WHAT DO PHILOSOPHERS TALK ABOUT WHEN THEY TALK ABOUT AUTISM?

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Abstract. Several anecdotal claims about the relationship between philosophical discourse and the subject of autism have been forwarded in recent years. This paper seeks to verify or debunk these descriptive claims by carefully examining the philosophical literature on autism. We conduct a comprehensive scoping review to answer the question, *what do philosophers talk about when they talk about autism?* This empirical work confirms that the philosophy of autism is underdeveloped as a subfield of philosophy. Moreover, the way that philosophers engage with autism is often unreflective and uncritical. As a result, much work in the discipline serves to perpetuate pathologising, dehumanising, and stigmatising misinformation about autistics and autistic behaviour. By highlighting the significant gaps in the philosophical literature on autism, this review aims to deepen our understanding of philosophical thought surrounding autism and contributes to ongoing dialogues pertaining to neurodiversity, madness, and disability rights more generally.

Keywords — autism, neurodiversity, the philosophy of autism, scoping literature review

1. Introduction

It has been suggested that autism is "theoretically or philosophically intriguing ... because it 'goes to the heart' of philosophy" (Russell, 2012, 164), that the "very idea of an autistic person is a philosophical one" (Murray, 2012, 9), and that the "subject of autism is rich with philosophical possibilities" (Anderson and Cushing, 2013, 3). Despite these conjectures, Bölte and Richman (2018, 4) contend that most philosophical work on autism focuses on questions in ethics, the philosophy of mind, the philosophy of psychology, or the philosophy of medicine (4), and Anderson and Cushing (2013) suggest that "the amount of philosophical writing on autism [appears] scanty indeed" (2). Hence, the "philosophy of autism is not (or not yet) a subfield of philosophy" (Bölte and Richman, 2018, 4). If it is true that there is

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an anecdotal link between philosophical discourse and autism, or the very idea of an autistic person is a philosophical one, then Anderson and Cushing (2013, 2) are right to point out that the apparent paucity of philosophical writing *directly* about autism is somewhat puzzling.

Each of the claims noted above is *descriptive*. We might summarise them as follows:

D1. There exists little philosophical work that engages with autism.
D2. Philosophical research on autism centres narrowly on questions in ethics, mind, psychology, or medicine.
D3. Hence, if autism is or ought to be a proper subfield of philosophy, it is underdeveloped at present.

On the assumption that autism *is* rich with philosophical possibility (or that the idea of an autistic person is inherently philosophical), (D1) and (D2) provide evidence for (D3) since a philosophy of autism would necessarily span a breadth of philosophical topics.

In a recent call for papers for a new edited volume, *More Philosophy of Autism*, Anderson and Cushing (2023) contend that, merely one decade ago, philosophical writing on autism was minimal, and cultural (indeed, philosophical) attitudes about autism were extremely negative. They suggest, furthermore, that in the last decade, (cultural) attitudes and perceptions of autism have become more nuanced, and sympathetic discussions on autism have "exploded". Hence, narrowing the scope of this sentiment to the target of our article—i.e., *philosophical* discussions—we can add the following descriptive claims to the list:

D4. Philosophical work on autism has increased significantly in the last decade.
D5. Recent philosophical work reflects a more sympathetic and nuanced understanding of autism.

Anderson and Cushing's (2023) conviction that much about the discourse on autism has changed in the last decade notwithstanding, misinformation about autism persists—particularly in (unreflective) philosophical writing about autism and autistics.[1] Hence, Walker (2021) suggests that the present state of autism-related discourse in an academic context (which includes specifically philosophical contexts) is "deplorable" insofar as it reflects the "ableist and neuronormative values of the dominant [i.e., neurotypical] culture" (150). Thus,

D6. When philosophers do engage with autism, this engagement is often unreflective and uncritical.

[1]We use "autistics" and related identity-first language throughout to denote autistic individuals.

D7. Despite **D5**, the claims forwarded (or presupposed) by philosophers are predominantly negative insofar as they stigmatise, dehumanise, or pathologise autistics and autistic behaviour (if only inadvertently).

Each of the limiting, positive, and negative claims, (D1) through (D7), describes a view that has been put forward *anecdotally*. However, because these claims are descriptive, whether they are true or false is an *empirical* question. Hence, each claim can be validated by carefully examining the philosophical literature on autism. This paper provides such an examination by addressing the following key question:

What do philosophers talk about when they talk about autism?

To answer this question, we conduct a comprehensive scoping review to map and summarise philosophical engagement with autism systematically. The database for our review includes 67 philosophy journals, yielding nearly 2000 articles, with approximately 1100 meeting our inclusion criteria. These articles were classified according to features of interest using qualitative data analysis software. These data suggest that philosophy has done an astonishingly poor job of keeping up with critical and conceptual developments about autism.

Section 2 outlines the scoping review method that we employ, including the steps taken to identify relevant databases, search terms, and inclusion/exclusion criteria. In Section 3, we summarise some key statistics arising from qualitatively coding articles in our corpus. When appropriate, we contextualise these statistics by introducing the relevant history, background, or theory. Section 4 draws attention to some key gaps by examining keywords and subjects that are (relatively) absent from the corpus. Section 5 synthesises the statistics described in Sections 3 and 4 to validate (or falsify) the descriptive claims (D1) through (D7). We also reflect on the limitations of the method employed(Section 5.1), and we offer some suggestions (normative claims) motivated by the current state of the literature (Section 5.2).

Hence, in addition to confirming or disconfirming descriptive claims philosophers have made about autism and advancing several normative claims about the philosophy of autism en route, this review also highlights extensive gaps in the literature, thus gesturing toward future work. Accordingly, this review not only deepens understanding of philosophical thought surrounding autism but also contributes to the ongoing dialogue concerning neurodiversity, madness, and disability rights.

Our main contribution is providing specific empirical evidence to support (or deny) these (anecdotal) descriptive claims about the state of research on autism within "mainstream" philosophical discourse. That said, it is worthwhile to draw attention to the fact that many of the ideas we present and conclusions we derive have been previously proposed by other scholars—many of whom are autistic and some of whom are philosophers. We do not claim to be the first to discuss these

topics. In fact, much of our work is inspired by earlier critical research, which is often published outside the journals included in our review. What sets our contribution apart is the systematic exploration of this topic, demonstrating empirically, rather than anecdotally, that negative, dehumanising, pathologising, and stigmatising views toward autistics are not only current but dominant in the field.

2. Method

To answer the question, *what do philosophers talk about when they talk about autism?*, we conduct a comprehensive scoping review of the philosophical literature on autism. Unlike a systematic literature review, which aims to answer a specific research question through comprehensive synthesis of available evidence, a scoping review seeks to map out the existing literature, identifying key concepts, theories, sources, and knowledge gaps.[2]

The steps for conducting a scoping review include the following:[3]

(1) Identifying a research question.
(2) Identifying relevant studies.
    (a) Identifying databases.
    (b) Identifying search terms.
    (c) Identifying inclusion/exclusion criteria.
(3) Selecting articles to be included in the review.
(4) Coding articles and charting data.
(5) Collating, summarising, and reporting the results.

In this section, we discuss our method for Steps 2–4 before presenting the results and analysis of our review in Sections 3-5.

Databases. Usually, when conducting a literature review, researchers consult a database, like *Scopus* or *Web of Science*. However, we are interested in what *philosophers* talk about when they talk about autism. Hence, our review protocol was designed to search a specific set of philosophy journals directly through publishers' websites. In this sense, we are using *philosophy journals* as a proxy for *philosophers*, on the assumption that most researchers who publish in philosophy journals are in fact philosophers.

To compile a list of candidate journals, we begin with Kate Devitt's LGSCD-INDEX ranking of philosophy journals. This ranking uses data from Leiter's ranking and Google Scholar data, weighted by citable documents (Devitt, 2014), yielding a base list of 34 candidate journals;[4] see Appendix A.1.

[2]See Arksey and O'Malley (2005); Levac et al. (2010); Colquhoun et al. (2014); Pham et al. (2014); Peters et al. (2015).
[3]See Mak and Thomas (2022) for additional details.
[4]Note that *Archiv fur Geschichte der Philosophie* was excluded because of access issues.

To this list, we added eight journals noted by Devitt that are not indexed by Google metrics[5] and six journals ranked in the top 20 of Google Scholar that did not rank in Leiter;[6] see Appendices A.2 and A.3. Since Devitt's list was published in 2014, we consulted a more recent Leiter ranking from 2022, which included four additional journals; see Appendix A.4.

This list of 52 candidate journals was cross-referenced with de Brouin's (2023) meta-ranking of philosophy journals, leading to the inclusion of seven additional journals; see Appendix A.5.[7] Finally, since all the rankings consulted are "leading" philosophy journals, they are mostly generalist. We added eight pertinent "wild card" journals, which are more specialised but whose subject focus seemed relevant to our research question; see Appendix A.6.

Once this database of 67 journals was compiled, we searched each journal directly through the publishers' websites for a determined set of keywords. A complete list of the journals consulted is provided in Appendix A.

Search Terms. To conduct a comprehensive scoping review on the philosophy of autism, we used the following search terms:

```
(autis* OR
  asperg* OR
  ‘‘pervasive developmental’’ OR
  kanner* OR
  ‘‘childhood schizophrenia’’)
```

The first search term, `(autis*)`, includes a *wildcard*, *, which returns any number of characters after the root, `(autis)`, or an empty string. This term covers the words "autism(s)", "autistic(s)", "autist(s)", "autistically", in addition to compound words that contain any of these terms—e.g., "infantile autism", "high-/low-functioning autism", "autism spectrum", "autism spectrum disorder(s)", etc.[8] We did not explicitly search for the initialism "ASD" on the assumption that any paper which uses this abbreviation would first introduce it—i.e. "autism spectrum disorder (ASD)"—which would then be captured by the search term.

We assumed that authors might discuss "Asperger's syndrome" or "Asperger's disorder" without mentioning "autism" or "autistic". Hence, the second disjunctive search term, `(asperg*)`, will yield Asperger's (Asperger, Aspergers) syndrome

[5]Note that *Oxford Studies in Metaethics* and *Oxford Studies in Epistemology* were excluded because of issues with the search function on the publisher's website.
[6]Note that *Journal of Consciousness Studies* was excluded because of issues with the search function on the publisher's website.
[7]Note that *Disputatio*, *International Philosophical Quarterly*, and *Res Philosophica* were excluded because of access issues.
[8]This search term could also return "flautist"; see notes on exclusion criteria below.

(disorder, patients), or the identity term "aspergians".[9] The search term would also return references to Asperger, the person, including bibliographic citations in some instances.[10] References solely to the person, Hans Asperger, would be excluded according to the exclusion criteria discussed below.

The phrase search, `(''pervasive developmental'')`, will return the matching string which captures tokens like "pervasive developmental disorder(s)" or "pervasive developmental disorder not otherwise specified". Pervasive developmental disorder was the official classification under which "Autistic Disorder" and "Asperger's Disorder" resided in the fourth iteration of the DSM (APA, 1994, 2000).[11] Again, we assume that tokens of the initialisms, PDD, PDD-NOS, PDD NOS, or PDDNOS, will first introduce the full string, so the phrase search should capture these.

