



HG Library: Autistic tendencies: the consequences for our culture. Joe Griffin interviews Prof Michael Fitzgerald

Published in 2006 after the release of Professor Michael Fitzgerald's third book, this landmark interview outlines some of the current thinking on autism that influenced the development of [caetextia theory](#) and will be of great interest to anyone interested in Asperger's Syndrome and autism.

Autistic tendencies: the consequences for our culture

Professor Michael Fitzgerald talks with Joe Griffin about the powerful impact, both positive and negative, of autistic thinking in diverse walks of life.

GRIFFIN: Michael, having read your three books on Asperger's and creativity, I have become a great admirer of your work, finding it hugely enlightening. I had so many wonderful 'Aha!' moments reading them, partly because I've a significant amount of autism and Asperger's in my own family, having a sister who is autistic and two brothers who meet the criteria for Asperger's.

FITZGERALD: You're an expert, then!

GRIFFIN: Well, I've lived with it all my life and, in addition to that, I've encountered it clinically. But I'm curious, Michael. You've written so profoundly and with so much insight into this condition; it's your life work. What prompted your interest in this area?

FITZGERALD: Well, it was accidental. In about 1973 my boss said that I should do research and he suggested I look at autism. And once I got into it I became more and more interested, and I began doing clinical work too. Once you've got an interest in Asperger's, you never give it up for the rest of your life because these people are so fascinating. We human beings are totally obsessed with ourselves, and studying Asperger's and autism gives us hints that point to the central issues about what it is to be a human being. When you understand autism, by studying people with problems in this area, paradoxically you understand more of what it is to be a normal human being. It's just the most fundamental thing of all.

GRIFFIN: What amazed me about the analysis in your books of personalities you felt had these traits was that it was so utterly convincing. And yet, when I heard you being interviewed on Irish

radio, people phoning in took such a strong exception to it, rejecting almost out of hand your analysis – which seemed to me to be so blindingly obvious! Were you surprised at that?

FITZGERALD: Well, when I thought about it, I wasn't. Such hostility is based on a lack of understanding. People don't understand because they have preconceptions about everything and when these preconceptions are challenged it makes them angry and they just get hostile.

GRIFFIN: Mostly nothing is looked at in any depth. That's why this interview opportunity is so useful. For those who don't know your work, your findings show an astonishing relationship: Asperger's, which we normally think of as almost the opposite of innovation – a desire for sameness, systems, rules and control at all costs – can also be associated with creativity. Could you say something about how that could be possible?

FITZGERALD: It *is* a surprise to most people. Savantism has a long history of being accepted. Savant syndrome is seen when there is both a severe developmental or mental handicap and extraordinary mental abilities not found in most people, often involving great feats of memory, arithmetic, draughtsmanship or musical ability. And it is generally accepted that engineers and mathematicians might be a bit autistic, but what is the hardest thing for most people to swallow is that artists like Samuel Beckett, James Joyce, George Orwell or Michelangelo – those kind of people – are autistic too. (I've written about them all in my books.) It surprises them. But it's true.

GRIFFIN: Yes, as you show, people with highfunctioning autism, or Asperger's syndrome, very often have exceptional verbal skills and originality of thought. Although their verbal skills are more usually better than their spatial and visual skills, some do, in fact, become artists as well as poets and philosophers. People with Asperger's syndrome think about the world differently from other people, are often eccentric, can become intensely interested in one particular subject and, because of a more limited social understanding and ability to relate, do not engage with people in the usual sorts of ways. So it's not surprising, perhaps, that what comes shining out of your books is that some Asperger's traits are highly beneficial to the human race, including original thinking and creativity. You show us how, because they are not much bothered with the emotional politics of day-to-day life, this tends to give people with Asperger's the spare capacity to address what are ultimately the most important questions.

FITZGERALD: Yes. The bright ones are fundamentalists in the true sense of the word: interested in the deepest questions that mankind can ask, either of philosophy or science.

GRIFFIN: And then, because of their obsessiveness, they keep on investigating these questions, despite not getting any immediate material reward for doing so. This has obviously been beneficial for the rest of us.

