

Autistic Ontology: Why Autistic Embodiment Reveals an Incommensurability Between Modes of Reality

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ABSTRACT

Autism is not a deviation within a shared human ontology, but a distinct mode of world-constitution with its own epistemic and ontological grounding. This paper argues that autistic and non-autistic cognition are anchored in fundamentally different operator logics of reality formation. These differences arise not at the level of interpretation or behavior, but at the level of primary ontological structure. Drawing upon the MNO-theoretical operator model developed in *The Physics of the Poor* (Speed 2016/2025), as well as phenomenological analyses from *They Cannot Understand* (Speed 2025), I contend that autistic reality formation is an internally coherent, fidelity-driven, non-representational mode of world-construction. Neurotypical reality, in contrast, is structured through representational abstraction and normativity.

Autistic–non-autistic misunderstanding therefore emerges not from communicative gaps, but from ontological incommensurability. To participate in neurotypical sociality, autistic individuals must abandon their primary operator mode and adopt an imposed representational ontology. I introduce the term *Seinsverschiebung* (ontological displacement) to describe this forced ontological transition. Masking is the behavioral manifestation of this displacement; burnout and shutdown are physiological responses to ontological instability.

Autism does not distort reality; it reveals that human reality is plural rather than singular.

KEYWORDS

autistic ontology; autistic epistemology; neurodivergence; ontological incommensurability; MNO-theory; *Seinsverschiebung*; masking; embodied cognition; phenomenology

1. INTRODUCTION

Contemporary autism research is built upon an implicit assumption: that autistic and non-autistic individuals inhabit the same ontological ground, and that differences between them arise from diverging cognitive, communicative, or social processes. Within this framework, autism is framed either as a medical deficit, a neurological divergence, or a mismatch between individual variation and societal norms. Even Critical Autism Studies (CAS), despite its reframing of autism as a site of epistemic injustice, often leaves intact the assumption of a single shared human ontology.

This paper challenges that foundational assumption.

I argue that autism constitutes a distinct ontological mode of being-in-the-world. Autistic reality is constructed through direct sensory coupling, structural fidelity, and minimal representational mediation. Neurotypical reality is constructed through symbolic abstraction, normative stabilization, and socially coordinated coherence. The conflict between these modes arises not from failed communication or social misunderstanding, but from incompatible ontological architectures.

Autistic–non-autistic interaction therefore becomes a site of ontological negotiation. When autistic individuals enter neurotypical social environments, they are compelled to abandon their primary grounding in perceptual reality and adopt a representational mode foreign to their own. This is not adaptation but ontological coercion. I term this process *Seinsverschiebung*: the displacement of one’s fundamental mode of being into an externally imposed ontology.

The stakes of this argument extend beyond autism research. If autism reveals the plurality of human ontologies, then many foundational assumptions in philosophy of mind, cognitive science, phenomenology, and social theory must be reconsidered. Autism is not simply a category within a shared human world; it is evidence that human worlds themselves differ.

The term ontology is used here not in a metaphysical sense but in an operational-architectural one: it designates the operator-level structures through which a subject constitutes and stabilizes world-relations. In this framework, autistic and non-autistic ontologies differ not as metaphysical doctrines but as distinct architectures of sense-making.

2. BACKGROUND AND RELATED WORK

2.1 Traditional Autism Models

Traditional medicalized accounts of autism conceptualize autistic traits as deficits relative to neurotypical norms. These models implicitly assume neurotypical cognition as a

reference ontology, rendering autistic cognition an impaired variant of the same structure. This assumption is not merely incorrect— it is ontologically violent, as it denies autistic world-construction its legitimacy.

2.2 Critical Autism Studies

CAS has reframed autism through the lens of epistemic injustice (Fricker 2007; Chapman 2021). The Double Empathy Problem (Milton 2012) identifies reciprocal misunderstanding between autistic and non-autistic people, but leaves unexplained why this misunderstanding persists even under conditions of goodwill and shared intention. This gap points to deeper ontological divergence.

