

In praise of folly

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Dichotomies divide our world into two non-overlapping categories. Black versus white, good versus bad, autistic versus neurotypic, smart versus stupid, etc. Beside clarity, however, it may also cause confusion and misunderstanding. On closer inspection, even white is not always white and black is not always black. In recent years I have tried to redefine autistic and neurotypic as components of a universal development system, but the interests of maintaining the dichotomy are far too great, in science, in health care and even among people on the spectrum themselves. Already in the Renaissance, the famous Dutch humanist and philosopher Desiderius Erasmus made a dichotomy that strongly resembles that between neurotypic and autistic.

From 1478 to 1485 Desiderius Erasmus studied

at the Latin school in Deventer. In 1509 he wrote his famous work *In Praise of Folly* in London. In this work the goddess Folly decides to write an eulogy about herself, which she defends by saying that this is much better than the aristocrats, who pay someone to praise them. Folly divides the world into fools and wise men. The goddess had 9 companions: Philautia (self love), Kolakia (flattery), Lethe (forgetfulness), Misoponia (laziness), Hedone (pleasure), Anoia (dementia), Tryphe (wantonness), and two gods, Komos (intemperance) and Nigretos Hypnos (heavy sleep). Thanks to Folly, she praises herself, human relationships remain intact, there is forgiveness, pleasure, make believe and the beautiful virtues. Without Folly, there would be no flattery, heroic deeds, and irony, and with that no possibility of settling conflict and even war. Folly was good, brought love and passion, gave pleasure to the little ones, and brought the elderly back to their childhood.

With the dichotomy neurotypic and autistiform in my head, I can hardly resist the thought that Erasmus talked about neurodiversity. In his description the sages are much like what we now call highly gifted Aspergers (or as Hans Asperger described them during their childhood: little professors). Despite Folly's praise for the masses, however, Erasmus ultimately opts for the minority, the sages, for intellect and reason. He opted for the real die-hards, the nerds (what we would now call "on the spectrum"), instead of the foolish aristocrats or seemingly scholars, who fetched grotesque ideas from the sages.

In the meantime, we know much better than Erasmus could ever have suspected what that small, rational movement - the Enlightenment - would finally bring about: dominion over all nature, with disastrous consequences. With this distinction between follies and sages, Erasmus was almost 500 years ahead of the distinction in thinking that Nobel Prize winner psychologist Daniël Kahneman makes between system 1 (thinking fast, instinctive and emotional, parallel, natural and fallible: Folly's masses) and system 2 (slow, serial, logically and less natural in use: Sages). Compared to "normal" people, autistic people work primarily through system 2, which means that their information processing is slow, analytical, systematic and profound.

But ... Dichotomies are folly! The sages brought us into our everyday reality, from automobile to nuclear energy and AI. The fools used all of this in ruthless global business models and, in addition, they also control the sages primarily as a psychiatric business model. Has the goddess Folly lost her kindness.

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