The keyword, `(kanner*)`, will yield Kanner (Kanner's, Kanners) syndrome (disorder). As with `(asperg*)`, this search term could also return references to the person, Leo Kanner—e.g., bibliographic citations. As before, references solely to the person would be excluded according to the exclusion criteria discussed below.

Finally, we also include the phrase search, `(''childhood schizophrenia'')`, since this was how autism was initially conceived prior to the publication of DSM-III (APA, 1980). Hence, philosophers writing in the middle of the 20th century might discuss childhood schizophrenia and, in doing so, refer to what we now call autism.

We do not include "neurodiversity" (or cognates) in our search terms because this casts too wide of a net. Although "neurodivergent" is sometimes (incorrectly) used as a synonym of autistic, several ways of (cognitively) being in the world fall under the umbrella of neurodiversity, including ADHD, schizophrenia, dyslexia, dyscalculia, epilepsy, Tourette's, etc.[12]

For all intents and purposes, our search spans the period from 1911 (when Bleuler (1911) first coined the term "autism" as a symptom of schizophrenia) to the end of 2023, when the search was conducted.

Across the 67 philosophy journals in our database, these search terms yielded 1899 unique articles, averaging 28.34 articles per journal. The range was 0 articles (*Episteme*, *Notre Dame Journal of Formal Logic*) to 175 (*Philosophy, Psychiatry, and Psychology*). Note that more than 2/3 (0.6716) of the journals are below this

[9]Note that the search term `(asperg*)` would exclude the identity term "aspie". We assumed that authors using this term would first introduce the term "asperger's" or "autism". Checking for this term after the fact showed that it was indeed redundant.

[10]Certain publishers' websites or databases consulted, like JStor, search the works cited in addition to the main body of the text, whereas others, like Springer, do not.

[11]The pervasive developmental disorders additionally included *Rett's Disorder*, *Childhood Disintegrative Disorder*, and *Pervasive Developmental Disorder Not Otherwise Specified (NOS)*.

[12]However, we do analyse mentions of neurodiversity within our corpus; see Section 4.3.

average, which is skewed because of the number of hits in the top five journals—*Philosophy, Psychiatry, and Psychology* (175); *The American Journal of Bioethics* (150); *Synthese* (133); *Philosophical Psychology* (130); and *Mind & Language* (106). See Figure 1.

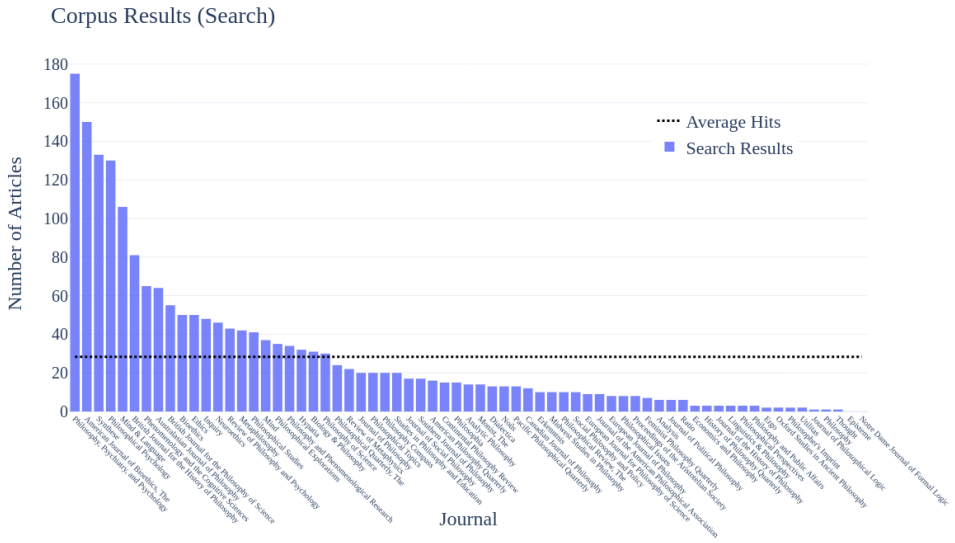

FIGURE 1. Journal database search term results, number of articles by journal

Inclusion/Exclusion Criteria. Now that we have our search results, the next step is to determine inclusion/exclusion criteria because not everything that hits on the search terms will be relevant to our review. The exclusion criteria were deductively and inductively determined as follows:[13]

Code 00: Reference to a flute player
Code 01: Reference to search term outside the main text
Code 02: Invalid document type
Code 03: Non-English article
Code 04: Different sense of "autism"
Code 05: False positive
Code 06: No access

First, the search term, `(autis*)`, would return any reference to ***flautists***. Hence, we would exclude any article about flute players rather than autistics (Code 00).[14]

[13]Deductive exclusion criteria were determined before the search was conducted; inductive criteria arose from the data.
[14]Unless, of course, the article discusses autistic flute players or autistics in addition to flute players.

No articles were excluded by this criterion. Second, if the search term occurred outside the title, abstract, or body of the article—e.g., in the works cited only—we would exclude it (Code 01). As mentioned, some publishers' search function includes the bibliography in the search. So, e.g., an article which does not mention autism but which references an article with "autism" in its title would hit on the search term `(autis*)`. 105 articles were excluded under this criterion.

We also excluded some document types that arose in the search (Code 02)—e.g., tables of contents, critical notices, news bulletins, etc. Additionally, we chose to exclude book reviews since these typically referred to autism through paraphrase, and we are primarily interested in the original ideas that philosophers forward when they talk about autism. 320 articles were excluded under this criterion. Although the journals included in our database are primarily English-language publications, some are multi-lingual. 4 articles from the search were written in a language other than English since the search term `(autis*)` includes the German *Autismus* or *autistich* and the French *autisme* or *autistique*. These articles were excluded (Code 03).

In some cases (typically in the early 20th century), tokens captured by the search term `(autis*)` referred to "autism" or "autistic" in the more etymological sense, deriving from the Greek *autos* ("self"), or they referred to a symptom of schizophrenia, or they used the term in a poetic sense to mean self-facing, egotistic, or solipsistic. Each of these is a different sense of autism than we are interested in when we ask the question, *what do philosophers talk about when they talk about autism?* That is, we are interested in philosophical discourse about a particular way of being in the world, denoted by the present-day sense of "autism". Hence, those articles that used the string "autism" in a different sense[15] were excluded as they arose, and knife-edge cases were discussed amongst the authors. 124 articles were excluded under this criterion (Code 04).

Sometimes, articles would appear in the search results without any keywords. This could happen when the (print) article was scanned and encoded to be machine-readable. This process can result in words like "be**autif**ul" showing up in the search because the "f" is read as a "long s" (ſ). In addition, some articles that did not include the search terms would appear as an artefact of the search function on particular publishers' websites (e.g., Taylor and Francis). 225 articles were excluded as false positives (Code 05). Finally, 9 articles were inaccessible to us and excluded (Code 06).

[15]For example, "The actions of withdrawal are endless: fantasy, autistic image-making, self-persecution, orgies, inferiority feelings, shyness, delusions, melancholia, and so on" (Meadows, 1946).

The bibliographic information for each article resulting from the search was recorded in a spreadsheet. If an article that appeared in the search was to be excluded, the reason (code) was also recorded. For the inclusions, the article was downloaded as a portable document file (PDF). Of the 1899 articles that resulted from searching our journal database for our keywords, 787 (0.4144) were excluded based on our exclusion criteria. A breakdown of exclusions by criterion is shown in Figure 2.

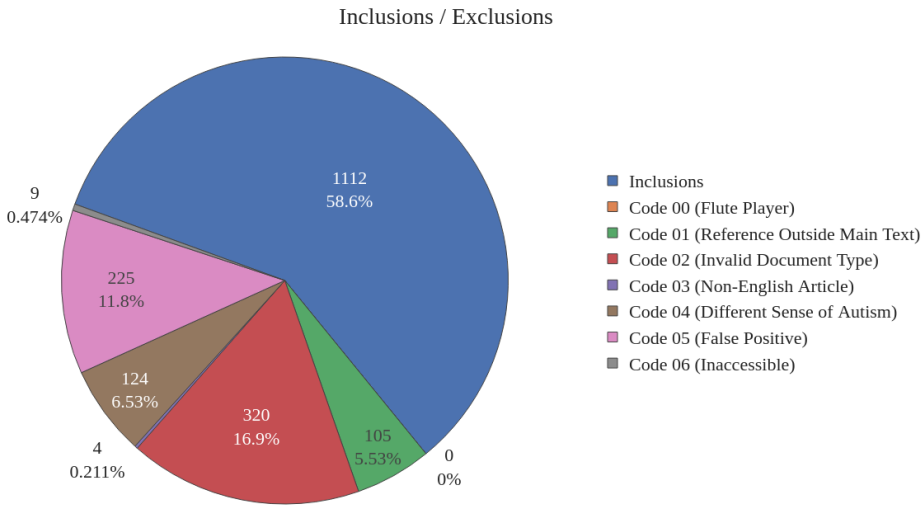

FIGURE 2. Breakdown of exclusions by criterion

Inclusions. Any article that was not excluded was included in our corpus—a total of 1112 articles, or an average of 16.60 articles per journal. The top five journals are as before, although the order has changed slightly; they are now *Synthese* (98); *The American Journal of Bioethics* (94); *Mind and Language* (90); *Philosophical Psychology* (79); and, *Philosophy, Psychiatry, and Psychology* (78). These five journals account for more than 1/3 (0.3947) of the articles included in the corpus of 67 journals. As before, more than 2/3 of the journals (0.7164) had a below-average number of articles. See Figure 3.

It is worth noting that these 67 journals have highly differential publication rates. For example, *Mind* has been in continuous publication since 1876 (148 years), whereas *Feminist Philosophy Quarterly* has only been in print since 2013 (11 years). Similarly, some journals publish annually, quarterly, or monthly—for example, *Synthese* has published twice as many issues as *Analysis* (approximately 775 compared

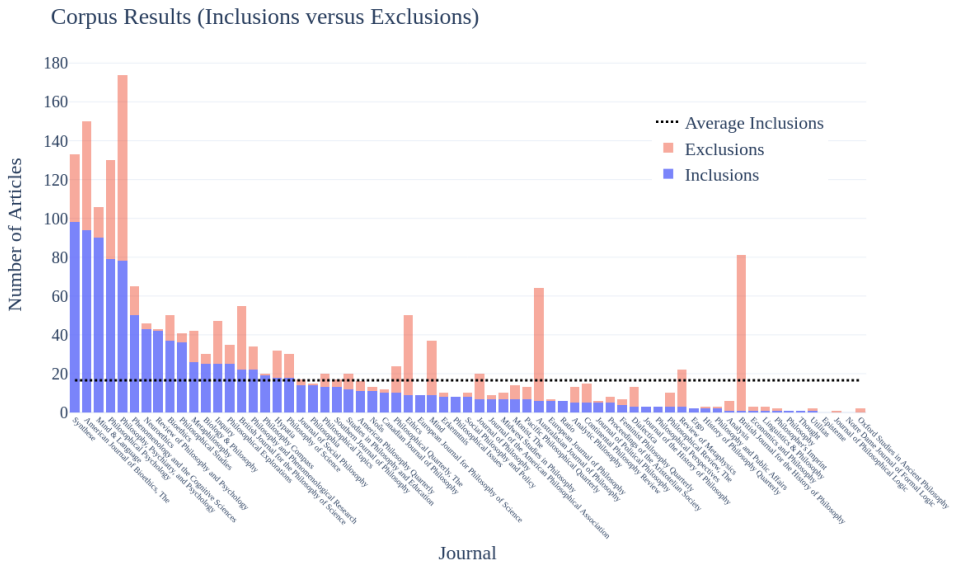

FIGURE 3. Journal database search term results, number of inclusions by journal

with 392) despite that both these journals began publishing around the same time—1936 and 1933, respectively. (This is to say nothing of how many *articles* a given journal publishes per issue, on average.)