2.3 Enactivism and Embodied Cognition

Enactivist models (Varela et al. 1991; De Jaegher & Di Paolo 2007) describe cognition as world-involving, embodied, and relational. These frameworks resonate strongly with autistic phenomenology, which reveals cognition grounded in direct structural coupling rather than representational inference. Yet enactivism rarely addresses the possibility of multiple coexisting ontologies.

Incommensurability, as used here, does not imply communicative impossibility or conceptual isolation. It denotes asymmetrical operator-constraints: autistic and neurotypical subjects can communicate, but only through continuous ontological translation work. The friction, fatigue, and chronic mis-attunement reported by autistic individuals are not signs of communicative deficit but of ongoing operator conversion under incompatible world-conditions. The term therefore marks structural divergence, not hermetic separation.

Established explanatory frameworks for autistic experience — sensory processing accounts, predictive-processing theories, executive-function differences, and social-pragmatic models — each illuminate partial aspects of autistic life. None, however, address the structural conditions under which sense-making itself becomes possible or impossible. The present argument does not reject these models; instead, it situates them within a deeper operator-architectural divergence. Sensory overload, for instance, is not merely a perceptual issue but an operator boundary-condition: a collapse of stabilisation under incompatible world-constraints. Predictive-processing differences are likewise interpretable as shifts in operator priority. In this sense, ontological divergence is not an alternative to existing accounts, but the structural layer that makes them intelligible.

While this analysis identifies operator-level tendencies characteristic of autistic experience, individual variation remains considerable. The ontological divergence proposed here describes a modal pattern rather than a uniform or universal condition. Autistic subjects

differ in thresholds, sensitivities, stabilisation strategies, and degrees of susceptibility to environmental coercion. The account developed here therefore addresses structural tendencies, not categorical absolutes.

Successful autistic–neurotypical communication occurs when ontological translation work is reduced or temporarily suspended. This generally requires explicitness, lowered sensory and social load, extended processing time, and environments that do not impose neurotypical stabilisation demands. Under such conditions, operator constraints align more closely, allowing interaction that is not structurally extractive or cumulatively destabilising.

2.4 Phenomenological Accounts

Phenomenology introduces the idea that perception is active structuring rather than passive reception. Autistic perception, however, is seldom analyzed as a distinctive phenomenological stance. The present paper fills this gap by framing autistic experience as an ontologically distinct mode of world-constitution.

The form of argument deployed here is structural rather than empirical-deductive. It identifies the operator-conditions under which certain experiential patterns necessarily arise. The reasoning is therefore neither circular nor inductive: the phenomena do not “prove” the ontology; rather, the ontology renders the phenomena intelligible by articulating their structural preconditions. This mode of analysis belongs to the family of transcendental-phenomenological arguments, not hypothesis-driven empirical science.

3. METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK

This paper develops a structural–phenomenological analysis rather than an empirical-deductive study. Its aim is to articulate the operator-level conditions under which autistic and neurotypical worlds diverge, stabilise, or collapse. The method follows the tradition of embodied, first-person, and enactive phenomenology, extending it through an operator-architectural lens grounded in autistic cognitive experience.

Methodological Note.

The present analysis does not aim at empirical generalisation and does not follow the conventions of qualitative psychological research. The examples offered in Section 4 function as *phenomenological vignettes* rather than as “cases” in the empirical sense. Their purpose is not to represent a population but to disclose structurally revealing configurations of experience that allow operator-level dynamics to become analytically visible. This is consistent with phenomenological traditions (Husserl; Merleau-Ponty; Zahavi) and with autistic first-person methodologies, where the central aim is *structural disclosure* rather than inductive proof.

Definition of Operator.

