguistic ability when compared to other ASDs.

#### Conceptual Frame of the Present Work

This paper is an attempt to delineate the aspects of mind blindness that might be working in the cognitive faculties of a child suffering from Asperger's syndrome. Christopher Boone, the protagonist of the book titled "The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Nighttime", who suffers from Asperger's, has been chosen as a suitable subject to understand how the mind of such a child works. The paper also attempts to show the behavioural and social disturbances that such a child might experience which creates problems for the child and his family. This novel has been chosen for such literary analysis because of unique language. Written by an English novelist, Mark Haddon in the first person narrative, the book explores how a child with Asperger's might perceive his surroundings. Haddon himself had previously worked with children suffering from Autism.

#### Method

Taking a qualitative approach the thought pattern of Christopher Boone has been analyzed along with his behaviour and his idiosyncrasies. Literary analysis has been employed to delineate the features of TOM that is either present (or not) in the characteristics and thought processes of the protagonist. The structural components of TOM, namely intention, goals, attentional gaze, pretence, desire and knowledge, and language, have been described as they happen in the normal development of a child and they have also been used to show how a child having Asperger's might lack in these areas. A parallel has been drawn with Christopher's narratives of his own daily life and activities.

#### Discussion

The novel revolves around 15 year old Christopher John Francis Boone, who lives with his father in Swindon. He suffers from Asperger's syndrome, though this has never been mentioned specifically in the novel but that can be inferred from

the narrative, the fact that Christopher attends a special school and other references which would be discussed later in the paper. Christopher has been led to believe, by his father, that his mother died of a heart attack. He has a pet rat named Toby. Other than his father, Christopher feels comfortable only with Siobhan who is his special educator in school. After discovering his neighbour, Mrs. Shears' dog, Wellington murdered by a garden fork, Christopher begins to investigate the murder. He gets into trouble with the police, rebuked by Mrs. Shears, and cautioned by his father because of this investigation, but remains persistent in pursuing the killer. In the course of this he discovers certain letters written to him by his mother which were dated after her supposed death. His father confesses that his mother had left them for Mr. Shear and hence lied to Christopher because of his disdain for her. Along with this he also confesses to killing Wellington because of his anger with Mrs. Shears. Christopher starts feeling scared of his father and runs away to his mother in London. During this journey too, he tries to overcome his fears. The story ends optimistically when Christopher successfully completes his Maths A level examinations and reunited with his mother and slowly begins to accommodate his father into their lives.

Even before realizing that this novel has certain uniqueness in the way it had been presented the reader will notice the numbering of chapters. All the chapters have been numbered in prime numbers as they are Christopher's favourite kind of numbers. By the 19th chapter he mentions that "prime numbers are like life as because they are logical but the rules can never be worked out even if one spends all the time thinking about them."

#### Significance of Numbers

Christopher has a special attachment with numbers. For him the world is numbers and he uses them to make inferences of his surroundings. He describes mostly everything from a numerical view point - "It was 7 minutes after midnight."; "I have been hugging the dog for 4 minutes ..."; "I put the dog down on the lawn and moved back 2 meters"; "I turned my

computer on and played 76 games of Minesweeper and did the Expert version in 102 seconds, which was only 3 seconds off my best time which was 99 seconds." Many more such numerical descriptions help the reader understand the precision with which Christopher notices and stores such information. But another more important factor that can be observed here is that he even talks of his emotions through such numerical descriptions. He mentions the duration through which he held Wellington, after he was killed. He used to like this dog as he could relate to him and hence felt sad to see him murdered. Whereas individuals who do not suffer from Asperger would be able to express their sadness and shock through emotional reactions, Christopher just hugs him and eventually starts looking for the perpetrator of such a heinous act. Christopher believed that killing a dog to be as much punishable by law as is killing a human. The fact that he actually keeps digging through clues with the help of logical deduction shows his emotional involvement with the animal. He mentions the time he required to finish the expert level of that he receives from challenging himself and competing against himself to feel good and confident about his abilities. But there is an absence of a sense of pride when he describes such achievements. Even when he becomes the first person from his school to receive an A Grade in his A level Maths examination, he shows no arrogance or even happiness. This, too, remains as an information that he provides for the reader. This, too, becomes just a fact for the reader. The sense of achievement and the feeling of its consequential pride are somewhere lost with children suffering from Asperger's. Christopher only remarks how this achievement is going to help him become an astronaut.