In light of this, we can normalise the number of articles by the number of issues for each journal to get a more accurate comparison of the publication rate of articles mentioning autism. Unsurprisingly, the leading publishers in this case are fairly specialist. These include *Neuroethics* (0.8958 articles per issue); *Review of Philosophy and Psychology* (0.8400); *Phenomenology and the Cognitive Sciences* (0.7937); *Philosophy, Psychiatry, and Psychology* (0.6610); *Mind & Language* (0.5114); *The American Journal of Bioethics* (0.4087); and *Philosophical Psychology* (0.4051). Except for *Philosophical Explorations*, there is a natural breaking point between what we consider more generalist philosophy journals versus these specialist journals in the top seven. See Figure 4.

The average publication rate is 0.1262 articles per issue, or approximately 1 article referencing one of the search terms per every eight issues published. Hence, for a typical quarterly publication in a generalist philosophy journal, one article mentioning autism might appear every two years, on average. As before, over 2/3 of the journals (0.7164) had a below-average number of articles per issue.

The PDFs of the inclusions were added to a shared NVivo project, where they were coded according to several qualitative and quantitative features. Section 3 gives descriptions, contexts, and summary statistics for each category of interest.

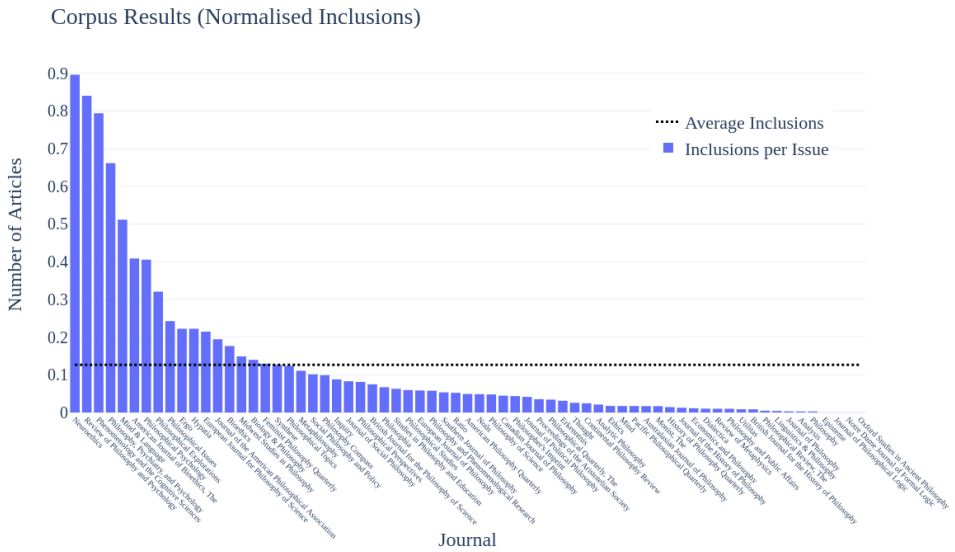

FIGURE 4. Journal database search term results, number of inclusions by journal normalised by issue

3. Summary Statistics

Several quantitative and qualitative coding categories were determined beforehand (deductive coding); additional codes were iteratively added or modified as relevant (inductive coding). These included the occurrence and distribution of search terms (3.1); the volume of publications across time (3.2); philosophically relevant myths (3.3); the language used to describe autistics (3.4); the connotation of the article with respect to autism (3.5); the representation of autistic voices in the corpus (3.6); and, the relative engagement with the subject (3.7). We provide characteristic examples from the corpus in the footnotes for each feature discussed.

3.1. **Search Terms and the History of Terminology.** As mentioned, Bleuler (1911) coined the term "autism" to refer to a symptom of schizophrenia.[16] The first clinical notes referring to autism in the sense that we would conceive of it today are due to Grunya Sukhareva (1926), who characterised the behaviour of six boys in her clinic as having "autistic tendencies". However, Sukhareva's work was not translated from Russian to English until 2013; so, this study was relatively unknown or uncredited. Hans Asperger (1944) similarly observed a group of boys in his clinic in Nazi-occupied Vienna, whom he characterised as "autistic psychopaths". Asperger's work was also relatively unknown (or uncredited) in

[16]"Autism" was used in this sense to describe a subject's symbolic inner life through to the 1950s. However, by the 1970s, "autism" came to describe a complete lack of unconscious symbolic life. See discussion in Evans (2013).

the English-speaking world until Lorna Wing (1981) coined the term "Asperger's syndrome", and Uta Frith (1991) provided an authoritative translation (Asperger, 1991). Despite the prior work of Sukhareva and Asperger, Leo Kanner is credited with the first published account describing autism as a "distinct clinical syndrome" (Kanner, 1943).

The only reference to autism in the first iteration of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (APA, 1952) was as a symptom of childhood schizophrenia. It was not until the publication of the DSM-III in 1980 that autism was separated from schizophrenia as a diagnostic category—first, infantile autism (APA, 1980), then autistic disorder in the DSM-III-R (APA, 1987). Asperger's syndrome was briefly introduced with autistic disorder as a type of pervasive developmental disorder in the DSM-IV and DSM-IV-TR (APA, 1994, 2000) before these diagnostic categories were collapsed into a single label—*autism spectrum disorder*—in the fifth and most recent version of the DSM (APA, 2013, 2022). Figure 5 shows the overlap of search terms in our corpus.

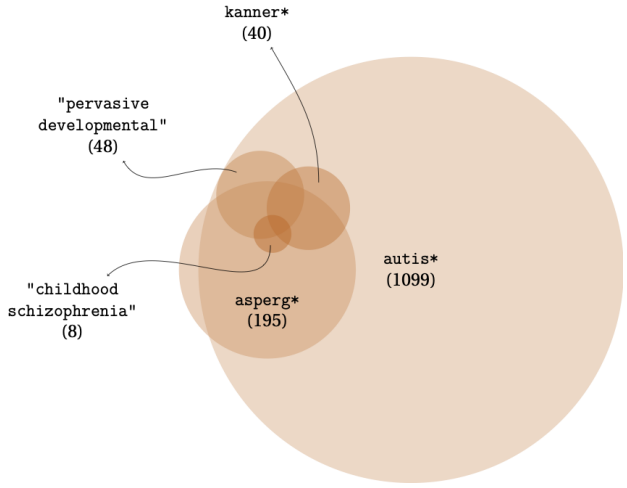

FIGURE 5. Venn diagram of search terms

Considering the occurrence of each of the search terms, we can see that almost all the articles included in the corpus (0.9883) refer to autism and cognates directly: 1099 articles in total.[17] 195 articles (0.1754) refer to Asperger, with 13 of these (0.0117) referring to Asperger without referring to autism. 48 articles (0.0432) refer to pervasive developmental disorder, and 40 (0.0360) refer to Kanner. A total of 8 articles, less than 1% of the corpus (0.0072), refer to "childhood schizophrenia"; most of these describe the history of diagnostic labels for autism. Every article that

[17]Throughout the article, we provide the *number* of articles in addition to the relative proportion of articles in the corpus, or a subset thereof; context should disambiguate.

mentions pervasive developmental disorder, Kanner, or childhood schizophrenia also refers to autism or Asperger's. Hence, the search terms outside of `(autis*)` and `(asperg*)` were wholly redundant.

Given the history of diagnostic labels for describing autistic behaviour, the fact that very few articles discuss childhood schizophrenia, pervasive developmental disorder, or Kanner's syndrome would imply that there is very little engagement in the philosophical literature prior to the 1980s or 1990s. Indeed, this is exactly what we see.

3.2. **Publications by Year.** The distribution of articles in the corpus by year is shown in Figure 6. It should be apparent that mentions of autism in the philosoph-

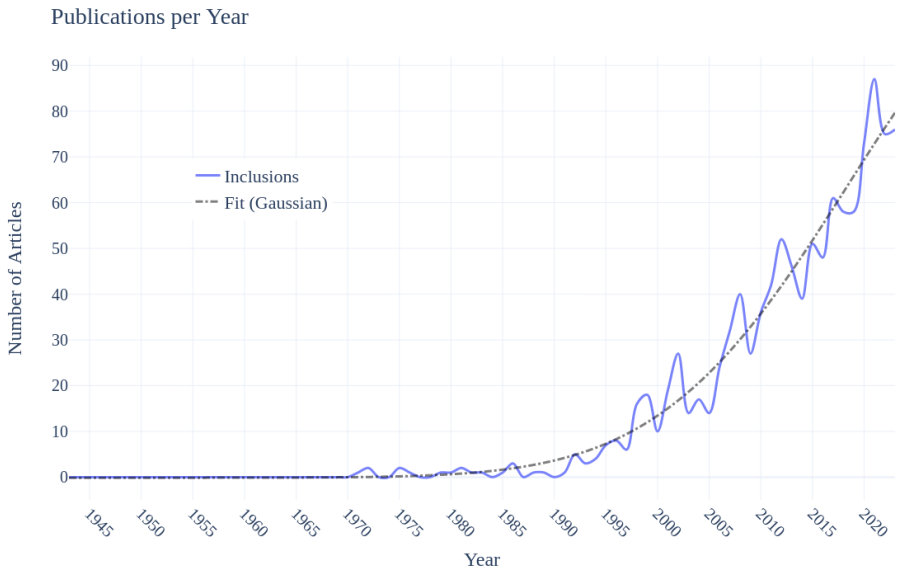

FIGURE 6. Publications mentioning autism across time, with fitted curve (Gaussian)

ical literature are steadily increasing—particularly in the last decade. The highest peak is 87 total articles in 2021. However, it is also worth noting that the literature begins quite late, relative to the "discovery" of autism.[18]

The first article in our corpus that references autism—and therefore, one of the first philosophical works to engage with the subject—is Mitroff (1971), although it had relatively little uptake. This article forwards two key theses. First, philosophers of mind ought to engage with relevant sciences (psychology, anthropology) to ground their theories in real-world empirical research. Second, the philosophical argument

[18]Note that because of the delay between an initial publication date and the assignment of a volume (the official publication date), the statistics for the prior 1–3 years may be slightly inaccurate.

for solipsism is untenable (based on empirical work). In the penultimate section, titled "infantile autism", Mitroff (1971) invokes autism as an empirical thought experiment to make a point about solipsism:

> One of the strangest and most tragic of all childhood diseases is that of infantile autism. The strangeness of autistic children lies in the fact that in their behaviour they act as if other people did not exist. Thus, while autistic children do not consciously articulate and advance the solipsist's argument, by their behaviour they are the closest analogue to the argument itself. To say the least, it is one thing to entertain the philosophical argument, quite another to observe children whose behaviour too closely for comfort mimics the argument. ... In brief, the behaviour of autistic children shows what the solipsist's position actually entails. (384–385)

Despite being highly pathologising, recall that "infantile autism" was not a diagnostic category until the DSM-III, which was published a decade later (APA, 1980). Hence, Mitroff (1971) appears to engage directly with the budding empirical literature on childhood development and infantile autism. However, this is not the case. The sole source of Mitroff's information on autism is Bettelheim (1967) (and Kanner (1943) by proxy). Bruno Bettelheim—the "leading expert" on autism in the 1960s—was a psychoanalyst who popularised the psychogenetic "refrigerator mother" theory of autism, described the autistic child as an "empty fortress", and likened the autistic child to a prisoner of a Nazi concentration camp (Bettelheim, 1967). Hence, Mitroff (1971) refers to "infantile autism" rather than "childhood schizophrenia" simply because this is how Bettelheim (1967) refers to it.