FITZGERALD: Yes. Persistence and being obsessive is part of Asperger's syndrome, as you know. Asperger's people don't ever give up. Also, what helps them hugely is that they don't care very much about what other people think. They are not impressed by authority figures or conventional beliefs. Socrates was clearly like that.

GRIFFIN: Socrates certainly pursued the truth without fear of the consequences. Such people were a huge benefit to humankind, surviving against the odds, as it were, and innovating.

FITZGERALD: And they're not upset that much by other writings. The philosopher Wittgenstein, who, as you know, was Asperger's, regarded most other philosophical writing as nonsense. He didn't want to clutter his mind by reading it.

GRIFFIN: And yet he made an amazing contribution. Because of his own difficulties with language and lack of understanding of how to communicate, he asked fundamental questions about language and communication.

FITZGERALD: Yes. And some people say he's the greatest philosopher of the 20th century, exactly for those reasons.

GRIFFIN: Right. So, on the one hand, these Asperger's geniuses with immense talent – and obviously we're talking about a minority of Asperger's people here – had this potentially tremendous creativity, yet they are decidedly odd in many ways.

FITZGERALD: Absolutely! They are seen as being odd, highly eccentric or enigmatic.

GRIFFIN: So if we were to look a little bit lower down the scale, for want of a better term, people who have Asperger's but who are not necessarily outrageously talented, what are *they* like?

FITZGERALD: Well, that's the majority, as you pointed out. But we're getting into savantism, into calculators who are able to do amazing calculations almost as quickly as a computer. Some are calendrical calculators: you tell them what day you were born on and they'll tell you in a couple of seconds what day you'll retire on when you're 60 or 65 and they'll give you the day of your 21st birthday in another couple of seconds – those are savants.

GRIFFIN: But they wouldn't actually show creativity as such.

FITZGERALD: Not creative but massively impressive; not creative genius but extraordinary.

GRIFFIN: It is. Now, many people today claim that the condition is on the increase.

FITZGERALD: Well, diagnostically, figures are increasing massively. The latest figures published in the *Lancet* are 1.2 per cent of the population. That's more than one in a hundred. But this is a diagnostic thing. People have been reclassified. For example, some Asperger's people were diagnosed with schizophrenia, which they don't have, and treated with neuroleptics and injections. Almost all those with Asperger's in Ireland that I've seen were misdiagnosed as schizophrenic.

GRIFFIN: Certainly, as you say yourself, schizoid personality disorder and schizotypal personality disorder mostly meet the criteria for Asperger's.

FITZGERALD: Almost all schizoid types now are pulled into Asperger's syndrome.

GRIFFIN: And that's a much more benign classification, really, isn't it?

FITZGERALD: Yes. Reclassification is shooting up the figures. And they will go higher. When I did my first study, back in the 70s, the figure I came up with was about 5 in 10,000.

GRIFFIN: Gosh! That's an incredible difference.

FITZGERALD: And that, I think, is just down to better diagnosis. We're more aware of the subtleties of the condition now.

GRIFFIN: But there is a significant genetic contribution to this disorder?

FITZGERALD: Heritability is 93 per cent. That means, I believe, that the measles, mumps and rubella vaccine (MMR) cannot cause autism. It's totally against that notion.

GRIFFIN: Could it be possible that autism is a continuum, with degrees of vulnerability?

FITZGERALD: Oh yes, there is no doubt about that – that's absolutely true. You can get the phenotype [observable characteristics], which is just a descriptive diagnosis. I've seen 25 children from orphanages in Eastern Europe, and they all met criteria for autism.

GRIFFIN: So there are some extreme environmental conditions that can trigger it.

FITZGERALD: You can get the descriptive profile of the phenotype from extreme environmental conditions – the odd one would have true genetic autism but, for the majority, I just use my own classification, “institutional autism”, whenever I just think the aetiology is the institution and not the heritability factor.

