Hej,
Jag hade tänkt presentera en prydlig text men den var så tråkig så ni får läsa den här soppan istället. Ber om ursäkt.
h. Ylva

**Autism and false belief tests**

**False belief tests**

In discussions on philosophy of mind autism often appears as an example of a state where the person lacks a capacity to understand others. Generally the autistic person is, in these studies, described as lacking a theory of mind. This use of a theory of mind is considered as something normal people use in order to understand others. The thought that we understand each other by using a theory of mind shows also in researchers’ conducting so called false-belief tests with autistic persons as well as with children. Originally the theory about false beliefs was put forth by Daniel Dennett (1978)\(^1\). Wimmer and Perner (1983) then put these thoughts into action by building up a real test situation. Since then the tests have been repeated a number of times.

These tests have been made on the one hand to prove that autistic persons lack the mental function of using a theory of mind. The tests have also been made with children in order to describe how children gradually develop an understanding of others. The thought is that the test is the ultimate proof of autistic persons not being aware of other people, as well as the child at a certain age being unable or able to see that other people have an inner mental life consisting of beliefs and intentions. Here is one description of a typical false-belief test:

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\(^1\) "Beliefs about Beliefs" in *Behavior and Brain Sciences* 4: 568-570.

Wimmer and Perner (1983) devised a task known as the false belief task which has become the litmus test for demonstrating that children understand that people act on the basis of their representations of the world. In the false belief task, a child watches as one of two puppets places an object (such as a piece of chocolate) in a distinct location (say, a red box). This puppet then leaves the scene. In the next part of the story, a second puppet takes the object from the red box and places it in a second location (a green box). Finally, the first puppet returns and the child subject is asked “Where will the puppet look for the chocolate?” or “Where will she think her chocolate is?” Wimmer and Perner (1983) found that most 3-year-olds failed the false belief task, incorrectly claiming that the puppet would look where the chocolate really is. These children erred on the task because their theory predicted that people’s beliefs would tend to directly reflect reality, so the person acting in accord with their beliefs would search for the object where it was really located. On the other hand, most 4-year-olds correctly understood that the puppet would hold a false belief, and moreover, would act on the basis of this false belief and not on the basis of the actual situation. (Keenan and Evans p.288, 2009)

The result is that a four year old child generally understands that the puppet will have a false belief while a child of three does not realize this. The idea behind the test is that we all, when we are grown up use a certain “theory of mind” by which we are able to see that other people have an inner mental life. These same tests have also been made in large amounts with autistic children. The thought is that autistic children’s difficulties in completing the false belief tests show that autistic children have an impaired mental function, an impaired “theory of mind”, that
makes them unable to see that other people are “minded”. Robert Gordon writes:

It is well known that autistic children suffer a striking deficit in the capacity for pretend play. In addition they are often said to ‘treat people and objects alike’; they fail to treat others as subjects, as ‘having points of view’ distinct from their own. This failure is confirmed by their performance in prediction tests like the one I have just described. A version of the Wimmer-Perner test was administered to autistic children of ages six to sixteen by a team of psychologists (Baron-Cohen, Leslie, and Frith 1985). Almost all these children gave the wrong answer, the three-year-old’s answer. (Gordon p.70)

Paul Bloom writes in *How children learn the meaning of Words*:

A focus on theory of mind makes some strong predictions about how certain disorders should affect the course of word learning. One central case is that of autism, a developmental disorder that affects about one in a thousand children. It is characterized by a range of deficits, including impairments of socialization, communication, and imagination. One theory is that this cluster of deficits is the product of a delayed, impaired, or nonexistent theory of mind (Baron-Cohen, Leslie & Frith, 1985) This elegantly explains the range of specific problems that autistic children have, including difficulties with understanding false belief, deception, and ignorance, while at the same time accounting for preserved abilities in other domains. [...] One proposal, defended in detail by Uta Frith and Francesca Happé (1994), is that the linguistic impairments of autistic individuals are not due to an additional deficit that is special to language, but exists because autistic children are impaired in the theory-of-mind abilities necessary for normal language learning. (Bloom p.78)

Gregory Currie also concludes about autistic persons:

We have seen that autistic individuals show coincident deficits on pretend play and on the comprehension of the mental states of others. (*Mental Simulation* Currie p.159)

From this perspective it seems that autistic children as well as normal children under the age of four, lack a fundamental ability to see other people as having minds.