Mentions of "autism" in the philosophical literature begin to increase in the 1990s. This is perhaps unsurprising. The film *Rain Man* was released in 1988, which significantly increased public awareness of autism and coincided with a massive increase in funding for medical research and the broader diagnostic criteria provided by the DSM-III-R (Silberman, 2015).

Examining the cumulative distribution of papers published mentioning autism, we can see that around 1/3 of the philosophical corpus (0.3318) has been published in the last five years. Over half of the corpus (0.5279) was published in the last decade. Around 2/3 of the corpus (0.6511) was published between 2011 and 2023. Nearly 85% of the philosophical corpus mentioning autism (0.8444) was published in the last two decades, since 2004. See Figure 7.

Hence, it appears that the increasing philosophical literature has been caused less by scholarly engagement with autism and more by a general public awareness of autism. However, public perception of autism has been rife with misinformation and myths surrounding autistics and autistic behaviour. Thus, it is worthwhile to see

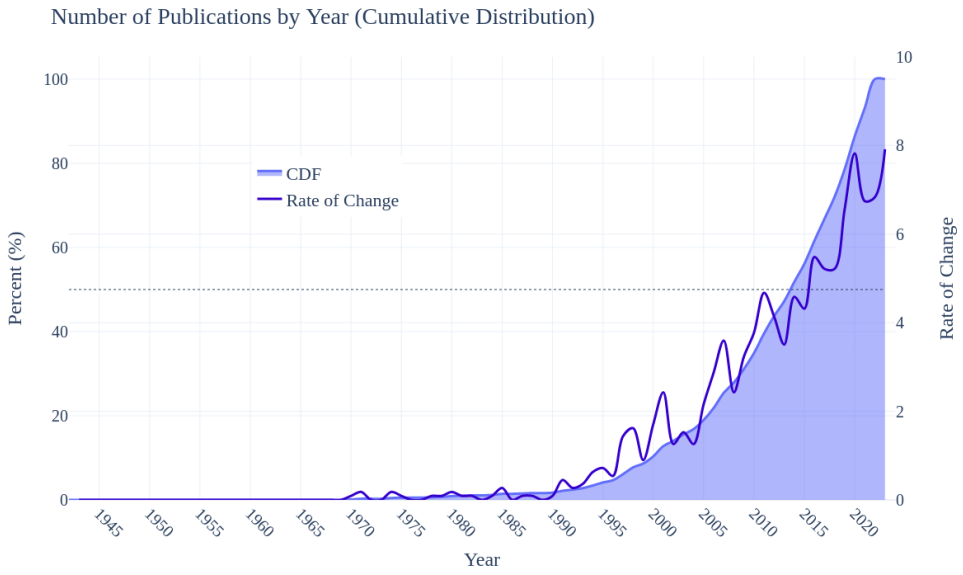

FIGURE 7. Publications mentioning autism across time

how or whether philosophers have assimilated and perpetuated this misinformation from academic or public conceptions of autism.

3.3. **Themes and Myths.** In 1994 and 2000, respectively, the DSM-IV and DSM-IV-TR were published, introducing "Asperger's Syndrome" (APA, 1994, 2000) and further widening the diagnostic criteria for autism. These criteria, in addition to a complicated political landscape through the 1970s and 1980s surrounding advocacy, awareness, accommodation, funding, deinstitutionalisation, stigma, and shifting conceptions of diagnostic labels, led to a massive increase in diagnoses of autism, prompting public awareness and panic about an "epidemic" and its potential causes.
Vaccines. Perhaps one of the most widely known and uncontroversially false myths surrounding autism is that it is caused by vaccinations. Between the publication of the DSM-IV and DSM-IV-TR, Andrew Wakefield published a fraudulent study on the purported link between the measles, mumps, and rubella (MMR) vaccine and autism. Hence, by 1998, the public would have been very familiar with the idea of autism, in no small part because Wakefield heavily promoted this view in the popular media.[19]

[19]Although Wakefield was discredited and barred from practising medicine in the United Kingdom, where he is from, he has found a home in the United States, where he continues to promote anti-vaccination propaganda.

In total, 94 articles (0.0845) mention vaccines in relation to autism. However, none of these *assert* the claim that vaccines cause autism. Instead, each uses "vaccines cause autism" as a toy example to make a point about, e.g., conspiracy theories, the spread of misinformation, the anti-vax movement, vaccine hesitancy, trust in science, values in science, etc. Hence, "vaccines cause autism" appears to have become a favourite prototypical false proposition amongst certain philosophers.

It is worth noting that despite pseudo-scientific claims of a causal link between vaccines and autism dating back to 1998, the philosophical literature did not begin to mention the proposition until 2005. The example *appears* to have been popularised by Lackey (2007), whose "distraught doctor" thought experiment is used to make a point about the knowledge norm of assertion (namely, that it is false). Most of the articles that mention vaccines in relation to autism (32, 0.3404) describe a hypothetical first-order belief that someone might hold to make a point about epistemology or assertion. Indeed, *all* of these refer to vaccines and autism via Lackey (2007). In contrast, only 10 articles that mention vaccines (0.1063) refer to Wakefield directly. Most of these were published after *The Lancet* officially retracted Wakefield's article, in 2010.

Theory of Mind. Between the publication of DSM-III (APA, 1980) and DSM-III-R (APA, 1987), Simon Baron-Cohen, Allan Leslie, and Uta Frith (all considered "leading experts" on autism) published their 1985 paper, "Does the autistic child have a theory of mind?" (Baron-Cohen et al., 1985).[20] This article was the first to falsely suggest that autism can be described as a theory of mind deficit, which would have been particularly interesting to philosophers in the philosophy of mind. And, indeed it is: 252 articles in the corpus (0.2257) refer explicitly to "theory of mind" in relation to autism.[21] Although Krueger (2021, S374) suggests that the theory-of-mind-deficit theory of autism "is no longer the consensus view", only 24 articles that mention theory of mind (0.0952) challenge the idea that autistics lack a theory of mind or that autism consists of a theory of mind deficit. Hence, the vast majority of the articles that mention theory of mind in relation to autism are

[20]Note that this title is a reference to the paper by Premack and Woodruff (1978), "Does the chimpanzee have a theory of mind?". This parallel highlights the fact that the theory-of-mind-deficit theory of autism is dehumanising insofar as it seeks to compare autistic people directly with nonhuman animals, casting them as different (from neurotypicals) by analogy with how humans are different from nonhuman animals. Moreover, this dehumanisation is *inherent* to the very idea of a theory-of-mind deficit insofar as the *construct* of "theory of mind" is derived from research in animal psychology. See discussion in Gough (2023).

[21]This statistic does not include articles that discuss, e.g., simulation theory versus theory theory, empathy, or imagination and pretend play—each of which is related to claims about mindreading abilities—without explicitly using the phrase "theory of mind". Hence, this is a conservative estimate.

either unreflective or uncritical of the view, or they outright endorse the claim.[22] The most recent of these were published in 2023.[23]

It should be apparent that the theory-of-mind-deficit theory of autism is inadequate as a cognitive explanation insofar as, at best, it could only logically explain the *social* features of autistic behaviour.[24] However, instead of abandoning the theory, some researchers[25] have attempted to embed "mindblindness" within a larger theory that purports to explain alleged "essential" neurological differences between "male brains" and "female brains".

Extreme Male Brains. Only 11 articles in the corpus (0.0989) refer to the *extreme male brain* theory of autism (sometimes called the "systematising-empathising (E-S)" theory). Of these articles, 6 are critical of the view (0.5454); however, 4 articles defer to scholarship on the extreme male brain theory of autism without questioning its conclusions, and 1 article seems to endorse the extreme male brain theory, insofar as "it is one of the only models [of autism] to directly address this sharp phenotypic divide" (Weiskopf, 2017, 180). The "phenotypic divide" described here refers to the apparent gender discrepancy in diagnoses; however, this statistic ignores that screening tools are normed for male autistic behaviour. Few articles question this.

Empathy. Related to theory of mind are claims surrounding *empathy*—particularly *cognitive* empathy, which has been associated with theory-of-mind abilities. 152 articles in the corpus (0.1367) refer to empathy explicitly. In particular, 148 refer to an empathy deficit or a lack of empathy in autistics. Only 23 articles mentioning empathy deficits (0.1554) are critical of the claim that autistics lack empathy. Hence, the vast majority of articles referring to autism as constituting an empathy deficit are uncritical of or explicitly endorse this myth (125, 0.8446). The most recent of these were published in 2023.[26]

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[22] Gough (2022) correctly underscores that recent work takes a theory-of-mind deficit to be *characteristic* of autism rather than a hypothesis about autism.

[23] "moral judgments about such scenarios appear to be somewhat abnormal in individuals with autism, a condition with characteristic deficits in theory of mind" (May, 2023, 246); "Persons with schizophrenia and persons with ASD are two populations of individuals who tend to exhibit mindreading deficits accompanied by executive dysfunction" (Munroe, 2023, 306); "But none doubted that among humans it was a universal capacity, for only those suffering from some neuropsychological disorder, such as autism and related dysfunctions included in the Autism Spectrum Disorder, could be defined as having a defective ToM" (Salazar, 2023, 499); "sufferers from autism, whose ability to relate to the emotional life of others through interaction is impaired, also struggle with mental state ascription" (Seemann, 2023, 141).

[24] This point has been highlighted many times before. See, e.g., Shanker (2004); Pellicano (2011); Gernsbacher (2018); Gernsbacher and Yergeau (2019); Gough (2023, 2024); LaCroix (2023) (outside our corpus) and Yergeau and Huebner (2017); Gough (2022) (in our corpus) for additional criticism.

[25] Baron-Cohen (2002, 2003, 2005, 2007, 2008, 2009, 2010).