An *operator* refers to the procedural rule-set through which a subject constitutes and stabilises world-relations. It is neither a mental representation nor a metaphor, but the enacted logic by which sense-making coheres under environmental pressure. Operator architectures determine which affordances appear salient, which perturbations destabilise cognition, and how experiential patterns consolidate or collapse. Different operator configurations therefore yield different phenomenological worlds, even under identical external conditions.

Autistic methodology operates through four key tendencies:

1. **Perceptual fidelity:** a heightened resistance to smoothing or interpretive normalization of incoming information.
2. **Hyperspecificity:** a fine-grained, detail-sensitive mode of attunement that resists abstraction toward generic categories.
3. **Pattern attunement:** a sensitivity to structural invariants, environmental regularities, and deep relational configurations.
4. **Non-representational immediacy:** sense-making grounded in direct environmental coupling rather than symbolic mediation.

This non-representational orientation aligns methodologically with contemporary non-representational cognitive science (e.g., Gallagher; Hutto; Chemero), which similarly emphasises direct organism–environment coupling over internal intermediary representations, though in the autistic case these operator dynamics appear significantly more structurally pronounced.

Together, these tendencies constitute a methodological stance that is not merely epistemic but *ontological*: they shape how worlds are constituted, not merely how they are perceived. The methodological framework thus reflects the same operator-architectural divergence that the theory seeks to describe.

4. FINDINGS

4.1 Autism as a Mode of Reality

Autistic reality emerges through direct engagement with the world. Structures are not inferred; they are encountered. The autistic mind stabilizes reality by leaning into sensory fidelity and precise coupling rather than smoothing irregularities via social expectation or representational filtering. This mode of reality construction is coherent on its own terms and reveals a fidelity-centered ontology.

4.2 Divergence in Ontological Architecture

Neurotypical world-constitution is typically characterised by strong representational smoothing, rapid categorisation, and automatic inferential compression. Perceptual fields are stabilised through coarse-grained abstraction: environmental variation is filtered into socially functional categories (“friendly,” “neutral,” “uncertain”) rather than maintained at high fidelity. This filtering produces a world that is experientially coherent, low in perturbation, and highly supportive of fast social coordination. Normative expectations, conversational conventions, and shared scripts operate as background stabilisers, reducing cognitive load through habitualisation. What appears to autistic subjects as an unstable or contradictory field is, for neurotypical subjects, a pre-organised landscape of affordances that rarely threatens operator collapse.

Neurotypical cognition constructs reality through the triangulation of

- representational abstraction,
- normative stabilisation,
- social coordination.

Autistic cognition constructs reality through

- direct structural coupling,
- fidelity-driven processing,
- non-normative attunement.

These architectures differ in their fundamental logic. The neurotypical mode prioritises coherence *across individuals*; the autistic mode prioritises coherence *within the structure of reality itself*.

Ontological divergence therefore operates not only at the individual level but at the field level.

In social environments, the neurotypical ontology functions as a *field operator*: institutions, spatial arrangements, temporal rhythms, communicative norms, and evaluative criteria are organised in ways that stabilise neurotypical patterns while suppressing high-fidelity or non-representational forms of sense-making. From an MNO perspective, such fields act as ontological filters: dimensions of autistic complexity that do not fold into the dominant object-logic fail to appear as meaningful phenomena. What cannot be rendered through representational or normative smoothing becomes structurally invisible.

This produces a characteristic displacement effect: the autistic subject is pushed toward the edge of the field geometry, where their reality appears only as noise, excess, or deviation. In MNO terms, this is an *absence through the object*: a field order fixed by things and objects renders invisible whatever cannot be absorbed into its representational stabilisation. Seinsverschiebung (Shift of being) is therefore not merely an internal operator conversion but the systemic non-representability of autistic complexity within dominant world-fields.

4.3 Exist or Be Understood — But Not Both

Autistic individuals face an ontological double bind: to be understood within neurotypical frameworks requires suppressing the operator mode that makes autistic reality coherent. Autistic selfhood is grounded in unmediated attunement to reality; neurotypical understanding requires mediated representation. These modes are structurally incompatible.