GRIFFIN: Another thing I’m just wondering about is this. Given the fact that there seems to be a drop in our emotional intelligence as a society and that this is supposedly influenced by our increasing preoccupation with computers and television and a lessening of face-to-face interactions within family members (at family meals together etc), could our vastly increased preoccupation with machines and screens be increasing the propensity for those on the borderline to be tipped into Asperger’s?

FITZGERALD: Now you’re bringing up your own thoughts and I actually haven’t heard them before, but I find what you just said very interesting. I hadn’t ever thought of society going down in emotional intelligence but I think that you are right – but that’s a societal thing. I’ve just come back from Africa: African tribal society is very high in social capital, which I suppose goes with emotional intelligence but social capital is low in Western countries.

GRIFFIN: And becoming increasingly so.

FITZGERALD: So that’s a really interesting hypothesis that you have there. These are your own thoughts, but I do agree with them. I am fascinated to hear you say that because it had never crossed my mind before.

GRIFFIN: To take our conversation in a slightly different direction – you probably diagnose more people on this spectrum than almost any living physician! So you must be counted as one of the world experts now.

FITZGERALD: I’ve diagnosed over 1200, but I think there are people who have diagnosed more – Lorna Wing, in England, for example. But I can claim a certain amount of expertise.

GRIFFIN: Certainly, you’re one of a handful of people who have this degree of actual experience. And, given all that expertise, is there anything we can do to help people with Asperger’s?

FITZGERALD: Well, I think the first thing is that education about it is critical. And the media need to understand, because there are a huge number of Asperger’s people who have not been diagnosed, and many are suffering as a consequence. Those misdiagnosed are still being treated for schizophrenia. So, that’s the first thing. And then, if we get them early enough, I’m much more hopeful about their situation.

I’m tending to diagnose autism around the age of two, now, or sometimes slightly below two, and two and a bit for Asperger’s. No one in the field now takes any notice of the American Psychiatric Association’s current *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual* (DSM-IV) because there was a terrible blunder in it – it specifies no language problems and no cognitive delay for a diagnosis of Asperger’s. So for practical purposes we are now leaving aside DSM-IV and we diagnose Asperger’s syndrome if IQ is about 70 or above and if people have good language. That is more helpful and it’s more acceptable to parents. If it is below 70 and into lower levels of mild moderate handicap or severe handicap, I use the word ‘autism’.

What I advise everybody in the field to do is get the CD-ROM *Mindreading Skills* from Jessica Kingsley Publishers and really use it. I also recommend that speech and language therapists get involved in pragmatic language therapy for Asperger’s since, as you know, most children with Asperger’s have semantic pragmatic problems – they have plenty of language but they don’t use it correctly. So I send most of them to speech therapists who specialise in semantic pragmatic problems – using a form of cognitive therapy based on improving empathy and helping them to understand other people’s points of view, read faces and read other people’s minds. It’s all about communication skills.

GRIFFIN: Sometimes straightforward simple tips can help these people – explaining the reciprocal nature of conversations, for example, and how to not talk for too long.

FITZGERALD: That's pragmatic language skills.

GRIFFIN: We had a very bright, intelligent man who was Asperger's working in our organisation for a while, and we often talked to him about the fact that he used to lecture us, and he made tremendous improvements with this. Then, one day, I complimented him on the progress he had made and he said, "Oh yes, Joe, I think I have come out of this Asperger's thing now. For example, I know when I'm talking to you I've got to give short answers and mention emotions."

FITZGERALD: Exactly that. Asperger's people can learn – Temple Grandin is a perfect example. In her new book *Animals in Translation*, she describes how, when she goes into a social situation, she just slips into her brain a 'video' of how she needs to behave in that particular situation, and then she knows what to do and say.

GRIFFIN: I'm glad you mentioned Temple Grandin because it raises a question in my mind, which is partly inspired by what she says about her condition, but partly also arises from my own clinical work. I get the impression that the emotional memory system that inspires our predictions about reality might be working in a different way with these people. What do you think?