How do false beliefs have meaning in ordinary life situations? Here are some examples: The kids and I go to the library. But when we get there the library is closed. I say “Oh shit! It’s closed. I thought it would be open. Well, let’s do something else then.” And the kids ask me four times “are you really sure Mom that it’s closed? Where does it read?” Their way of repeating their question to me several times is expressive of their wish and their disappointment. And I confirm it to them again that the library is really closed. “Yes, it is really closed. It reads here on the note that it closed at six o clock.” This is one way for a child to learn that her parents can have a false belief. And it is also one way for a parent to learn how to try to handle a child’s disappointment, for instance by trying to find something else to do instead. The character of this situation could perhaps be described as all of us believing that the library is open, and me then realizing we were wrong.

Here is another example: My son has begged me to buy something that is called Bakugan. I don’t know what it is but I promise we’ll try to find one in the shop in the evening. When we get to the shop the Bakugan is a game that costs 35 Euros. I’m shocked by the price; I was expecting it would cost five to ten Euros. I tell him it’s too expensive and we don’t buy it. I buy him an ice-cream instead (which he first does not want since he is offended, but which I buy anyway and he then eats with reluctance
because he is angry at me) and we drive home. Here the situation is different from the former one in that I had made a promise, and my son feels I have not kept my promise.

And here is a third one: I get home and I see that someone has left the door to the refrigerator open all day. I’m tired and because I recently have seen a trend in the children leaving the refrigerator door open I’m convinced it is them who did it again. Because I am so tired I immediately get angry at my kids and I scream and accuse them for once again having messed in the kitchen. They say it was not them. I mutter some more but suddenly I just stop. And then I say “I’m sorry for yelling at you. I’m just so tired.” Here the main question is not whether my belief about who left the refrigerator door open is right or wrong. The important thing is that I regret my screaming, and that I apologize. If I would not apologize to them the situation would be very different even if I personally regretted my screaming.

A fourth one: Every morning I tell my son about twenty times to get dressed “Please put on your other sock, here it is.” And he takes it in his hand in an absentminded way and a minute later he has left the sock somewhere and is deeply engaged in building something out of a piece of paper. The situation can then go on in different directions. Maybe he knows I’ll usually help him after a while, and he therefore just continues peacefully to draw or build his things even if I’m repeatedly telling him to get dressed. Maybe he just suddenly says “Ok” and puts on his socks. Maybe I put on my shoes and coat and say “Ok, well I’m going to day care now with your sister.” and then I pretend to walk out the door and then he really fast puts on his socks and shoes and comes along screaming “Wait Mom, I’m coming!” Here is a mix of an absentminded son who perhaps is absentminded because he knows I will help him sooner or later. There is also involved some theatrical manipulation in my walking out of the door.

And a fifth one: Often when we are at home and I sit in the kitchen and read the newspaper the kids come and ask me for help with something. I say “Yes I’ll come in a minute.” But then I just keep on reading and reading. And the kids come ten times to ask me until I finally get up and help them in a half hearted manner, still with my mind somewhere else. The kids are by then already in a bad mood, muttering “Why can’t you ever help us Mom?..., why do we have to ask you so many times before you help.” Here it is the parent who is absentminded because she wants to be alone with her paper, and children who are critical.

And a last one: We are biking to day care. My son is far ahead of my daughter and me. Suddenly my daughter, (who was about three at that time), screams “Ville! Look out! There’s a biker coming behind you!” And here is an expression of care and ability to see a coming danger.

