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Autism before and after the Enlightenment

The stories of Ralph and Ida neatly bisect the social and medical history of autism. Before the ‘Age of Enlightenment,’ a period that is usually held to run from the last two decades of the seventeenth century through the eighteenth century, the symptoms that we now associate with autism were viewed largely through the lenses of folklore and religious belief. After it, there was almost always a medical aspect to how these symptoms were conceptualised and dealt with, even if this was but a thin veneer of terminology. This is not to say that there was a sea change from one paradigm to another. As will be demonstrated in later chapters, earlier beliefs about autism have survived alongside and within scientific views. Observers in the pre-Enlightenment past will also have occasionally stumbled upon less ethereal explanations.

It is hard to find solid, reliable information concerning ideas about disability or medical practices of any sort before the advent of writing, just a few thousand years ago. We instead look to physical evidence, and the echoes of prehistoric ideas that remain in early literature. For example, we know that prehistoric humans had concepts of illness, health, and ‘treatment,’ because medicinal herbs have been found amongst grave goods dating back to very early human existence (Larsen, 2002). We also know that they were aware of brain-based difficulties, as evidence of trephination (scraping or drilling holes into a living person’s skull in a crude attempt to relieve such problems) dates back to at least 8000 BC (Philips, 1990).

In hunter-gatherer and basic agrarian economies, anyone capable of repetitive hard work would probably have a valued role to play
in the community, and intellectual ability would have had somewhat less relevance than it does today. However, individuals with severe feeding or digestive problems, like Ralph, would have a low survival rate, as would those with compromised immune systems. As in Ida's time, epilepsy would have led to increased debility and possibly death, and serious challenging behaviour in small children may well have been met with violence, as it all too often is today.

From these likelihoods we can make the assumption that survival rates for individuals with autism and severe learning difficulties and those with comorbid conditions like epilepsy may have been low. For others, the steady pace of work and carefully controlled patterns of human relationships that characterised pre-modern societies would have given daily existence an orderly pattern—something that current research indicates underlies a better quality of life for people with autism—with interruptions from outside circumstances such as severe weather, crop failures, or the need to move to better hunting grounds posing the greatest challenges.

In addition, the superior pattern recognition abilities seen in many individuals with autism (O'Riordan, Plaisted, Driver and Baron-Cohen, 2001) may have given them a clear advantage in hunter-gatherer societies. The ability to distinguish animal footprints from random impressions on a riverbank, tell edible plants from their poisonous lookalikes, and pick up distress calls from birds that provide an early warning of a large predator would be among the most valued talents possible during the first 100,000 years or so of the existence of *Homo sapiens*. Paul Tréhin, the parent of an autistic savant who has made a particular study of cave art, has also suggested a crucial role for traits linked to autism. He has written that savant syndrome—a pattern of extreme gifts and deficits seen more often in people with autism—may have played a key part in pushing forward human evolution in the Paleolithic period, as evidenced by the character and form of very early human artwork (Tréhin, 2002). Others have also noted the similarity of art produced by some modern autistic savants and prehistoric cave art (Humphrey, 1998).

A similar hypothesis has been put forward in relation to attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, with claims that high levels of alertness and quick reaction times could have provided clear advantages in the past, despite being pathologised today. In this context it has been argued that 'it is unlikely that such a “disorder” could be