FITZGERALD: Well, I suppose most of us tend to say there is a malfunctioning. The limbic system and the emotional circuits and the frontal lobes are certainly malfunctioning in Asperger's. But there are so many areas of the brain affected, you know – the cerebellum is also malfunctioning. It's generally accepted that you have massive local processing. According to Professor Gerry Fodor's philosophy of mind, there are independent modules in the brain that, if poorly connected up, produce a very unintegrated brain. But the great value of having quasi-independent modules, such as mathematical or musical modules, is that these can then go off and do their own thing and they are not interfered with by other parts of the brain. And so Asperger's people have very powerful local connections but very poor longrange connections, because their brain isn't connected up —

GRIFFIN: — or it's wired differently.

FITZGERALD: Well, it's wired differently, but what I'm saying is that it's as though you have 20 computers and a central computer in the normal brain – ie you have all these modules and they are all very well integrated – but, in the autistic brain, you have all these independent computers basically doing their own thing. And they're not linked up.

GRIFFIN: One idea that we've been considering is that maybe autistic people are, in a sense, at the extreme end of a trend that is actually beneficial for society in evolutionary terms.

FITZGERALD: Oh yes! There's no doubt about it. All human evolution was driven by slightly autistic Asperger's and autistic people. The human race would still be sitting around in caves chattering to each other if it were not for them. This very conversation we are having would not be happening without the advent of mild autism in people. It wouldn't!

GRIFFIN: Could you elaborate on that, Michael?

FITZGERALD: Well, it's just that Asperger's and autistic people were the ones who spent enormous amounts of time and energy in developing the first refined stone tools. Then they went on to metals. They were the people who observed the seasons and developed farming. The scientific and industrial revolutions happened because of Asperger's people. They invented computers and now run the IT computer world that we all live in today. All these advances were driven by Asperger's people. Those who don't have Asperger's might choose to spend a lot of time socialising instead. They don't stick at tasks they set themselves in the same way. If you're

chatting all the time, you're not going to be creative.

GRIFFIN: And, when we're wrapped up in our emotional life, that also uses up the spare capacity we need to think clearly and be creative.

FITZGERALD: That's right, too. Obviously Asperger's people can be very emotional but when they are left to themselves, doing their own research as they do, they make enormous progress. Isaac Newton had Asperger's syndrome, for example, and he would go for two or three days without eating anything. They took food to him and put it on his table; he'd take one bite and forget all about it and then work on for another nine hours. Then someone would bring in more food. But he was just so focused on his work that he didn't allow the chitchat of the world to interfere with it. What we hear on the radio today about celebrity culture, for example, is all background chitchat and noise – it interferes with creativity and does not interest Asperger's people.

GRIFFIN: If we think about the whole drive towards evolution and the development of civilisation, clearly you have to have people who can think long term and who don't have to respond to immediate emotional rewards.

FITZGERALD: Yes, it is these people who are interested in making tools and weapons; they made these weapons and then I think they killed off the Neanderthals.

GRIFFIN: That might be controversial!

FITZGERALD: Yes, but somebody killed them off. They disappeared!

GRIFFIN: Unless they starved through lack of efficiency?

FITZGERALD: Well, this is controversial, I know, but this is my theory: *Homo sapiens*, modern man, suddenly began making sharp tools and spears and then hunted the Neanderthals to extinction, because obviously the Neanderthals were not as bright; their brain wasn't as well developed as that of *Homo sapiens* and they weren't as able to develop the sophisticated tools and the methods of hunting and fighting.

GRIFFIN: Even though they had a bigger brain?

FITZGERALD: But not the social intelligence.

GRIFFIN: Michael, there is another aspect of Asperger's, in particular, that seems to me to have led to an awful lot of innovation, and you refer to it again and again. It's how the confusion of identity Asperger's people feel, not knowing who they are, seems to lead many of them to ask the most profound philosophical questions and that then takes them into the areas of philosophy and spirituality.

FITZGERALD: Yes, that's right. Some of them did go down that 'religious' road in an attempt to solve their identity and make sense of the world. And they drift between reality and fantasy, and, of course, in religion there is a lot of drifting between reality and fantasy – the religious world is an autistic world.