Numbers have another implication in his life. He always thinks of solving difficult calculations in his mind whenever he feels scared or is having a panic attack. When his father confessed that he killed Wellington he couldn't trust his father to not kill him too. So he was waiting to get out of the house and go somewhere safe but as his father was awake and

would be able to see him escape he tried to pass the time by squaring 2 but could only reach till 215 (precisely 32,768) before he starts to groan. On his way to his mother's in London he was caught by a police officer on the train who planned to hand Christopher over to his father once they reached their destination. Feeling helpless, Christopher tried to find solace in solving complex equations like:

$$X = \frac{-b \pm \sqrt{(b^2 - ac)}}{2a}$$

He later escaped from the vigilance of the policeman when he went to the toilet and saw a luggage shelf where he proceeded to hide himself just like he did in his own cupboard when he felt scared at home. He solved some more equations after calming himself down:

$$0 = 437x^2 + 103x + 11.$$

#### Intentional Actions and Goals

Like usual development of Infants of understanding and ability to distinguish intentional actions by the age of 5 and 9 months and ability to classification of actions (Woodward, 1999), by 15 months (Csibra et al., 2003) it is extremely difficult for Christopher to understand intentions and goals of other humans; this in turn hampers his perspective-taking attitude. When he sees that Mrs. Shears screams seeing her dead and bloody dog instead of picking it up like he did, he thinks that she did this to avoid being dirty. He cannot decipher from the scream that Mrs. Shears was in shock and in pain to see her dog brutally murdered. He doesn't realize that Mrs. Shears had a different emotional response from him for the same unfortunate incident. This is a very genuine problem of children suffering from ASD. They do not realize that other's mental states and the emotional expression of such states might be completely different from theirs. This could be because of their insufficient knowledge about mental state terms. The less they know about different emotional states and their recognition the lesser chance of attributing it to others. Research has shown

that when individuals having ASD described people's behaviour they used fewer mental terms in their narration, which suggests a lower tendency to represent interactions in mentalistic terms (Begeer et al., 2010).

When the policeman interrogates him regarding Wellington's death he feels confused and agitated because he cannot connect the information that is there in his mind with the questions being asked rapidly by the policeman. He mentions here specifically that his mind is like a machine that gets stuck due to over load of information. Other individuals can get agitated for the same reasons but the distinction is that they can express that agitation in ways understandable by another person, precisely something that Christopher cannot. Being a child with Asperger's, Christopher rolls back onto the lawn, presses his forehead on the ground and starts groaning to not hear outside noise and tried to feel safe. This is his way of asking the police officer to give him respite which is not understood by the police officer who then attempts to grab him and lift him up after which Christopher hits the man. Christopher doesn't realize the man's intention to make him stop groaning. He also does not realize that, having been found hugging the murdered dog, he was now himself a suspect. None of this becomes clear to Christopher even later in his life because he could not take the policeman's perspective and therefore try to figure out what might be going on in the man's mind. Such examples are present throughout the novel. When Mrs. Alexander, an old friendly neighbour asks him to have tea and biscuits as a welcoming gesture he runs away from her house without waiting to say good bye because he has always been taught in school to be careful of strangers. He could not perceive her offering to be a friendly gesture because he could not decipher Mrs. Alexander's intentions.

#### **Gaze Direction and Physical Proximity**

Unlike usual development of gaze direction and monitoring (between 1 -2 yrs.), (Mossler, Marvin, & Greenberg, 1976; Liben, 1978; Flavell et al., 1981), Christopher He, even at his age 15, does not engage

in gazing into another person's eyes and usually feels uncomfortable about this. In fact Christopher doesn't like any kind of physical proximity. He does not hug anyone other than animals. This is because he identifies with animals and feels comfortable around them. When he reaches London and waits outside his mother's house, on being discovered by his mother she hugs him spontaneously but he starts groaning because he dislikes being touched by even a loved one. To avoid such complexities Christopher and his parents had previously decided on a symbolic way of showing love to each other where they spread their fingers as a fan and touch each other's fingertips to express love.