[26] "The empathic abilities of ASD persons are diminished, and their empathy is less direct" (Nešić, 2023, 13); "Ordinary human perceivers and agents draw on both the felt aspect of human interaction and psychological reasoning to glean insight into the mental lives of others, [**FN**: Empathy is often thought to play a key role in the felt understanding of others.] and sufferers from autism,

Only 1 article of those referring to empathy (0.0066) mentions positive autistic traits related to empathy—e.g., empathetic connection with non-human animals (Arnaud and Gagné-Julien, 2023). Only 2 articles (0.0132) mention the *double empathy problem* by name (discussed in more detail in Section 4 below). Relatedly, 2 additional articles explicitly subvert the stereotype that autistics lack empathy by highlighting demonstrated empathic deficiencies of neurotypicals (evidenced by their treatment of neurodivergent persons).[27]

Psychopathy. In discussions of empathy, some articles distinguish between cognitive and affective empathy—often to differentiate autism from psychopathy. 64 articles in the corpus (0.0576) draw explicit comparisons between autism and psychopathy. Most of these (39, 0.6094) invoke the comparison to explore certain aspects of moral agency. The rhetorical move is to posit that both psychopaths and autistics lack empathy, but autistics *appear* to be moral agents (or at least capable of following moral rules). Hence, a distinction is made between *affective* empathy, which is assumed to be missing in psychopaths, and *cognitive* empathy (i.e., theory of mind), which is assumed to be absent in autistics—hence, autism is used as an argumentative foil to make a claim about psychopathy or empathy deficits in general. 24 articles make such a claim; however, 15 articles argue that neither psychopaths nor autistics are moral agents (or that their moral capacities are similarly diminished or altogether absent). This approach appears to enter the literature via Kennett (2002), whose article, "Autism, Empathy and Moral Agency", is cited by nearly all of those articles that discuss autism and psychopathy in the context of moral agency. Rather than contrasting autistics and psychopaths, autism is sometimes taken to be a "lite" version of psychopathy.[28] Of the articles mentioning psychopathy and autism together, 4 (0.0625) were somewhat critical of the validity of such a comparison.

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whose ability to relate to the emotional life of others through interaction is impaired, also struggle with mental state ascription" (Seemann, 2023, 141).

[27] "neurotypical researchers seem to suffer from a lack of 'empathy' ... or a deficit in theory of minds, which results in difficulties in recognizing and understanding experiences that differ from theirs" (Catala et al., 2021, 9032); "non-autistic parents and caretakers lack first-person experiential knowledge of what it's like to be autistic, limiting their capacity to empathize with and interpret the needs and experiences of autistic people in their charge" (Benjamin et al., 2020, 51).

[28] "consider Ted, a young person with autism. While he is at the high-functioning end of the autism scale, Ted still sees others as unpredictable 'bags of skin,' and doesn't understand that they have mental states of pain and happiness as he does. ... Our contention is that at least some psychopaths are similar in important ways ... to high-functioning autistics like Ted. Psychopaths lack the capacity to build accurate representations of the world because their representations lack the appropriate emotional salience or information about other's emotional states; but many successful psychopaths have sufficient executive processing to have corrected for this lack" (Sifferd and Hirstein, 2013, 132–133).

Figure 8 highlights that references to each of these myths (except for psychopathy) continue to increase over time. In particular, uncritical or accepting references

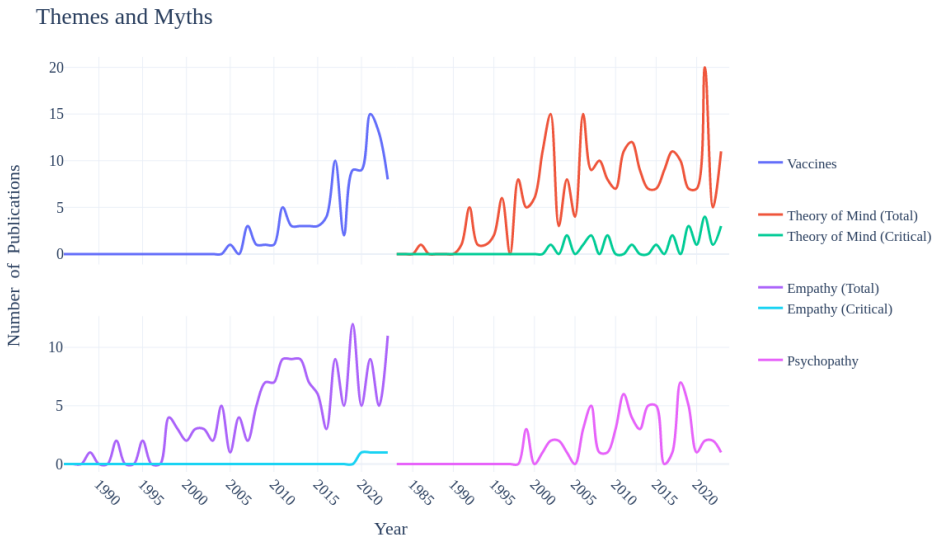

FIGURE 8. Keyword trends across time: vaccines (top left), theory of mind (top right), empathy (bottom left), psychopathy (bottom right)

to theory of mind deficits (top right) and empathy deficits (bottom left) remain relatively constant compared with the lesser and more recent increase in criticisms of these views. Other (less prominent) myths included claims that autistics are incapable of forming social relationships;[29] that autistics do not or cannot lie or pretend;[30] or that autism could be transmitted via faecal matter transplant.[31]

3.4. **Language.** In addition to the (generally uncritical) repetition of myths surrounding autism, explicitly ableist language abounds in philosophical discussions of the subject. At least 445 articles in our corpus (0.4002) employ language that can be described as ableist. For example, 109 articles (0.0980) use functioning language to differentiate autistics even though such labels are stigmatising and inaccurate insofar as "measures of adaptive functioning do not correlate with measures of intellectual ability" (Bottema-Beutel et al., 2021, 24). The most recent of these was

[29] "And people born autistic are incapable of forming deep personal relations" (McMahan, 1996, 4).
[30] "autistic people are incompetent both at detecting deception and engaging in it" (Kennett, 2002, 349); "People with autism cannot play games of make-believe" (Liggins, 2010, 769).
[31] "Theoretically, FMT could entail the transmission of anxiety and depression, autism, or neurological conditions, such as Parkinson's disease" (Bunnik et al., 2017, 62).

published in 2023.[32] Similarly, 47 articles (0.0423) differentiate "profound" or "severe" autism, despite that such labels are inherently vague, and it is effectively impossible to divide autism into subgroups (Woods et al., 2023). The most recent of these was published in 2023.[33] 28 articles (0.0252) describe autistics as "suffering from" autism. The most recent having been published in 2023.[34]

More subtle is the prevalence of person-first language in the corpus. 387 articles (0.3480) utilise person-first language alone (250, 0.2248) or a mixture of person-first and identity-first language (137, 0.1232). This is despite the fact that several studies across the United States (Kapp et al., 2013; Taboas et al., 2022), the United Kingdom (Kenny et al., 2016; Lei et al., 2021), Australia (Bury et al., 2020), and amongst English-speaking adults cross-culturally (Keating et al., 2023) have consistently shown that autistic communities prefer identity-first language and autistic self-advocates have argued against the use of person-first language since at least the 1990s (Sinclair, 1999; Brown, 2011).

More recently, autistic scholar Nick Walker (2021, 92) argues that "Person-first language is rooted in autistiphobia and anti-autistic bigotry, and its use is widely recognized by most of the autistic community as being a reliable indicator of autistiphobic attitudes". She goes on to say that only two kinds of people use person-first language when talking about autistics:

(1) Autistiphobic bigots; or
(2) People who don't know any better.

One hopes that philosophers are merely ignorant. Indeed, there is some inductive evidence that this is the case. For example, Neufeld (2020) ignores the history of autistic self-advocacy when she notes that "it is well-known that various disability advocacy groups oppose the essentializing language used to describe people with disabilities ('autists', 'schizophrenics', 'hearing-impaired')" (709). Ironically, this sort

[32] "High Functioning Autism (HFA) and Asperger Syndrome (AS), now classified as mild forms of Autism in the Autism Spectrum Disorder continuum (DMS-V), preserve normal or high IQ" (Coelho et al., 2023, 2); "Temple Grandin is a highly intelligent, high-functioning autistic woman who has a PhD in animal science and has published more than 200 scientific articles and autobiographical accounts on her experiences with autism" (Nešić, 2023, 67); "In these studies, children with high-functioning ASD interacted with a virtual peer—a life-sized animated child—and were assessed for their ability to engage in contingent discourse, namely a conversation where each utterance follows from the previous contribution" (Tigard, 2023); "many high functioning ASC [autism spectrum conditions] individuals are able to understand scalar implicatures, metaphors, and even irony" (Vincente and Falkum, 2023, 120); "people with high functioning autism seem capable of some kind of mindreading" (Wolf et al., 2023, 2981).

[33] "In severe autism, by contrast, both forms of shared intentionality are disrupted" (Paterson, 2023, 372);

[34] "Schneider was diagnosed later in his life, having suffered a process of several misdiagnoses. It was Schneider himself who firstly had the intuition he suffered from ASD, after reading a newspaper article, a guess his doctor later confirmed" (Coelho et al., 2023, 22); "sufferers from autism, whose ability to relate to the emotional life of others through interaction is impaired, also struggle with mental state ascription" (Seemann, 2023, 141).

of view seems to stem from aggregating multiple disabilities into a monolithic group. That is, disability rights activism in the 1970s through to the 1990s saw person-first language as a tool for avoiding dehumanisation and stigmatisation by frontloading personhood. Hence, suggesting that disability advocacy groups *in general* oppose essentialising language treats all disabilities as identical and ignores the fact that some communities do not see their disability as separable from their identity—e.g., the autistic community, the Deaf community—hence why identity-first language is (generally) preferred within these communities.

Some philosophers do worse than this. For example, not only does Leslie (2017) ignore the history of autistic self-advocacy when writing on the subject of language, she gets the history exactly backwards, without any citations to back up the historical claims being made:[35]

> In the early days of research on autism, researchers would often speak of "autistics"—using a noun to label this group of people. It came to be thought that this promoted an undesirable way of referring to this group, so researchers were urged to speak of "autistic people"—using an adjective instead. However, this sort of adjective-noun compound is all too easily heard as just another common-noun unit. Nowadays, the preferred locution is "people with autism"—a locution which emphasizes that they are people first and foremost, and that autism is just one property among many which they possess. The condition does not define them. (418)

Continuing with the theme of ignoring the history of autism, 116 articles use "Asperger's" to refer to autism after 2014 despite that it ceased to exist as a diagnostic label with the publication of the DSM-5 (APA, 2013). Moreover, none of these articles mention that Asperger collaborated in the murder of children with disabilities under the Third Reich and was a Nazi in all but party membership.[36]

That said, it is not always obvious that ignorance alone drives the language used by philosophers to describe autism. At least 11 articles in the corpus openly advocate for eugenics in relation to autism.[37] Moreover, the language used to describe

[35]With an exceptional footnote about the effects of the linguistic rephrasing thus described, which refers the reader to an undergraduate honour's thesis from 1999 (the sole citation).

[36]See discussion in Czech (2018); Sheffer (2018).