These are some examples of how a child learns that other people can have “false beliefs”. We learn it by other people sometimes promising things and then withdrawing their promise, we learn it by others sometimes acknowledging their own mistakes and their own faults. A child also learns that parents can get angry in ways which the parents later on regret and apologize for. Learning to see that people are not perfect and that they can be mistaken as well as that they can behave stupidly and arrogantly; is entwined with our talking about our behavior and our mistakes in all sorts of ways and entwined with our responding to each other. It is entwined with our accusing each other for stuff, our getting angry in disproportionate ways, our sometimes later on apologizing for our own behavior, our helping each other, showing each other where to look for something, our laughing at our own behavior as well as teasing others for their mistakes and so on. It is also a very ordinary aspect for a child to lose things and come to realize she was wrong about something. And it is quite ordinary that parents get angry at their child for messing and losing stuff etc. Few things are so ordinary for a child as knowing that they make mistakes, ... them unfairly or fairly for things. It is also usually an equally daily aspect that their parents can’t find things and rumble around searching for socks or gloves or boots.
So, if one thinks about these situations and how mistakes and apologies and helping often are a daily part of a child’s life. How can it be that the three year old children do not manage to answer the false belief tests in the correct manner? Can it really be the case that they are unable to understand that people can make mistakes or that they are unable to see that other people are not perfect? It seems to me that there are other reasons for why they do not manage to accomplish the tests.

Let us take a look at the tests. A first problem is that the whole test situations are built up as if it had no relevance who was asking you to solve a problem or who was asking you other matters. For a young child it is usually a huge difference whether a close person addresses her or whether a stranger does so. Towards a stranger a young child often becomes quiet and shy and also has difficult to understand the questions. The same aspect concerns autistic children; they can also be chocked by new situations, and they can have difficult to address strangers. That these aspects are not taken into account is in itself expressive of the way the whole question is built on the misconception that understanding another person is only a matter of trying to gain as much information about the other person’s mental state as possible; having nothing to do with mutual engagement with close ones.

There may also be other reasons why both the autistic children and the normal younger children answer in a certain way in the tests, which have to do with the way the tests are built up and how this does not correspond with an ordinary life situation. Usually when seeing that another person makes a mistake or has lost something we try to help the person; we show her where the thing is. We do not merely sit quietly and look and conclude in our mind that the other person has a false belief. This way of trying to help each other is also a very ordinary trait in young children’s behavior. Is it not then possible that the way the three year old responds by pointing at where the thing really is, has more to do with them trying to respond as we would do in a real life situation? We would try to help by pointing at where the thing is. In that sense the younger children’s response can be said to have more to do with them trying to respond as we would do in a real life situation. The younger children’s difficulty to understand the tests has perhaps then to do with them not understanding the theoretical character of the situation. That is, their inability to answer the questions might have to do with that they are not yet used to recognizing the difference between a real life situation and a theoretical situation where questions are to be answered in a completely different way than usually. The tests, on the other hand, are built up on the assumption that our most ordinary approach to others is to quietly observe them and do nothing.

What I am trying to say here is that when children are confronted with researchers who test if they can understand that other people have false beliefs; their success or failure to respond in these tests does not show anything about what it means to understand another person in real life. The children who succeed in the tests do not show some form of general capacity to use a theory of mind, nor do the children who fail the tests show an incapacity to use such a theory of mind. The children’s responses merely shows that at a certain age children have generally developed a skill to answer correctly on certain defined theoretical tasks. It is also important to remember that a task can be highly theoretical even if it is staged with a story about puppets that search for a chocolate box.

Pretend play
In the theory of mind debates it is often concluded that children under the age of three, including autistic children, fail the tests because they are not good at pretend play. This pretend play is thought of as if it took the same form as our behavior in real life only that we do it by our imagination. And the false belief task is supposed to be an example of such pretend play. But this is not true. Young children do not in some absolute sense have difficulties with “pretend play”, but they often have difficulties with forms of playing that have nothing to do with ordinary life. On the packages of games it often reads that the game is suitable from four years and up. The difficult thing with learning to play games is
that games often do not concern ordinary life much at all. There are all sorts of strange rules about how to behave, how to wait for one’s turn, how to throw the dice only one time, how to walk with the pawn, when to open a card etc. In the false belief test the strange rules are that you are to describe an event without really knowing why you ought to describe it. You are not describing the puppet’s beliefs in order to help anyone, not even helping the researcher who asks. You are merely to answer the question. This is a strangely theoretical situation in its lack of any clear purpose and meaning of the answer. There isn’t even a chance to win this “game”. Usually around four children have developed a capacity to concentrate somewhat more, which enables them to listen to what rules are to be followed. At that age they also often have gotten used to some simpler forms of card games, puzzles, memory etc. Learning to play games takes both a development of patience, concentration as well as getting used to rule following and getting used to questions posed in a weird manner. That the children do not manage to understand the pretend play in the false belief tests shows nothing about their lacking some sort of general mental capacity to imagine things. It only shows that they do not manage to follow the rules of a strangely empty game, a game where questions are to be answered without any clear purpose. On the other hand, most children have no problem whatsoever to play with dolls. But such playing does not generally have the form of two dolls guessing what the other one has hidden in a box. Playing with dolls generally takes the form of the dolls engaging in each other’s life, playing and talking with each other, putting the dolls to bed, feeding them, clothing them, or if it is a Bionicle fighting, flying to the moon etc. This is not the form the puppet game in the false belief tests take.