#### **Pretence and Lying**

Pretence is another aspect that eludes Christopher, which normally develops at 1.5yrs to 2 years of age. Leslie (1987) strongly claimed that to understand and involve in pretence the child has to understand about representing his own and other's mental state. Even though Christopher mentions once that he enjoys looking at the night sky to observe the milky way and the billions of stars to contemplate about them and pretend as if he is the only person in this world, but in general pretence that is required to fantasize and imagine and even lie in times of need is difficult for him. When Siobhan asks him to write something that other people can relate to he chooses to write about his real experiences with this murder mystery because he cannot imagine what people other than him might relate to. He also mentions that he doesn't like novels because they are not real and they are figments of someone else's imagination, which he cannot enjoy indulging in. That is why he has more affinity to watching shows on the television or videos that give factual information with moving images as watching these gives him respite from imagining things that might or might not exist.

He has difficulty in lying for this very reason. First of all he does not understand the purpose of lying to be either a defence or save another person from being emotionally hurt. According to him lying is when one says something has happened but actually which

didn't happen. Because he is a very logical individual he falls in the trap of logical loopholes while forming a lie. In his mind, because there is only one truth and an infinite number of untruths, it is impossible to choose which untruth to actually use while lying. Needless to say, he eventually fails to lie.

### Desires and Knowledge

In between 2 and 3 years of age children begin to understand that desires and knowledge are private attributes which cannot be observed directly and such knowledge may not be accurate and such desires may not be realistic. Christopher, however, cannot perceive why the police would not be much interested to find out Wellington's killer. For Christopher it is important because that dog is almost like a human for him and hence deserves as much justice as a man deserves. He does not understand that the police might not have the same desire to investigate Wellington's murder as he has. When his father confesses that he killed Wellington out of jealousy (because he thought that Mrs. Shears had feelings for him but discovered that she cares more about Wellington than the Boone family), Christopher becomes scared thinking that his father might kill him too. He never recognizes his father's desire to be loved by Mrs. Shears, his jealousy or his sense of guilt on perpetrating the crime. He feels scared because he identified with Wellington and hence expected the same fate in his case. When his mother hugs him on meeting after a long period of time he gets irritated as usual. He does not express any joy on discovering his mother to be alive whom he believed for many months to be dead. When he discovered the letters from his mother and his father expressed the truth about his mother leaving with Mr. Shear he cannot understand his father's anger, which prompted him to lie about mother's death. He himself doesn't feel exhilaration or any amount of joy on discovering his mother to be alive. It seems that his parents were more like acquaintances for him who took care of him until and unless he could become independent and manage on his own. But even if that was the case, he only allowed his parents to show their love for him

through limited bodily gestures.

### Language

Acquisition of language helps develop the theory of mind because it provides a system for talking and thinking about mental states. Discussion of mental states promotes the development of TOM. In case of Christopher it was mostly from Siobhan that he learned about different mental states and their expressions in people. Siobhan used to draw different facial expressions with smiley faces to help him understand the meaning of each one. But the only ones he could understand were sadness, happiness, and anger. The other expressions got lost somewhere and he couldn't recognize them in other people's voices or intonations or facial expressions. His parents are never shown to use mental state terms to help him understand other's perspectives. He could understand some one was being angry only when that person was shouting. But he failed to recognize anger if someone was being calm but still expressing anger.

Metaphors always confused him: He could understand similes because simile is the actual comparison between two things or phenomenon and hence not a lie. But according to Christopher metaphors are lies because he does not understand why something should be described by a word that means something else. For him a pig is not like a day (Metaphor – 'We had a real pig of a day') and neither do people have skeletons in their cupboard (Metaphor – 'They had a skeleton in their cupboards'). Metaphors are one of the reason he doesn't like people because people use them a lot (another being that people talk through non verbal gestures like frowning and raising eyebrows which means different things at different times). Christopher does not understand that metaphors are used to make the language more ornate and decorative. For him language is used for the purpose of communication only and hence should only deal with that which is absolutely necessary and comprehensible. It is difficult for him to grasp the pragmatic and syntactic meaning of conversation both of which deal with the inner meaning of a statement. Paul Grice (1957) proposed a set of rules

for effective communication. According to him for communication to be successful utterances should be true, clear, and relevant and provide the appropriate amount of information. When an utterance does not appear to conform to these principles, listeners usually assume that there is a hidden meaning to which the utterances do conform. When it is not immediately obvious, listeners try to work out what the speaker intended to communicate. Thus, effective communication relies on bridging the gaps between what is said and what is meant via inferring beliefs and communicative intentions of the speaker. This is bound to be difficult for someone who has difficulty inferring other's mental states. Several researchers found that children with ASD have difficulty understanding jokes, sarcasm or any sort of conversational pragmatics (Happé, 1994; Surian, Baron-Cohen and Van der Lely, 1996)

#### Precision

The precision that he expects in the use of language is also something he follows in other aspects of his life. He needs his instructions to be accurate and precise. When someone asks him to be quiet he needs to know for exactly how long he should remain quiet. While giving his age too he specifically mentions 15 years and three months and two days.