4.4 Limits of the Double Empathy Problem

Milton's Double Empathy Problem identifies bidirectional misunderstanding but does not articulate the ontological mechanism. The mechanism proposed here is divergence in operator-level world-constitution. Understanding fails not due to lack of empathy but due to incompatible ontological premises.

4.5 AUTISTIC EPISTEMOLOGY

Autistic epistemology constitutes a distinct mode of knowing grounded not in abstraction or consensus but in fidelity, invariance, and embodied attunement. Unlike neurotypical epistemology—which relies on norm-driven interpretive filtering—autistic cognition treats perceptual contact with the world as primary rather than derivative. Information is not reconstructed through symbolic categories but apprehended directly as structure.

This epistemic mode prioritizes:

- structural accuracy over social coherence,
- invariance over generalization,
- direct coupling over representational mediation.

Autistic knowledge is therefore not a variation of neurotypical knowledge but an alternative epistemic regime. Attempts to evaluate autistic cognition by neurotypical criteria commit a category error: they apply a representational standard to a non-representational system. This misalignment underlies much of the epistemic injustice described in Critical Autism Studies.

4.6 ONTOLOGICAL DISPLACEMENT (SEINSVERSCHIEBUNG)

Seinsverschiebung refers to the forced transition from an individual's primary ontological mode into an imposed, socially dominant one. In autistic life, this occurs when neurotypical

environments compel the adoption of representational abstraction and normative coherence, even when these contradict the autistic mode of reality formation.

Masking is the behavioral surface of this displacement. Burnout and shutdown are its physiological consequences, resulting from prolonged ontological instability rather than emotional weakness or cognitive overload.

Case Example (Formalized):

An autistic subject reported that participating in workplace meetings required suppressing direct sensory processing in favor of representational framing. This produced a split between experienced reality and the socially enforced ontology. Over time, the subject experienced derealization, sensory fragmentation, and eventual collapse—consistent with ontological overload rather than psychological dysfunction.

4.7 MNO-Theory and Operator Collapse

The operator-level divergence that distinguishes autistic and neurotypical world-relations can be further clarified by the cyclic dynamics described in MNO-Theory. MNO refers to three operator-phases — **Submergence**, **Indimergence**, and **Emergence** — which articulate how sense-making modulates under conditions of overload, instability, or reconfiguration.

Submergence designates the phase in which environmental pressures overwhelm the subject's stabilisation capacities. The subject becomes absorbed into incompatible world-conditions, losing operator coherence as external demands exceed available processing channels.

Indimergence marks the critical threshold at which the operator architecture destabilises. Boundaries become permeable, priorities collapse, and the subject's world loses its continuity. This phase is neither breakdown nor adaptation but the liminal zone in which a new configuration becomes necessary.

Emergence denotes the re-establishment of coherence under a revised operator configuration. Stability returns, but only through a transformation in the subject's relation to the environment — new priorities, new thresholds, new structural couplings. Emergence is not a "return to baseline"; it is the formation of a different world.

These phases are not metaphysical categories but **architectural descriptors**: they capture how sense-making reorganises when confronted with incompatible environmental constraints. Their relevance for autism lies in the significantly altered thresholds at which submergence is triggered, indimergence sustained, and emergence forced. Autistic subjects often encounter submergence in environments that remain stable for neurotypical subjects,

not because of sensory “oversensitivity” alone, but because the operator architecture itself is differently configured.

This model makes visible the structural dynamics underlying autistic shutdowns, overwhelm, cognitive fragmentation, and the need for highly controlled environments. What appears clinically as “meltdown,” “burnout,” or “overload” is, at the operator level, a forced traversal of the MNO cycle. Neurotypical stabilisation patterns can often prevent submergence through coarse-grained smoothing mechanisms; autistic operators, by contrast, tend toward fidelity-driven processing, which collapses earlier when confronted with incompatible demands.