[37]"For a certain broad range of genetic disadvantages [including autism], the arguments for social redistribution or genetic intervention seem plausible, even compelling" (McMahan, 1996, 4); "Someone might object to our view that there is a duty for all at-risk parents to use PDG [preimplantation genetic diagnosis] and therefore use IVF [in vitro fertilization] because it imposes a not inconsequential burden on them. The response to this objection is to recognize that fulfilling ordinary parental duties imposes greater burdens on some than on others. For example ... rearing a child with autism takes a greater emotional toll on parents than raising a child without autism. ... Actually, the development of PGD has provided a less burdensome alternative to testing and aborting affected fetuses or refraining from bearing children altogether, which may have been the only alternatives in the past." (Ladd and Forman, 2012, 18); "neurofeedback has been hypothesized to reduce the symptoms of autism and anti-personality disorder and may change a person's

autism is often indicative of both ignorance and (explicit or implied) prejudice (sometimes simultaneously).[38]

3.5. **Connotation.** Given the unreflective repetition by philosophers of many negative myths surrounding autism and their frequent employment of ableist language, one might imagine that the connotation of philosophers' discussions of autism and autistics is primarily negative. There are at least three different (but intersecting) ways in which a reference to autism may be categorised as negative, depending upon whether the reference utilises pathologising, dehumanising, or stigmatising language.

Pathologising Language. According to Walker (2021), "the pathology paradigm's medicalized framing of autism and various other constellations of neurological, cognitive, and behavioural characteristics as 'disorders' or 'conditions' ... [is] a social construction rooted in cultural norms and social power inequalities, rather than a 'scientifically objective' description of reality" (126). The "pathology paradigm", in this context, can be defined by the following two principles:

(1) There is one "right", "normal", or "healthy" way for human brains and human minds to be configured and to function (or one relatively narrow "normal" range into which the configuration and functioning of human brains and minds ought to fall).
(2) If your neurological configuration and functioning (and, as a result, your ways of thinking and behaving) diverge substantially from the dominant standard of "normal", then there is *Something Wrong With You*. (Walker, 2021, 18)

The pathology paradigm consistently results in autistic people being stigmatised, dehumanised, abused, harmed, and traumatised by professionals, caregivers, their families, and society. Hence, it should be clear how pathologising language often intersects with dehumanising and stigmatising language.[39]

Dehumanising Language. Many other scholars have underscored how scholarship on autism serves to dehumanise autistics, both in philosophy and in the wider research community.[40] Autistic scholar Monique Botha (2021) highlights several

identity in fundamental but desirable ways" (Nijboer et al., 2013, 555). "In terms of inherited mutations, it may be possible to prevent copy number variants (CNVs), which are major insertions, deletions, and duplications of DNA segments. CNVs have been associated with disorders like schizophrenia, autism, and HIV susceptibility" (Simana and Ravitsky, 2022, 271).

[38]It is worth noting that the claim forwarded by Leslie (2017) that "The condition does not define them" is one of several spurious arguments highlighted by Walker (2021) that "autistiphobic bigots use to support this lie [that person-first language is the 'respectful" way to talk about autistic people], or to justify their continued use of person-first language when autistic people and our allies object to it" (94)—i.e., "We have to put the person first to show that they're people first and that autism doesn't define them" (94).

[39]See also the historical analysis of the pathology paradigm offered in Chapman (2023).

[40]Some of these scholars are autistic; some of them are philosophers. Mostly, these analyses are published outside of the "mainstream" philosophy journals included in our search. See, for example,

prototypical ways in which dehumanisation can occur with regard to autistics, each of which is amply represented in our corpus. For example, the denial of a group's community or identity,[41] or being excluded from moral boundaries.[42] We have already seen that 148 papers in our corpus (0.1331) explicitly claim that autistics lack empathy, which is prototypical of another way of dehumanising a social group—i.e., by denying group members' abilities to experience complex emotions.[43]

Perhaps the most obvious form of dehumanisation involves the denial of full humanness to others.[44] Similarly, one might deny that autistics have specific traits which are said to unite all humans or separate non-human animals from humans—e.g., empathy, theory of mind, etc.[45]

Stigmatisation. As before, stigmatising language is closely connected with pathologising and dehumanising language. According to Turncock et al. (2022, 76), "Autism stigma is primarily influenced by a public and professional understanding of autism in combination with interpretation of visible autistic traits". In this case, stigma is inherently socially constructed and may include problems of knowledge (ignorance), attitudes (prejudice), and problems of behaviour (discrimination). Link and Phelan

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Gernsbacher (2007); Cage et al. (2018); Hens (2021); Pearson and Rose (2021); Botha and Cage (2022).

[41] "If I were indifferent to the approval and disapproval of my fellows generally, I would very likely be even more incapable of being trained into my part in a human community than are persons with autism" (Reynolds, 2008, 90).

[42] "if we are curious about whether any particular being or species has the ability to act morally as humans do, the best starting point is to see whether they have empathetic capacities ... it is suggested that Autistic Spectrum Disorder makes it so difficult to understand others' perspectives, that people with ASD very rarely engage in lying, deception, or manipulation. Given this, they are sometimes described as having a kind of 'moral innocence' which contrasts them starkly with individuals with psychopathy" (Ferrin, 2019, 142, 149); "The moral judgments of people with autism are sometimes very odd, and are often not characterized by concern for the wellbeing of others, but by a concern for following rules" (Maibom, 2010, 1005).

[43] "If you are neurologically normal and you intrinsically desire my wellbeing, and if you then detect my suffering, you'll 'feel my pain.' If you are autistic, and you intrinsically desire my wellbeing, you might fail to 'feel my pain' — but only because you cannot detect that I am in pain!" (Arpaly, 2014, 71); "Autistics and Asperger's patients, who also display unusual activity in the ventromedial cortex, are notoriously challenged in emotional development" (Cholbi, 2006, 636).

[44] "Both apes and autistic children express emotions and other experiences in communication and may intend some acts to catch the attention of others and direct it to some item of interest, thus displaying some meaning-directed communication. What seems to be missing, though, is the sharedness, mutuality and turn-taking present in the interpersonal exchanges and communication of normal human children with others" (Bogdan, 2001, 247).

[45] "[T]here is evidence that an actual deficit (autism) involves an inability to possess concepts like belief, desire" (Richard, 1994, 318); "much more than 'consistency' and order in logic, belief and visible action are required in order for a person to be intelligible. The full panoply of human expression and action, including perception, desire and affect, is needed. Where one of these is, we want to say, wholly lacking, as in some autism and schizophrenia, I think we just don't know in the end what to say about the experience of the persons concerned" (Read, 2001, 460); "A human being who does not tap into those widespread, deeprooted feelings that pervade human relationships (such as autistic people) survives only in a very impaired state, if at all" (Gillett, 2003, 246).

(2001) argue that the development of stigma derives from the culturally driven detection and labelling of a difference (in this case, labelling people with a particular set of behavioural characteristics as autistic), which converges with other interrelated components to form stigma, which includes the attribution of unfavourable stereotypes to the label.[46]

Frequent comparison of autistics' purported lack of empathy with the lack of empathy of the fictional psychopath (as already discussed) is a paradigmatic case of rhetorical stigmatisation.[47] Indeed, several articles suggest that autistics are inherently violent,[48] while ignoring social statistics about the stigmatisation and victimisation of autistics, including high rates of homicide, sexual assault, rape, abuse, unemployment, homelessness, death in care, police violence, death at the hands of police, bullying, victimisation, stigma, suicide, and so on (Botha, 2020). As before, many others have described the general stigmatisation of autistics—both in research and popular descriptions.[49]

Negative Connotation. Having seen some concrete examples of what we mean by pathologising, dehumanising, and stigmatising language, we are now in a position to present summary statistics on these codes. 513 articles in the corpus (0.4613) employ negative language when describing or discussing autism. 496 articles (0.4460) use language that can be described as neutral—in many cases, because they refer to autism in passing; see Section 3.7 below. 103 articles (0.0926) describe autism with a generally positive connotation. Although positive and neutral references to autism

[46] "Suppose that the man in question was severely autistic, and so (let us assume) incapable of experiencing anything like the range of pleasures of love that you and I experience in our lives" (Bramble, 2016, 106); "When someone asks how I am doing, I respond, 'fine, thank you,' regardless of how I am actually doing. I do not consciously apply a rule of thumb about lying. In fact, evidence for the unreflective nature of social interactions can be found in certain types of autism or certain brain-damaged individuals. These individuals can learn and articulate social and moral rules of thumb. They can even reflect on what they should do in hypothetical situations, but they cannot and do not make wise social or moral decisions in real time" (DesAutels, 2012, 344); "If our colleague tells us his child suffers from severe autism, we do not react in the same way as when he tells us that his child did not place in a merit program for gifted children. The former condition is judged as worthy of finding a cure or treatment for precisely because we judge such individuals as worse off than they should be" (Jaworska and Tannenbaum, 2015, 1108).

[47] "It would be a worthwhile project for future research to examine further how a limited capacity for immediate empathy and anxiety-fuelled rule-following interact within autistic psychology to produce a particular species of moral agency which is absent in psychopaths" (Isserow, 2015, 607).

[48] "For example, 90% of the prison population are young men with a 'mental disorder,' mostly in the spectrum of attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, autism spectrum disorders, dyslexia, dyspraxia, with difficult behavior, educational failure, early deprivation, low self-esteem, drug use, depression, or general frustration leading to a propensity to violence" (Clapham, 2012, 64); "In this paper, I focus on the experiences of caregivers abused by their children with autism" (Simplican, 2015, 219); "Take an example that can frequently be found in the (British) news, where severely autistic, non-verbal teenagers who are also mentally handicapped physically attack their families in situations of stress" (Jefferson, 2019, 571).

[49] See, for example Gernsbacher and Yergeau (2019); LaCroix (2023) and (in our corpus) Yergeau and Huebner (2017).

have increased significantly in recent years, negative descriptions of autism have remained fairly constant for the last two decades (although they appear to begin to decrease slightly in the last five years), and publications with negative connotation have significantly outnumbered those with positive connotation in all but the last two years. See Figure 9.

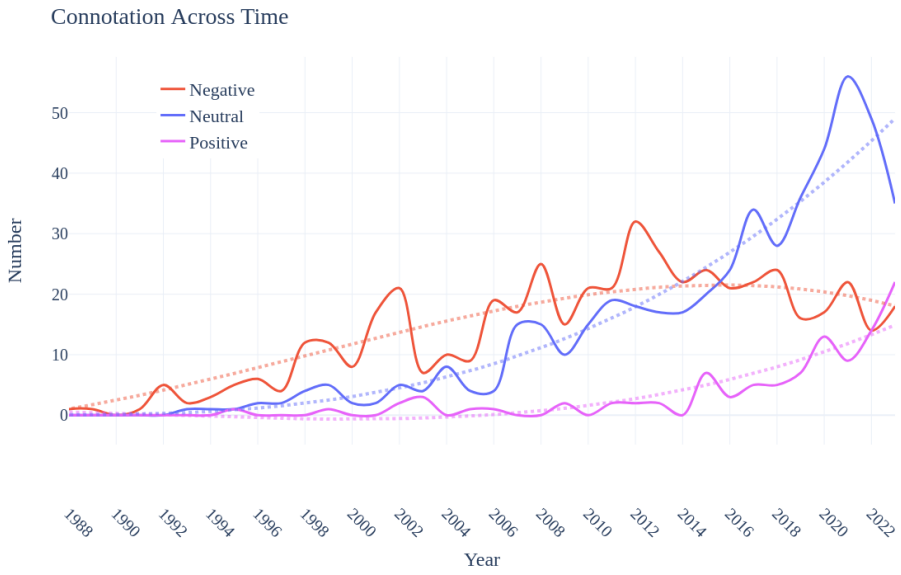

FIGURE 9. Connotation of publications mentioning autism across time, with third-order polynomial fit (dashed line)

One reason there are so many articles that can be classed as "neutral" is that very few engage with autism—as we mentioned in Section 3.4, less than 1/3 of articles in the corpus (322, 0.2896) utilise identity-first language to describe autistics, and around 1/3 use person-first language or a mixture of person-first and identity-first language (387, 0.3480). The remaining articles do not refer to autistics at all (408, 0.3669).