#### Positive Aspects of Asperger's

Along with all the aspects that create troubles for a child suffering from Asperger's, this disability also brings in certain boons. Even though the factor of being exact and excessively precise brings with it a lot of confusion for Christopher's mental faculties, it is this quality itself which helps him to discard unnecessary information while processing his surrounding world and deliver precise facts to his listener which clarifies their questions. Like when he describes how to find out which are the prime numbers he writes, "First, you write down all the positive whole numbers in the world. Then you take away all the numbers that are multiples of two. Then you take away all the numbers that are multiples of three. Then you take away all the numbers that are

multiples of four and five and six and seven and so on. The numbers that are left are the prime numbers." He could have just mentioned that any number that doesn't have any positive divisor other than itself and 1 is a prime number. But he prefers a more precise explanation that provides a clearer understanding. While describing what belongings he was carrying in his pocket he makes a list and also draws a picture of a puzzle piece that was there in his pocket. He mentions that he was carrying £1.47 that was made up of £1 coin, a 20 p coin, two 10p coins, a 5p coin and a 2p coin. This, paints a clear, if slightly too detailed, picture and to his credit, avoids any miscommunication.

Christopher's observation of details and logical thinking helped him to investigate Wellington's murder to certain extent. He delineates, with what he terms "Chain of Reasoning" as to who could have wanted to kill Wellington by asking himself several questions and reaching the conclusion that most probably Mr. Shears killed Wellington as he a) knew the victim and b) disliked Mrs. Shears. Given that he was, at the time, unaware of his father's feelings, this was a rather good sound deduction. He logically makes a chart in his head classifying the safest place to go to get rid of his father and deduces that living with Mrs. Shears, going home, staying in the garden or going to live with one of his uncle won't be safe at all as his father can reach him in all these places. And therefore he considered his mother's house to be the safest. Even though he cannot understand the mental states of another human being, his logical thinking is so precise that he can theorize how an alien might build its spaceship. He mentions that if aliens did exist then they would be different from humans and they might look like big slugs or just be like reflections, etc. and their space ships might look like clouds or made up of dust or leaves. This kind of imagination is only possible for a person having Asperger's syndrome because, in general, humans are more likely to anthropomorphize other beings because they are more emotionally oriented in their imagination.

The difficulty in recognizing his own emotional experiences and thereby missing the same in others

allows him to be more practical. Even though he feels sad about the dog's death he remains logical throughout his investigation of the murder. He does not break down at the news that his father hid his mother's existence from him rather he was more concerned about his life. Because of his reduced emotional involvement with his parents he could accept his mother's leaving them and staying with another man and he could also forgive his father eventually. This was only possible because he had lesser emotional expectation from his parents, which somewhat smoothened his parents life in certain areas.

### Conclusion

It can be concluded from the analysis of this novel that Christopher has impaired social cognition just like other children with Asperger's syndrome. And just like Christopher they cannot understand the intentions of the actions of another person even if that person is a parent. They lack the understanding of the desires and mental states of another individual and also cannot comprehend that these can be completely different from their own. They cannot understand ornate speech or implied meanings of phrases. It becomes difficult for them to interact with other people and hence they avoid human companions. They are more comfortable with animals because it's easier to understand and predict them. They prefer isolation, not because they are lonely or depressed, but because they have a free reign over their thinking process in such a state. Even Christopher understands that being an Astronaut is one of the most suitable professions for him because he is intelligent, logical and can stay apart from people for long periods of time and indeed prefers to do so.

What is most important in case of handling such a child is providing the child with certain amount of space and emotional acceptance of his quirks. One can always give a child suffering from Asperger certain amount of space to be himself. Like Christopher's father who accepts their unconventional way of expressing love for each other, parents of such children would be happier if they can

provide such allowances for their children and not force conventional methods upon them. Language remains an important factor. A child with Asperger's understands and responds best when spoken to in their language of logic, physical gestures and precise instruction. The onus is on us to adopt their perspective to make their life easier.

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