The need to take into account a person’s difficulties when building up a test
Besides that the false belief task in itself is based on a problematic conception of what it means to understand others, as well as based on a problematic conception of pretend play; it is also problematic to treat an autistic person’s failure to answer the test in the same manner as an ordinary three year old’s failure. By simply concluding that the autistic person lacks a theory of mind, one ignores how autistic persons often struggle with certain difficulties that ordinary children do not struggle with in the same sense. In order to at all understand the results of such tests it is necessary to try to see what difficulties an autistic child can have and how these difficulties can affect her way of answering.

For instance, as I already mentioned, autistic persons can have difficulties to talk with strangers. These difficulties can be immense compared to a three year old’s ordinary shyness. It is often possible to make a three year old feel somewhat at home with a stranger in a while. But while breaking the ice might take ten minutes or half an hour of small talk with a child it can take much longer with an autistic person. Autistic persons can also, for instance, have difficulties to express themselves when being nervous in new situations (and talking with a stranger is a new situation), getting stuck in words. While an ordinary child might speak fluently at three, it is not self evident that an autistic child at a much older age speaks without difficulty. Autistic persons can also sometimes have difficulties to concentrate on a single aspect of a situation where many things happen. If an autistic child suffer, among other things, from difficulties to concentrate on tasks and a difficulty to follow how events evolve, then it will surely be difficult for this child to learn to play games with strange rules, such as a game of talking with a stranger about empty questions about puppets for no clear reason. This is again not at all taken into account when the results are measured. Nor is it taken into account that an autistic person at the age of 15 can have low self confidence, knowing that she is mentally handicapped. This can be a person who has been teased a lot. And it can be a person who is used to fail assignments in school as well as used to fail psychological tests. Confronting such a person with another strange test does not necessarily make it easier for the person to concentrate or answer. It is not self evident that being 15 years old instead of three years old is an advantage when being put to answer a test. It appears unfair to treat the autistic children’s failures to answer in the same manner as the three year old normal children’s failures to answer, without taking into account the
difficulties an autistic child struggles with. That is, it is important to take into account a person’s difficulties when a test is made. So if a child tends to get nervous and tends to get difficulties to concentrate when talking with a stranger, the test should not be made with a stranger. And if a child has difficult to answer things fast, the child should be given a lot of time to respond. Also, an autistic child can find things meaningful in quite special ways. It is not self evident that an autistic child is interested in puppets, he might find them to be boring. There is nothing clearly meaningful with the false belief test, no reward, nothing fun following; merely a “right answer” requested. There is nothing in the test that catches interest.

And some other thoughts in a mess
The main problem with the ideas about our using a theory of mind in order to understand other people is that this idea on the one hand makes it look like it would be comprehensible to talk about beliefs or thought or intentions as if these were some kind of general inner mental class of phenomenon. I have tried to show that there is no such general form of our thinking, nor is there any such general form of being mistaken. Seeing that another person is mistaken has nothing to do with seeing some kind of general mental attitude towards something. On the contrary, it is only by growing up and sharing a daily life with others that mistakes come to have meaning, and then in many various ways. One important aspect here is that we can apologize for our behavior. There is a huge difference between apologizing and not apologizing for something. Whether I apologize or not will define the meaning of what has happened.