GRIFFIN: There is a lot of ritual in all religions, isn't there?

FITZGERALD: Yes, the religious world is a ritualised, internal world; it has no external evidence to back any of it – it's just a fantasy system.

GRIFFIN: It has the chanting and the rituals that appeal to Asperger's people—

FITZGERALD: —and so that's why they were so successful at making religious systems which

are purely internal fantasies that have no basis in reality – there is no scientific evidence for them. But the drive to be religious now seems part of human nature; we are born with it.

GRIFFIN: It's clearly in us now. Our whole brains and genetics are organised for it; there is a module for it, as it were.

FITZGERALD: Well, maybe there is – I don't know – but my own view of religion is that we all have a genetic predisposition and some have personality traits that attract them to religion. There isn't a single God-gene.

GRIFFIN: You've made the point that our evolution as a species is down to high-performing Asperger's people, and we owe so much to them – all the benefits of civilisation – and yet, in a sense, their very strengths have been bought with the price of great deficits that almost make them casualties of evolution.

FITZGERALD: You can't have one without the other. I believe the Asperger's genes and creative genes are one and the same – as you know, genes have multiple effects.

GRIFFIN: But there might be a suite of genes that predispose one to these conditions. It's almost as if some of them are incompatible with each other because, on the one hand, Asperger's genes are looking for underlying systems, sameness and control, and yet other Asperger's genes lead to a diffusion of identity and a search for answers.

FITZGERALD: Yes, that's right.

GRIFFIN: So, given that we owe so much to Asperger's people, should we be doing more for them?

FITZGERALD: Well, we should. The first thing we should do is give them a lot more respect; they don't get sufficient respect. I mean, when we describe them as odd, we are insulting them. Wittgenstein had about 50 nicknames, each one more nasty than the one before. Most Asperger's people have loads of hurtful nicknames and are bullied. They are mistreated by society from the start of school through the rest of their lives.

GRIFFIN: So should they be included into mainstream society or given separate facilities?

FITZGERALD: If they are in mainstream they have to be protected from bullying. The Norwegians are good at protecting these children from bullying – their government championed and funded research into the scale of the problem and into devising and testing a bullying-prevention programme, which is now in place in its schools, from pre-school upwards. There is no reason why the Irish and English couldn't adopt the Norwegian approach to anti-bullying and take it more seriously. After all, preventing bullying is the parent's and the teacher's job. People with Asperger's syndrome can't protect themselves, and we aren't giving them sufficient protection. We mock them, call them odd and say they are doing strange things deliberately, when they just don't know and can't relate to what is sometimes antisocial about what they are doing.

GRIFFIN: And, of course, historically, parents were blamed for children's autistic disorders.

FITZGERALD: Yes, the 'refrigerator' mother was supposed to be the cause of it.

GRIFFIN: That psychoanalytical view is roundly dismissed now. Although the parents might show some Asperger's traits, their behaviour was not the cause.

FITZGERALD: No. That was outrageous. I think the refrigerator mother concept was the greatest psychiatric catastrophe of the 20th century.

GRIFFIN: Indeed. There is something else I wanted to discuss with you – something that my colleagues and I are studying at the moment. We have observed that our institutions seem to be becoming progressively more autistic in some respects. So much red tape, control freakery, setting targets, endless rules and regulations trying to regulate for every little thing, continuous changes being made without seeing the wider implications of the changes for humanity, and all done with the best of intentions but actually doing immense damage – to education systems, health services, social services, the military, and the ordinary enjoyment of life. Is there a connection?

FITZGERALD: Yes, you're right about that. What's happening is that people in power are increasingly excessively controlling. They want to take control of everything, and that's the antithesis of creativity.

GRIFFIN: So might it be, then, Michael, that some highly intelligent people with Asperger's are getting into positions of power and their straightline thinking style is actually influencing culture, perhaps in harmful ways?