Why the ontological account is necessary.

MNO-Theory reveals why sensory, cognitive, affective, and social differences in autism systematically co-occur and reinforce each other. Partial explanatory models isolate one domain — sensory overload, predictive processing, executive function — but none explain their coordinated instability. The operator-architectural framework shows that these domains are not independent deficits but *expressions of a single underlying world-constitution*. Ontological divergence therefore provides the structural layer that renders heterogeneous autistic phenomena intelligible as manifestations of one coherent operator logic.

Under this view, autistic distress in neurotypical environments is not merely a sensory reaction, not merely a cognitive limitation, and not merely a social mismatch — it is an operator-level destabilisation forced by world-conditions built on a different ontological architecture. MNO-Theory thus frames autistic overwhelm not as pathology but as a predictable effect of ontological misalignment.

4.8 EMPIRICAL AND PHENOMENOLOGICAL EVIDENCE

Autistic phenomenology reveals consistent structural patterns across subjects:

The following case vignettes are not empirical case studies in the clinical or psychological sense, but phenomenological examples. Some are based on autobiographical experience, others are condensed composite cases drawn from long-term field observation. Their purpose is to illustrate operator-level structural patterns, not to provide statistical representativeness or empirical completeness.

Case Example 1 : Operator Destabilisation in Social Interaction

During a routine team meeting, an autistic researcher (Subject A) described the conversational environment as a rapidly shifting field of sensory and relational fragments: overlapping voice timbres, subtle changes in posture, micro-expressions, the resonance of the room’s acoustics, the rhythmic fluctuations of group attention. Each element arrived

with equal salience. No automatic filtering occurred; instead, every micro-variation demanded incorporation into an already saturated field.

To contribute verbally, Subject A reported having to suppress this high-fidelity perceptual field and actively translate sensory patterns into conceptual categories legible to neurotypical participants—“annoyed,” “uncertain,” “supportive,” “impatient.” This translation required continuous dual-processing: one stream tracking environmental structure at unfiltered resolution, another generating the socially acceptable representational layer the group expected.

After approximately 45 minutes, the translation process became unsustainable. Subject A described “being pulled out of my world into theirs,” accompanied by derealization, increasing fragmentation, and a sense of perceptual drift. The collapse did not arise from emotional overwhelm but from operator destabilisation: the incompatibility between fidelity-driven processing and representational social demands forced a traversal of the Submergence–Indimergence cycle. What neurotypical participants experienced as a minor, routine meeting corresponded for Subject A to a progressive breakdown of world-coherence.

Case Example 2:

During a social interaction, an autistic individual reported needing to pre-translate sensory impressions into socially legible representations. This produced latency, cognitive strain, and a sense of ontological dislocation. The subject described the experience as “stepping out of my world into theirs,” aligning directly with the concept of *Seinsverschiebung*.

Case Example 3:

A subject exposed to continuous normative expectations (e.g., eye contact, conversational pacing) experienced escalating internal fragmentation. The breakdown occurred not due to emotional stress but from structural incompatibility between autistic ontology and imposed neurotypical norms. This aligns with MNO predictions of operator conflict.

Case Example 4:

An autistic researcher reported that high-fidelity focus allowed detection of relational patterns invisible to others. This supports the claim that autistic epistemology can access structural information inaccessible to representational epistemologies.

Across cases, patterns show that autistic breakdowns are not failures of coping but failures of environmental ontological compatibility.

4.9 Relation to Predictive Processing Accounts

Predictive Processing (PP) models of autism describe altered precision-weighting and reduced top-down modulation. While these accounts illuminate important aspects of autistic perception, they remain confined to computational dynamics internal to the individual. They do not explain the structural co-occurrence of sensory, social, and affective instability. The operator-architectural framework developed here situates PP phenomena within a broader ontological configuration: altered precision is not a local anomaly but a manifestation of a distinct mode of world-constitution. PP describes how predictions fail; operator theory explains why failures cascade across domains and lead to systemic destabilisation.