Besides that being mistaken is not some sort of general mental phenomenon; it is also a mistake to think that a true understanding of another person necessarily would consist in our learning to predict the other person’s behavior. From the perspective that a true understanding of other people is a matter of privately speculating about their inner life, one gets the impression that becoming skilled at predicting other people’s behavior is an expression of true understanding of other people. However, on the contrary, a child who grows up to constantly doubt and constantly quietly predict other people’s behavior has not grown up to understand others; she has grown up to have a distorted attitude towards others. A child can, for instance, grow up in a family where violent quarreling between the parents is part of their daily life. Or she can grow up with parents who are very authoritative in the sense that they get mad if one does not agree with them. Such relations that go on year after year can form a child to think about and confront people in certain ways; one begins to avoid confrontations, one gets skilled at predicting what answers the other person wants to have. One gets skilled at manipulating others. The ones who think children grow up to learn to use a theory of mind in order to predict other people’s behavior and in order to learn to read their minds, think this is the normal and sound way to understand others and they think this ability is lacking in an autistic person. However, to grow up to become a person where every move and every word one utters is based on one’s predicting other people’s responses; is one way of growing up to an injured life. Childhood often does not make us into whole beings, but into deformed adults, and growing up to become tactical and predicting and lacking trust in other people’s words, is one way of growing up to a deformed understanding of others. From the theory of mind perspective it is such an ability that autistic persons lack. They do not see that this would be a distorted perspective on other people.

Eye contact and bodily closeness
The temptation to define autistic persons as lacking a certain mental function, such as a theory of mind, is also connected with a tendency to portray autism in a very absolute manner. Autism is described as if such a person would be completely unresponsive to others. And they are described as treating people as “objects”. This is once again a very unclear and a very absolute expression. When Temple Grandin (a woman who was diagnosed with autism as a child) writes about her childhood in Emergence Labeled Autistic, there is no such black and white life portrayed. Grandin belongs to the class of autistic persons that do not
suffer from any intellectual disability. There are of course autistic persons who suffer from more severe disorders. One important thing to see is that autism is not one single form of mental state. Because of this Grandin’s story does not perhaps work as a general picture of autism. But I do think her way of telling about her life in many important ways shows that an autistic person is a real human being, not a machine with a deficit, and that it is only by seeing these people as real people with real memories about a real life, with parents and friends and confrontations with mean people that their difficulties also can be understood.

But to return to the idea that autistic persons threat others like objects. One such all encompassing definition is that autistic persons lack eye contact with others. Eye contact as well as the ability to imitate other people’s facial expressions is often thought of as the important route to learn to read another person’s mind. This is the role the human face and bodily expression is given in theory of mind. To understand another person means to be able to read the person’s bodily expressions, to decipher his bodily shell. The body is considered as a tool, a shell expressing certain signs. And the autistic person is considered to lack this ability to see through the other person’s body. The whole approach here to what it means to understand other people is to see people as different and separate and as mental; as a kind of problematic figures hidden behind their bodies and their words; whom we need to learn to see through in order to really understand that these bodily beings are “persons”. The result is that in theory of mind debates bodily closeness is not in itself considered as an important expression of what meaning other people have in a child’s life.

There is in the theory of mind literature an intense interest in the face connected with an intense negligence of ordinary life situations a child is involved in with her parents. There is a negligence of all other bodily contact; as if the face would be the most central and most “intellectual” aspect of a child’s relation to others. This is connected with thinking that the face is part of the head and with thinking that people essentially are minds, and all our feelings and thoughts are in our minds. Therefore, if you want to understand another person or another mind you should look at the head. My impression is also that the reason the face is considered to be so important, is expressive of an adult intellectualistic perspective on what it means to be social. Human beings are considered as thinking beings who communicate about their inner intentions. Daily bodily contact such as being hold and being fed etc. is not consequently considered as in itself being genuine forms of how people have meaning for each other.

Temple Grandin describes how she as a child tended to withdraw from other people’s touch and to avoid eye contact. However, when Grandin describes these difficulties her descriptions are not expressive of some form of insensitivity or blank unawareness of others.