3.6. **Autistic Representation.** Epidemiological studies of autism are historically fraught and doubtfully provide an accurate representation of prevalence. However, taking these numbers at face value, we can propose around 2% as a base rate of autism prevalence in the general population. When considering whether autistics are represented in philosophical writing about autism, we can see that 20 articles out of 1112 were written by authors who have disclosed being autistic or neurodivergent; this is a "prevalence" of 0.0180. However, if we look at unique *authors* instead of unique *papers*, this number drops to 10 in 1337, for a prevalence rate of 0.0075.

Hence, this suggests that autistics are likely underrepresented in the philosophical literature on autism.

Some have claimed, based on anecdotal evidence, that autism is probably over-represented in philosophy as a discipline (Anderson and Cushing, 2013). Recent Academic Placement Data and Analysis (ADPA) surveys ask about disability status and found a prevalence rate of 0.0240; namely, 17 respondents in 709 selected "social/communication impairment (e.g. Asperger's syndrome)" in response to the question "Which of the following best describes your disability status?" (Jennings and Dayer, 2022, 110). This does not seem to corroborate the anecdotal claim that autism is over-represented in philosophy relative to the general population. However, these reported numbers may be lower than actual numbers insofar as individuals—particularly early career scholars—may be wary of disclosing disability status or neurotype, even in an anonymous survey, because the academy is openly hostile toward autistics (Catala, 2022).[50] For the same reason, our list of autistic authors probably undercounts those who have chosen not to disclose; nonetheless, it seems apparent that autistic voices are not well represented in the philosophical literature on autism.

3.7. **Engagement.** Exactly half of the articles that were included in our corpus (556, 0.5000) reference one of our search terms (described in Section 3.1) exactly once—456 of these are in the main text of the article, and 70 are outside the main text, either in a footnote, table, or appendix. 110 articles in total (0.0989) mention one of the search terms only in a footnote (or multiple footnotes). And, 135 articles (0.1214) refer to one of the search terms multiple times but within a single paragraph. Of the 1112 articles in our corpus, only 197 appear to engage with autism (0.1772)—although not all of these are *about* autism, per se. These 197 articles constitute the *philosophy of autism* (PhiAut) corpus, an in-depth analysis of which is deferred to future work. However, we can examine some of the general trends of the summary statistics thus far discussed with regard to this smaller, more engaged, subset of our corpus.

The maximum number of articles in the PhiAut Corpus is 27 (*Mind & Language*); 31 (0.4627) journals lack a single publication engaging with autism. The average number of articles per journal is now 2.94; 47 total journals (0.7015) fall below this average. Figure 10 compares the number of publications engaging with autism with the Total Corpus, normalised by issue. The leading publishers are as before, although the order has, again, changed. These are *Phenomenology and the Cognitive Sciences* (0.2063 articles per issue); *Neuroethics* (0.1667); *Mind & Language* (0.1534); *Philosophy, Psychiatry, and Psychology* (0.1271); *Review of Philosophy*

[50] See also Flowers (2024).

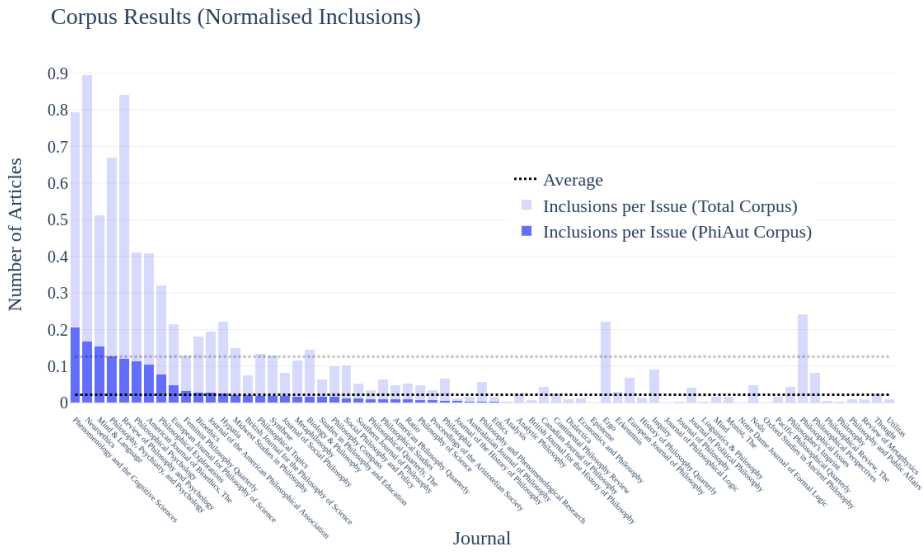

FIGURE 10. Journal database search term results, number of inclusions by journal normalised by issue (PhiAut Corpus compared with Total Corpus)

and Psychology (0.1200); *Philosophical Psychology* (0.1128); *The American Journal of Bioethics* (0.1043). Even amongst these specialised journals, the average number of articles engaging with autism per issue is 0.1415, or 1 article engaging with autism every 7 issues.

Although the number of articles engaging with autism has increased in recent years, as with those mentioning autism, the rates of increase between the two are strikingly different. Figure 11 compares the rate of publications of articles engaging with autism to the rate of publications of total articles mentioning autism across time. The first article engaging with autism is still Mitroff (1971), and the peak is now 20 total publications in 2020.

Table 1 compares statistics concerning the number and relative proportion of articles discussing some of the keywords described in Section 3 between the Total Corpus and the PhiAut Corpus. In particular, we describe the *percentage difference* comparing the relative proportion of, e.g., uncritical versus critical mentions of myths, person-first versus identity-first language, and negative versus positive

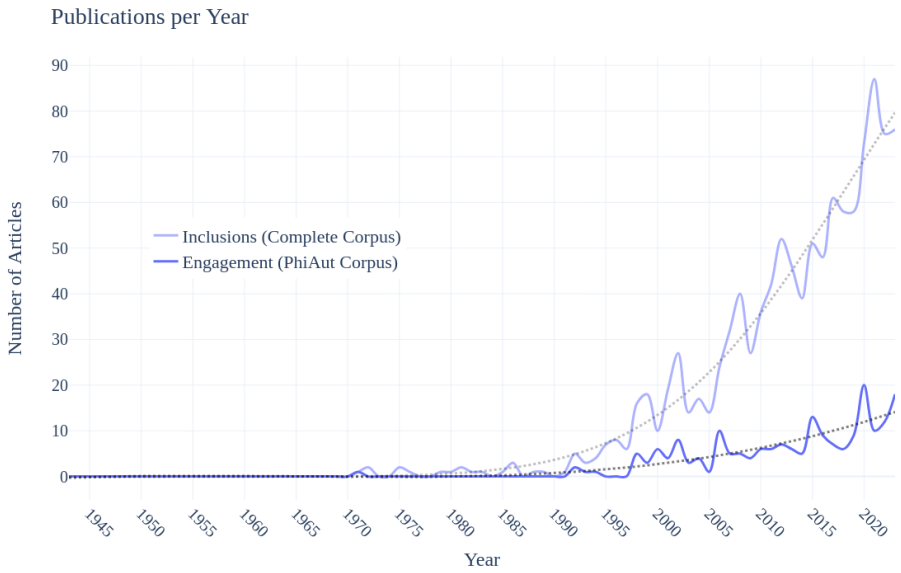

FIGURE 11. Publications engaging with autism across time (PhiAut Corpus) compared with publications mentioning autism across time (Total Corpus)

Category	**Total Corpus**		**Percentage Difference**	**PhiAut Corpus**		**Percentage Difference**	**Percentage Change**
	Number	Proportion		Number	Proportion		
Inclusions	1112	1.0000	—	197	0.1772	139.79%	−82.28%
Myths							
Theory of Mind (Total)	276	0.2482	—	101	0.5127	—	+108.38%
Theory of Mind (Uncritical)	252	*0.9130	165.20%	84	*0.8317	132.68%	−08.91%
Theory of Mind (Critical)	24	*0.0870		17	*0.1683		+93.45%
Empathy Deficit (Total)	148	0.1331	—	57	0.2893	—	+117.36%
Empathy Deficit (Uncritical)	125	*0.8446	137.84%	41	*0.7193	87.72%	−14.84%
Empathy Deficit (Critical)	23	*0.1554		16	*0.2807		+80.63%
Language							
Ableist	445	0.4002	—	144	0.7310	—	+82.66%
Person-First	387	0.3480	18.32%	127	0.6447	64.60%	+85.26%
Identity-First	322	0.2896		65	0.3299		+13.92%
Connotation							
Neutral	496	0.4460	—	43	0.2183	—	−51.05%
Negative	513	0.4613	133.12%	104	0.5279	70.13%	+14.44%
Positive	103	0.0926		50	0.2538		+174.08%
Representation							
Representation (Articles)	20	0.0180	—	16	0.0812	—	+351.11%
Representation (Authors)	10(/1337)	0.0075		9(/244)	0.0369		+390.00%

TABLE 1. Comparison of summary statistics between the Total Corpus of inclusions (1112 articles) and the "philosophy of autism" (PhiAut) Corpus (197 articles); an asterisk (∗) denotes the proportion relative to the relevant subset.

connotation.[51] We also describe the *percentage change* for each feature between the two corpora.[52]

[51]Percentage *difference* is calculated according to the following equation:

$$PD = \left| \frac{x_2 - x_1}{\left(\frac{x_2 + x_1}{2}\right)} \right| \cdot 100,$$

One thing to note is that there is a striking *increase* in the relative proportion of articles mentioning theory-of-mind and empathy deficits in autism—two key myths discussed in Section 3.3. This implies that those articles that engage with autism in some depth are *more likely* to repeat these myths. Moreover, the relative proportion of articles that are uncritical of these myths is significantly higher in both cases.

Similarly, although the relative proportion of articles that utilise identity-first language increases slightly when considering only those articles that engage with autism, the relative proportion of articles that employ person-first or otherwise explicitly ableist language increases much more, so the percentage difference between the two is significantly more pronounced in the PhiAut Corpus. In addition, a greater proportion—nearly 3/4—of articles that engage with autism employ ableist language when compared with the proportion of articles employing ableist language in the Total Corpus. The percentage difference between negative and neutral connotation decreases when considering the PhiAut Corpus, and the percentage change of positive connotation is significant between the two corpora. This can be explained by the following three considerations: first, the proportion of positive articles in the Total Corpus is small to begin with, so changes have a large effect. Second, the relative proportion of neutral articles decreases significantly when authors engage with autism. Third, the relative proportion of autistic authors (who are more likely to write about autism positively) sees a massive increase when we consider only those articles that engage with autism. However, it is worth noting that the relative number of autistic voices represented in the literature is still minuscule compared with non-autistic authors.