FITZGERALD: I hadn't thought of that – this is your own creativity! But take Éamon de Valéra [a founding father, Taoiseach and former president of the Irish Republic, who played a part in the 1916 rebellion to create it]; he was like that. He was incredible controlling. I think that you are right there actually. I am impressed by your creativity. It's all about control.

GRIFFIN: Well, I found the light you throw on the behaviour of many politicians and leaders fascinating. Almost whenever what they do baffles the rest of us, we find Asperger's people behind it. Éamon de Valéra, for example, made decisions that seemed to make no sense and puzzle everyone to this day. His obsessive pursuit of his own personal view prevented him from being flexible when flexibility was needed.

FITZGERALD: Exactly. He had no capacity to be flexible.

GRIFFIN: And we see this today in this age of the target and 'tick-box'!

FITZGERALD: Bigger and bigger departments, more and more laws, control becoming more centralised – that's an autistic phenomenon.

GRIFFIN: Yes, and given the fact that you have so clearly illustrated that some very prominent recent ex-politicians showed Asperger's-type traits – like de Valéra in Ireland and Thatcher's education secretary Keith Joseph in England – do you think it's possible that some of our political leaders today might also be showing some of those traits?

FITZGERALD: Well, of course. I'm reluctant to name names of *living* people but there is no doubt that politicians are often Asperger's types. There was Jefferson in America, Keith Joseph and Enoch Powell in England, and Hitler in Germany and the founder of Pakistan, Quaid-i-Azam Mohammad Ali Jinnah. These people are all dead, but obviously the genes don't die out, so what was true in the past is true in the present as well. There's no doubt about that. And this understanding does offer great insight into certain political leaders of today. But I'm unwilling to name them.

GRIFFIN: Naturally. People who are talented and Asperger's very often have 'autistic charm' or 'charisma'. This, combined with the purity of their vision, can make them hugely influential people. People full of doubts and confusion, which most of us are, follow them blindly.

FITZGERALD: That's right. It's a myth that they are always boring, uninteresting, dreary, and so on. They can be the most fascinating people on the face of the earth, because they have such original ideas and such vast pools of knowledge, and, of course, they have certainty as well and that is very powerful. The obvious example is Einstein. Everybody in the world knew about him at the time – he was a superstar, a real celebrity! Everybody wanted to meet him and he had

unbelievable charisma.

GRIFFIN: So, if we were to look for these Asperger's genius characteristics in influential politicians today, we would expect them to be very charismatic and to have a great certainty about the purity of their own vision, together with a conviction that they are right?

FITZGERALD: Absolutely, there is no doubt about that. We should know this about our leaders, our masters, because they can destroy us all. They can take us to war, bankrupt us, take away our freedoms, damage the environment. Many of our leaders are autistic and they create autistic government. We should not be taken in by all the sloganising that goes on. This is where psychologists have a role in educating people.

GRIFFIN: Do you think that, along with the certainty which people find so charismatic, come grandiose feelings about their role in life?

FITZGERALD: They might have grandiosity, yes. They are often very narcissistic and grandiose. There is a paradox: they usually have low self-esteem as one aspect of their personality but another aspect is tremendously grandiose fantasies, where they believe themselves to be fantastic, and to know everything. They often show great concern for their own 'legacy', too. In politicians, that is problematic.

GRIFFIN: But in some cases, as with poets like W B Yeats, they have the talent to match the grandiosity! His legacy was great for example.

FITZGERALD: Yes, but the problem with grandiose people is that they think that they are the best in the world.

GRIFFIN: Which is insufferable, if you're living with somebody like that!

FITZGERALD: And so they always get caught with that. Yeats, I think, was one of the best poets in the world at the time, and Wittgenstein was one of the greatest philosophers, so they are two of the few people who are legitimately grandiose – they're not thinking that they are better than they are, because they were the best. Their legacy was great.

GRIFFIN: But, when the sheer charisma of politicians with Asperger's, as they project the power and purity of their vision, doesn't fit real-world circumstances, it can be disastrous.

FITZGERALD: Yes, absolutely. Hitler is the example here, as well as our own de Valera in Ireland.