Since the governess, who lived with us from the time I was three until I was ten years old, never hugged or touched my sister or me, I craved tender touching. I ached to be loved-hugged. At the same time I withdrew from over-touch as from my overweight, overly affectionate, “marshmallow” aunt. Her affection was like being swallowed by a whale. Even being touched by the teacher made me flinch and draw back. Wanting but withdrawing. My brain-damaged nervous system imprisoned me. It was as if a sliding glass door separated me from the world of love and human understanding. (Grandin p.36)

Grandin shows that the difficulties an autistic person can have with bodily contact or with eye contact does not have to mean the autistic person is unaware of others or does not care about others. She was clearly as a child deeply attached to several people, but even those she really liked, such as her aunt; she could not bear to be hugged by. From the theory of mind perspective these difficulties with bodily closeness become distorted into something completely different. It is turned into a lack of capacity to decipher bodily expressions in order to read minds. But that is never what Grandin talks about as being her difficulty with
eye contact or with bodily contact. Her difficulty is centrally a combination of an intense wish for comfort and closeness to the ones she loves, while at the same time not being able to stand another person’s touch. Since other people are considered to be minds hidden within their bodies, a child’s need for comfort and closeness is not from the theory of mind perspective regarded as an expression of how other people have meaning for the child.

What I am trying to say is that from a perspective where it is taken for granted that understanding another person means to learn to see through them; the autistic person’s difficulties with bodily contact is distorted into something mental and something intellectual while it, in Grandin’s case seems to be a difficulty that is entwined with a longing for bodily closeness. From the “mind reading” perspective it also becomes impossible then to understand the grief a parent can feel in not being able to touch or hold her child. It is an immensely important part of both a child’s and a parent’s life that is lost if bodily closeness is not possible to share. Bodily closeness is essentially how children grow up to get a sense for life. However, the way a child grows into a close bodily relation with her parents through such daily ways of beings as being hold in the parent’s arms, falling asleep in these arms, being hugged, being washed carefully, being talked to and looked at while being fed etc., are ignored since the important thing with the body is considered to be the other person’s mind.

Grandin also describes her difficulty with bodily contact as being connected with her having difficult to touch certain materials and over sensitivity to sudden hard sounds. These difficulties are not completely different from ordinary people’s difficulties with both human touch as well as with difficulties to touch certain kinds of things. Even though her difficulties were extreme in the sense that she could not stand hand shakes until she was adult; the sensitivity she describes is something also ordinary people often can experience even if in a much lesser amount. It is not unusual to have difficulties to stand another person’s touch even if one likes the person and even if one longs for the loving closeness of touch. Nor is it unusual to have difficult to stand the touch of certain materials or hearing certain sounds. I do not mean by this that Grandin actually had no problems with touch. I merely try to say that the contradiction she experiences seems to me to be a highly human expression of sensitivity, though it is extreme. That her feelings are mixed and that she has hard to understand her own bodily reactions is also something ordinary people often can be faced with.

**Lacking a theory of mind?**

From the theory of mind perspective one gets the impression that an autistic person behaves mechanically towards others, and that her inability to understand others also takes a mechanical form. Though Grandin occasionally in her book mentions difficulties to engage with other people, these difficulties never appear mechanical. They appear as genuinely human difficulties in a real human life with others. She describes confrontations where other people are being mean, and where others give nasty comments on her. She also describes situations where she only later on understands the strangeness of her own remarks to certain people, and therefore only later understands why some people withdrew from her or found her difficult to be with. These are real worries in her life, real pains.

Her difficulties do not have some kind of mechanical or general form, as if some mechanical piece was missing in her behavior towards others. In a sense her difficulties to come along with others also appear to me as difficulties any normal person could struggle with though her difficulties are greater than usually. Also ordinary people struggle with such things as being unable to talk smoothly and easily with people. And it is, for instance, really difficult to talk smoothly with people who look down on you and who never accept you as the one you are. One can feel that every word one say feels awkward and unsuitable how much one ever tries. And with some people it can remain a riddle why one does not come along with them. Likewise we are also often blind to how we behave towards others, being too frank or being almost aggressive without
realizing it ourselves, or our talking endlessly or avoiding to talk at all, our not listening to others, our jumping when someone touches you kindly on the shoulder etc.