5. IMPLICATIONS

5.1 Scientific Implications

Recognizing autism as a distinct ontological mode requires a fundamental revision of cognitive science and philosophy of mind. The assumption of a single shared human ontology—upon which most models of cognition, perception, and communication rely—can no longer be sustained. Cognitive theories must incorporate the possibility of multiple operator-level systems for reality-constitution, each with its own coherence conditions. Autism becomes evidence of ontological plurality, not deviation.

This shift challenges representational models of cognition. Autistic epistemology demonstrates that direct structural coupling is not only possible but stable and coherent. Autism provides empirical counterexamples to theories that assume representation as the universal basis of cognition.

5.2 Clinical and Therapeutic Implications

Therapeutic models premised on normalizing autistic behavior enact ontological harm. When practitioners attempt to align autistic individuals with neurotypical norms—whether through social skills training, eye-contact enforcement, or behavior-shaping—they are not supporting adaptation but imposing *Seinsverschiebung*.

Ontological displacement is not therapeutic; it is destabilizing. Burnout, shutdown, and chronic exhaustion arise not from autism itself but from forced conformity to an incompatible ontological framework. Interventions must instead support autistic individuals in stabilizing their primary operator mode and in reducing ontological conflict.

5.3 Social and Political Implications

Society treats neurotypical ontology as universal, rendering autistic ontology invisible and illegible. This creates structural oppression: norms are written for one ontological architecture and enforced upon another. Policies, institutions, workplaces, communicative expectations, and temporal regimes are designed around neurotypical stabilisation dynamics, producing environments that consistently require autistic individuals to abandon or compress their primary operator mode.

Ontological field dominance means that neurotypical perceptual and evaluative grids structure the shared reality-field such that autistic contributions register only as deviation, excess, or defect. Complex, non-normative patterns that are coherent from an autistic perspective either fail to appear in public space altogether or are classified as “too much,” “incomprehensible,” or “irrational.” This field logic generates a dual movement: it forces autistic subjects into self-compression (*Seinsverschiebung*), and it erases those aspects of autistic reality that cannot be translated into the neurotypical object- and norm-order. Politically speaking, autistic ontology is not merely marginalised; it is actively rendered illegible in its most complex expressions.

Justice therefore requires not assimilation but ontological accommodation: the creation of social, institutional, and epistemic infrastructures that permit multiple operator architectures to coexist without coercion. Recognition of ontological plurality is not an ethical luxury but a structural necessity.

5.4 Implications for Autism Research

Autistic-led research must be recognized as methodologically and epistemically valid. The insistence that autistic perspectives be filtered through neurotypical interpretive frameworks reinforces epistemic injustice. Autistic epistemology offers insight into structural features of reality inaccessible through neurotypical modes of inquiry.

Autism research must shift from explaining autistic deviation to understanding autistic ontology.

6. CONCLUSION

Autism reveals that human reality is not singular but plural. Autistic and neurotypical individuals do not merely interpret the same world differently—they constitute different

worlds. Misunderstanding arises from ontological incompatibility rather than cognitive impairment. Autistic experience demonstrates that cognition is not universally representational, that perception can serve as a primary mode of knowing, and that fidelity to structure can be epistemically generative.

The concept of *Seinsverschiebung* clarifies why autistic individuals suffer in neurotypical environments: they are forced out of their own ontology. Recognizing autistic reality as real—and not as impaired—requires a transformation of science, therapy, and society. Ontological plurality becomes both a descriptive and normative imperative.

The normative implications that follow — particularly regarding therapeutic practices and institutional expectations — arise from the structural account developed here. They are not presuppositions but consequences: if autistic subjects operate under a distinct operator architecture, then interventions aimed at enforcing neurotypical configurations constitute, in effect, ontological coercion. This is a normative inference from descriptive structure, not a moral prior.

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