GRIFFIN: Yes, de Valera arguably held back Irish economic development for decades, "dancing at the crossroads", as he famously said himself. Without his intransigence, arguably, we might even now have a peacefully united Ireland and perhaps no 'troubles' in the north.

FITZGERALD: He burned everything except our coal – he impoverished the country – but I think what's worse is the 1400 who were murdered during the Civil War, which he instigated—

GRIFFIN: —Which he could have avoided. But I suppose, in a sense, that this lack of emotional intimacy and empathy might have meant that he wasn't as deeply affected by the prospect of lost lives as he was by the prospect of his vision not being fulfilled.

FITZGERALD: That's right, I think Asperger's is brilliant for science, mathematics, the arts and literature—

GRIFFIN: —because they are pursuing ultimate questions and may then make discoveries.

FITZGERALD: Yes, but Asperger's people in politics are a disaster! Far too controlling. You

know what de Valéra said: “When I want to know what the Irish people want, I look into my own heart.”

GRIFFIN: If that’s not narcissistic, what is! It’s a good job we don’t find major politicians today saying things like that, believing they are right against all the evidence, ruining countries and getting us into wars and causing mayhem...

FITZGERALD: Asperger’s does explain a lot of what’s going on.

GRIFFIN: You have mentioned Hitler a couple of times and, in your profile of him, you showed that he had Asperger-like traits – would his be a different sort of Asperger’s?

FITZGERALD: Yes, I described him as showing ‘autistic psychopathy’. This is just a personal preference because I wanted to emphasise the psychopathy. When describing non-psychopathic people I use the term Asperger’s syndrome. As well as having an undesirable influence in politics, Asperger’s traits may also explain some of what is happening in universities, which are no longer about creativity but about publishing a lot of papers...

GRIFFIN: Yes, again, it’s the number counting – targets, tick-boxes.

FITZGERALD: Think of it – Einstein had no references in his papers on relativity! Could you imagine a physicist sending his papers in to a scientific journal today with no references?

GRIFFIN: I know. It’s mind-boggling.

FITZGERALD: I mean, today Einstein would automatically be seen as a very stupid man. But nevertheless, in his early papers, he had no review of the literature.

GRIFFIN: Well, the university system has lost the wisdom that the truth needs no other qualification than that it is true!

FITZGERALD: Absolutely. So many universities just churn out papers like sausages on a conveyor belt. They don’t seem to care about whether something is right or true or not.

GRIFFIN: And by behaving like that they undermine the basis of creativity.

FITZGERALD: They want their papers published in high-degree sausage journals, so that they get on the rating scale – in England each article is given an ‘impact factor’, measured by how often it is cited by authors of other journal articles – but this is just about counting the number of publications. It is what is considered to bring status and funding to the institution. Quality counts for nothing now.

GRIFFIN: And that obsession with numbers is an Asperger’s-like trait.

FITZGERALD: Very much so. By the way, [Human Givens](#) is a wonderful journal. Not like that at all. I’ve only read three copies, but it’s one I’d subscribe to – it’s innovative and solid and cutting edge.

GRIFFIN: Thank you. We really appreciate that from someone of your standing.

[Professor Michael Fitzgerald](#) is Henry Marsh Professor of child and adolescent psychiatry at Trinity College, Dublin, clinical and research consultant to the Irish Society for Autism and an honorary member of the Northern Ireland Institute of Human Relations. He has a doctorate in the area of autism and has been a researcher in this field since 1973. Professor Fitzgerald is the author of *Autism and Creativity: is there a link between autism in men and exceptional ability?* (Brunner-Routledge, 2003); *Genesis of Artistic Creativity: Asperger's syndrome and the arts* (Jessica Kingsley, 2005); and, with Antoinette Walker, *Unstoppable Brilliance: Irish geniuses*

and *Asperger's syndrome* (Liberties Press, 2006).

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Anonymous [13 February 2015 at 14:25](#)

totally mind expansion, have recently picked up on the chance i may have some autistic tendancys and my family may verge on the autistic side of the spectrum, found so much within this article that rings true, regards an gratitude NI W