**Education and false belief tests**

The false belief tests are not only built on a problematic conception of what it means to understand other people. The tests are also built on a classical conception of understanding, where a child’s development of understanding is considered as continuously developing towards an adult conception of understanding. The trouble here is that one takes for granted that if a child fails a task it is the child who lacks a certain capacity. Grandin writes the following about her first childhood days in school:

> The school I attended was a small private school for normal children. Mother had discussed my problems extensively with the teachers. On the first day of school I was kept home so that the teachers could explain to the other children that I was different. The teacher, Mrs. Clark, had short grey hair, and the neck of her dress came almost to her chin. [...] After drilling us in the different sounds of letters, Mrs. Clark gave each of us workbooks with pictures. On one page there was a box, a suitcase, a birdbath, a chair, a telephone and a bicycle. Mrs. Clark said, “Mark the pictures that begin with ‘b’.”

I marked the suitcase because I thought it was a box. I skipped the picture of the bird and bird bath. They were in the middle of a garden and I thought ‘g’ was the key sound for them. But I couldn’t speak well enough to explain to Mrs. Clark why I had not marked certain pictures. I understood the concept of the ‘b’ sound, and I had a logical reason for every mark I made. Frustration raged within me and I wanted to hit or kick to release the feeling. I remember thinking that the bird bath was in the middle of a garden and so obviously, it was related to the ‘g’ sound. I marked the suitcase with a ‘b’ because boxes are containers and the suitcase was a box-like container. Even if I could have explained my thinking to Mrs. Clark, she couldn’t have accepted such logic—my reasoning didn’t fit into the black or white, right or wrong method of teaching. (Grandin p.34)

Temple Grandin’s parents clearly wanted to prepare the teachers and children in the school, so that they would not be hostile or mean towards their daughter simply because she would not behave as the others or would perhaps not be able to do her assignments as well as others. However, apparently the information about Temple Grandin not being normal made her teacher instead take a hostile and patronizing attitude towards her. When Grandin answers in a way that does not fit perfectly into the teacher’s model of the right answer, the teacher simply dismisses Grandin’s answer; taking it directly as showing her lack of understanding. There is, in the teacher’s rigid request for the only “right” answer from the start a refusal to listen to the child and a refusal to see any value in her responses. A little bit later Grandin describes another occasion.

Another challenge of school was learning rhythm, an impossible task for me. Mrs. Clark would have us sit in a circle and she’d sit at the piano. “Now, children, listen to the beat” She’d play a few bars. “Now, clap your hands in time with the music.” I couldn’t do it. When the class clapped, my hands were apart. “Temple. Pay attention” Mrs. Clark played again. And again I was out of “clap.” “Why are you acting this way? You’re spoiling it for everyone,” she said.

At that moment I didn’t want to spoil it, but I couldn’t listen to the music and clap my hands rhythmically at the same time.
Mrs. Clark started the song again, but this time, when I was out of clap, she said, “Just fold your hands in your lap, Temple, since you don’t want to keep time with the others.” Her tone of voice infuriated me. And then the children laughed. Angry, I jumped up from my chair, knocking it over. Mrs. Clark jumped up, grabbed by shoulder, and led me to the corner of the room where I stood until the clapping exercise was over. (Grandin p.34)

The teacher is unable to show any form of interest or affection towards what Grandin tries to do. Had the teacher showed any form of affection and patience she would have approached Grandin with care, not taking for granted that Grandin was trying to tease by not clapping in the right time. The most important thing would not have been that the teacher should have been able to read Grandin’s mind and find out the truth about Grandin’s intentions. The most important thing would have been to acknowledge her as a real child with certain difficulties; a child whom to approach with affection; to try to listen. This was what her mother tried to prepare the teachers to see. In the false belief tests it is as if the same thing happened. Here are scientists who already know that there exists people with autism, and who know these are people with a lot of difficulties with a lot of things. And because these children have difficulties they are put to a test in order to prove what these researchers expected; namely that they will not succeed in the test. Why not instead try to do something that would show what an autistic person can do and through this try to help build up a life for this person? These are also thoughts mentioned by Grandin. There is a certain attitude in the false belief tests; a patronizing attitude where one has already decided on beforehand not to try to give the autistic person a chance, not to listen.

