Introduction

Like many of my generation, I was introduced to the concept of autism through Bruno Bettelheim's famous book "The Empty Fortress" shortly after its publication in 1967. Bettlelheim's thesis was that autistic children were inherently normal, but having been deprived of the normal motherly love, grew up unable to form relationships with other human beings. Having no basis on which to dispute his claim, I accepted it on face value, although there were various details that I felt were in error.

I did not think about autism again until some twenty years later, when I was given the much less popular book, "The Ultimate Stranger, the Autistic Child" by Carl Delacato. He had a radically different understanding of autism. It was then that I realised that this was a much more complicated topic than I had imagined, and nowhere near as clear and straightforward as Bettelheim had made it seem. I began to do some serious research. I found that a wealth of study had been done during those years, and that many explanations had been proposed. But while Bettelheim's approach had been generally rejected, none had succeeded in replacing it. Instead, there was an ongoing debate about the nature of autism and what caused it.

At the same time there was another debate, this one much more general, but having important implications for understanding autism. This was a continuation of a debate that had been going on for well over a century about the relative roles of heredity and environment, "nature and nurture", in human development. While it was clear that each one contributed to some extent, there was considerable disagreement about the details. Those who see heredity as providing only the potential to develop ideas and behaviours, and experience as guiding actual development, are developmentalists. Those who believe that heredity provides specific thoughts and behaviours, which gradually emerge as the child matures, independent of whatever experience he might have, are nativists. Most scientists, myself included, are developmentalists. Even casual observation of the world provides clear evidence for the profound influence of experience on human cognitive development. I was therefore shocked to find that among cognitive scientists, the most popular school was nativism. They claimed that even basic concepts about the world were innately programmed into the human being.

I found this deeply disturbing. Not only did it run counter to the generally accepted beliefs of most educated people outside of cognitive science, the developmental school, and above all Jean Piaget, had, during the twentieth century, conducted careful scientific research on the actual course of development of a wide variety of thought processes from early childhood to adulthood. Their position was therefore based not on speculation or anecdotal evidence, but on detailed research and solid experimental evidence. I could see no rational basis to reject that position. As I began to study autism, I found that nativism had applied there as well, and that the most popular explanations were now nativist.

This, therefore, was the world I found myself in when I began to try to understand autism. So, having reviewed all of the prevalent theories, current and past, I decided to approach the problem independently. I began by collecting all the data I could about autism. I visited various institutions and spoke to people who had been working with autism for many years. When I felt I had a pretty good picture of autism, rather than asking the question that previous researchers had asked, "What is the cause of autism?" I decided to ask a more modest one: "What are the relationships between the various traits? Could a certain given trait, X be the cause of another trait, Y? Or might Y be the cause of X? Or might they both be caused by some third trait, Z, perhaps one that had not even been recognised yet?"

After looking at possible relationships, a different picture began to emerge. Eventually, I was able to construct an integrated theory, the core of which I published in three articles, Social Learning and the Etiology of Autism (2001), Positive Feedback Cycles in Autistic and Normal Development (2002), and Interest in Human Features and the Etiology of Autism (2003). No article, however, could

present the theory in its entirety. To present the complete integrated theory would require a book, hence the work presented here.

Beyond this, there is no need for further introduction, so I shall make only a fews notes regarding the style. Everything here has been presented in a way understandable by an educated layman. I have made very few references, but must state from the onset that my own work and thinking is based heavily on the work of Piaget, so, while I rarely refer to his work explicitly, any statements or explanations resembling those of Piaget can be assumed to have been derived from his writings, even when my presentation and nomenclature are different from his. On the other hand, there are many points that I see rather differently than he did. Often I have taken an idea from him and developed it in my own way. The result is a mixture of his ideas and my own. I have therefore refrained from citing him, so that it not be taken as a misrepresentation of his position.

I use masculine pronouns throughout, except when referring to a specific individual. This is purely a grammatical convention, and is not to be taken to in any way indicate male or female individuals. The masculine is the grammatically unmarked form, and is therefore used to refer to an unknown individual who might in fact be either a male or a female. The feminine, by contrast, is a marked form and refers exclusively to females.

When I occasionally use the word “normal” to refer to those who are not autistic, no value judgement is intended. To be normal is not better than to be autistic. Normal is neither positive nor negative but simply the norm, that is, the way most people are, which in this context means not being autistic.