When Grandin went to school she tells about her as a teenager having been bored and finding school pointless. She had, among other things, to struggle with learning mathematics and French. However, once she was presented with a strange kind of mirror box. It fascinated her immensely how this box worked. A teacher noticed her interest and told her that in order for her to solve the riddle she must learn math. After this she got a keen interest in learning math. When she was able to see a purpose in her own life for learning math or learning other things, Grandin suddenly started to learn subjects fast.

**Fighting for a life and being despised and loved**

The ease by which one concludes that autistic children treat other persons like objects is connected with a temptation to ignore one’s own attitude to autistic persons. By saying that an autistic person treats others like objects you make it look like there is no problem with your own behavior towards the autistic child. You don’t have to ask yourself whether you should behave differently towards her since it is she who is autistic not you.

Throughout Grandin’s book she recalls in a matter of fact manner situations where she was bullied and teased and treated meanly by others. This is in no way the main thread in the book, but it is clearly something that Grandin experienced many times. At the same time she also describes many good and kind people who helped her manage and go on in life. Grandin also had a violent temper that often got her into trouble, but my impression is that her strong temper also made her survive all the bullying she was confronted with.

 [...] when Mary Lurie, a girl in my grade, passed me in the hallway on the way to music class, she turned and looked at me. Lifting her nose in the air and curling her lips in a sneer, she spat, “Retard! You’re nothing but a retard!”

Anger, hot and quick, ripped through me. I was carrying my history book. Without hesitation I threw my arm back and then forward. My history book zoomed through the air like a guided missile and hit Mary in the eye. She screamed and I walked away, not even bothering to pick up my history book.
That night at home the phone rang and I answered. It was Mr. Harlow, the principal of Cherry Hill Girls School. He didn’t even ask to speak to one of my parents. He just said, “Don’t bother coming back to school. You are incorrigible. Mrs. Lurie is very upset. You could have blinded Mary and all because of your nasty, uncontrollable temper.”

I hung up the phone. Anger and frustration surged through me and I trembled, sick at my stomach. Mr. Harlow hadn’t even asked to hear my side of it. He just assumed that since I was “different” I was entirely to blame. (Grandin p.68)

Grandin’s reactions of anger and violence are I think here very much sound reactions towards a mean person. However, once again here is a principal who takes for granted that there is no reason to listen to Grandin’s side of the story since she is ”different”. Luckily Grandin appears to have been a strong person. She was also a child who had an extraordinarily thoughtful wise and loving mother who believed in her. There are letters from her mother in the book, letters that I often find to be expressive of a deeply caring and wise understanding of Temple Grandin. This combination of personal strength and a wise mother and other loving persons who stood by her side is, I think, what made her survive all these mean and patronizing people. However, autistic persons differ as do ordinary children. Some have a strong character seeming to be able to go through mountains of meanness while others can be shyer and do not necessarily manage to face constant teasing and bullying. I am sure I would not have survived so much bullying as she did.

Among these loving people Grandin also had some friends in school:

My original ideas, good or naughty, were what made Crystal Swift like me. We’d spin around on swings and play word association games. Our laughter over the word “jello” followed by “lime”, and then ”gravy” was endless. No one else thought it was funny. She could understand my speech with its rounded syllables when others couldn’t. When one of the kids asked Crystal why she played with such a nerd as Temple, Crystal said, “I like her because she’s not boring.” (Grandin p.44)

Here is a girl, Crystal Swift, who really likes to be with Temple Grandin. Her liking Temple is, I think, strongly connected with her ability to understand Temple’s speech. It is because she likes Temple that she also understands her speech. And it is because the other ones don’t like Temple, because they think she is a “nerd”, that they do not understand her speech and also can’t see anything fun in what she does. I am not saying here that there was nothing wrong with Temple’s speech, but I am saying that our capacity to understand another person’s speech is strongly connected with our will to listen, our will to take the other person seriously.

Och litteraturlistan finns inte heller.