4. Gaps

So far, we have discussed some relevant features of the corpus. However, it is worthwhile to mention some things that do not typically appear in the philosophical discourse. Namely, what do philosophers *not* talk about when they talk about autism?

4.1. **Intersectionality.** As we have seen, most articles that mention autism do not engage with autism. In this sense, those philosophers that invoke autism refer to a stereotyped *concept*—i.e., middle-class, white, cis-hetero males who lack a theory

which describes the relationship between the averages of these values, expressed as a percent (absolute value).

[52]Percentage *change* is calculated according to the following equation:

$$PC = \frac{x_2 - x_1}{|x_2|} \cdot 100,$$

which describes the change in the relative proportion of a given feature between each corpus, expressed as a percent (increase/decrease).

of mind, lack empathy, and have a preoccupation with STEM, trains, or lint[53] (and, if not this, then Temple Grandin). Hence, philosophers fail to engage with a unique way of being in the world since autism is nothing if not heterogeneous. As such, it should be relatively unsurprising that few articles engage with, discuss, or even mention considerations at the intersection of autism and, e.g., race, gender, or sexuality.

Only 9 articles in the corpus (0.0081) mention the intersection of autism and race, three of which gesture toward race and disability generally. 44 articles (0.0397) mention gender in the context of autism (or disability more generally). As with race, few of these engage with the intersection of autism and gender.

There is little mention of the intersections of autism and queerness despite that some scholars (again, outside of philosophical discourse) have highlighted that neurodivergent experience generally (and therefore autistic experience specifically) "promotes a readiness to challenge normative social standards through neuroqueer concepts of gender" White (2024, 2).[54] 12 articles (0.0108) mention sexuality or sexual identity in the context of autism, most of which ignore the fact that autistics are more likely to be queer, trans, genderqueer, nonbinary, or genderless than the general population.[55] 3 papers gesture briefly toward the existence of queer autistics. As with race and gender, this is done primarily to pay lip service to the value of intersectional thought or research.[56] This gap is particularly fraught in light of testimonial injustices enacted against autistics, which has led J. Logan Smilges (2022a) to suggest that "ableism is the packaging with which transphobia is delivered".[57] Those few articles that discuss autism and sexuality often treat autistics as specimens to be examined. For example, in scrutinising the auti-biography[58] of Edgar Schneider, Coelho et al. (2023, 15) write, "Remarkably, when Schneider wants to elicit certain types of erotic feelings, he imagines a female body not as a real body but as an aesthetic object". 5 articles mention that autistics (particularly autistic

[53] "There is an obvious answer to that question ['why do we value archery and not lint tricks?']. It is not found in the amount by which the intrinsic value of arrows suddenly occupying the centers of targets exceeds that of bits of lint drifting through the air in just the way the autistic child finds so fascinating, but rather in the history of archery. Archery was once of great benefit in hunting and warfare, while lint floating never has had such uses" (Reynolds, 2008, 82).

[54] See also foundational work by Yergeau (2016); Walker (2021); Barnett (2024).

[55] See discussion in Kourti and MacLeod (2019); Brown (2020); Kourti (2021); Walker (2021) and Krazinski (2023). Shelly (2004) argues that, "If gender is a social construct, then autistic people ... are less likely to develop a typical gender identity" (7). See also Jack (2012); Davidson and Tamas (2016).

[56] For example, Sarrett (2016) acknowledges the importance of intersectional research, stating that social identities, such as sexuality, "effect access to diagnostic practices as well as health care, education, and employment opportunities" (33). However, she offers no further commentary on why this is the case or the uniqueness of autistic intersectionality.

[57] See also Smilges (2022b, 2023).

[58] The genre of autobiography written by autistics.

women) experience higher rates of sexual abuse than the general population, and 4 mention (forced) sterilisation in the context of disability.

One sole exception (0.0009) to the lack of intersectional engagement in the corpus worth spotlighting is Krazinski (2023), whose autoethnographic analysis deftly examines how "a neurodivergent subject position can provide liberatory insights into oppressive patriarchal gender structures, while exploring productive tensions of the histories and lineages of neurodivergence marked by inequities, erasure, and epistemic injustice" (726). Krazinski (2023) discusses how philosophical issues, such as normative discourse around gender, sexuality, and colonialism; the metaphysics of identity; and epistemology, can all be improved or enriched by integrating the wealth of information that autistic understandings of sex and sexuality have to offer; autistic sexuality is invaluable to the study of sexual normativity.

4.2. **Theories of Autism.** In addition to a lack of intersectional considerations, there is relatively little engagement with non-pathologising theories or explanations of autism in the philosophical literature. Recall that around 1/4 of the articles reference theory of mind (deficits or impairments) as a constitutive feature of autism; however, autistic scholars have explained how breakdowns in communication or information transfer can explain purported theory of mind deficits during interactions between neurotypes. Autistics experience the world, express emotions, and communicate differently to non-autistic people. Hence, it is not that autistics lack empathy or a theory of mind; instead, neurotypicals also fail at mindreading or empathising when interacting with non-neurotypicals.

The "double empathy problem" was coined by Milton (2012) to describe this phenomenon.[59] 672 articles in the corpus were published between 2013 and 2023 (inclusive); only 9 of these (0.0133 of the corpus since 2013) mention the double empathy problem. The "intense world theory" was initially described by Markram et al. (2007); Markram and Markram (2010). 870 articles in the corpus were published between 2008 and 2023 (inclusive); only 7 of these (0.0080 of corpus since 2008) mention the intense world theory of autism. The term "monotropism" was introduced by Murray et al. (2005). 926 articles in the corpus were published between 2006 and 2023 (inclusive); only 2 of these (0.0022 of the corpus since 2005) mention monotropism.[60]

4.3. **Autistic Culture and Community.** Only 61 papers (0.0548) mention neurodiversity in the context of autism. Of these 61 papers, the majority (37, 0.6066) mention or focus on the socio-political aspects of the neurodiversity movement

[59]Recent research on intra- and inter-neurotype information transfer has provided empirical evidence supporting the double-empathy problem (Crompton et al., 2020a,b,c), the findings of which are inconsistent with the social-cognitive deficit narrative of autism.
[60]See also the "autistic flow" theory (Heasman et al., 2024).

rather than engaging philosophically with the idea of neurodiversity or its implications. Only 10 papers (0.0090) engage with neurodiversity. The term first appeared in print around 1997. However, the concept itself was fully formed in online fora earlier in the 1990s in parallel with the rise of autistic self-advocacy.[61] 1067 articles in the corpus were published between 1997 and 2023 (inclusive).

22 articles (0.0198) discuss flourishing and the good life in the context of autism. 12 of these allow for the possibility of autistic flourishing—however, 2 are in the narrow context of employment rather than life. Moreover, 3 suggest that autistics can only flourish (in an Aristotelian sense) or live the good life after undergoing applied behavioural analysis (ABA) to "normalise" their behaviour.[62] Each of these ignore that autistic self-advocates have spoken out against the use of ABA insofar as it teaches autistic children to mask, making them more prone to exploitation and abuse and increasing the likelihood of PTSD and suicide. Moreover, none of the articles that positively discuss ABA reckon with its entangled history with gay conversion therapy, leading some autistics to describe ABA as "autistic conversion therapy".[63]

6 articles suggest that autistics' ability to flourish or live the good life is impaired—i.e., because they are autistic, not because they live in a hostile environment. 3 articles mention the possibility of autistic joy. However, one of these suggests that autistics are "merely capable" of exhibiting joy insofar as it is a "basic emotion" (Schlicht et al., 2009).

5. Discussion

Although there is work left to be done in analysing the patterns of those articles that engage with autism (the PhiAut Corpus), we can validate or invalidate most of the descriptive claims we highlighted at the outset. First, consider the limiting claims (D1) – (D3).

[61] See discussion in Botha et al. (2024).

[62] "is it possible for children with autism to live a good life, to flourish? Surprisingly, the answer is yes, given a particular understanding of flourishing. ... Using Aristotle's paradigm of a good life (eudaimonia), the initial prognosis for children with autism flourishing is very poor. But this prognosis is made in the absence of children with autism receiving early intensive behavioral intervention (EIBI) using the science of Applied Behavior Analysis (ABA)" (Furman and Tuminello Jr., 2015a, 253); "ABA can facilitate tremendous results for a sizable percentage of children with ASD—results that would count as a good life by most any metric. ... All hope is not lost for children with ASD. With an appropriate intervention, a significant number of children with ASD can be normalized; a significant number can flourish just as much as any other child might" (Furman and Tuminello Jr., 2015b, 271); "Aristotle's idea that if one engages in desirable behaviors often enough they become habitual, and that this is more likely to happen in supportive environments, can be practically and scientifically realized through a program of ABA" (Schlinger Jr., 2015, 270).

[63] ABA was invented by Ole Ivar Lovaas, who was also substantially involved in the "feminine boy project" to "treat" "deviant" sex-role behaviours.

D1. There exists little philosophical work that engages with autism.

This is true. Across 67 "leading" philosophy journals, one article *mentioning* autism is published per every eight issues, on average. Most of these mention autism exactly once, and so cannot be said to engage with autism.

D2. Philosophical research on autism centres narrowly on questions in ethics, mind, psychology, or medicine.

This claim is also supported by our findings. Although we have not categorised the subject of the articles in the corpus here, the fact that the leading venues in the corpus (normalised by issue) are highly specialised provides strong inductive evidence for this claim.[64] Moreover, these seven journals account for more than 1/3 of the Total Corpus (0.3669) and more than half of the total publications (0.5838) in the PhiAut Corpus.

D3. If autism is or ought to be a proper subfield of philosophy, it is underdeveloped at present.

Given the evidence supporting (D1) and (D2), this claim follows directly.

Next, consider the positive claims.

D4. Philosophical work on autism has increased significantly in the last decade.

This is technically true. However, when we consider genuine engagement with the subject, claims about an "explosion" of philosophical literature on autism are overstated. Mentions of autism have increased exponentially, but the number of articles meaningfully engaging with autism has grown at a much slower rate. (See, again, Figure 11.)

D5. Recent philosophical work reflects a more sympathetic and nuanced understanding of autism.

The word "more" is doing a lot of work here. One might argue that (D5) is true on the technicality that sympathetic and nuanced understandings of autism were basically non-existent two decades ago. Hence, "recent" philosophical work is, strictly speaking, "more" nuanced or sympathetic. However, this reading would be disingenuous. Philosophical work cannot reflect a more sympathetic and nuanced understanding of autism if it does not reflect an understanding of autism in the first place. The sympathetic and nuanced engagement of philosophers with autism arises almost exclusively because of autistic philosophers working in the area. Hence, if we take "philosophical work" to mean "by non-autistic philosophers", (D5) is demonstrably false.

Finally, we proposed two additional (negative) descriptive claims.

[64]Recall that these are *Neuroethics*; *Review of Philosophy and Psychology*; *Phenomenology and the Cognitive Sciences*; *Philosophy, Psychiatry, and Psychology*; *Mind & Language*; *The American Journal of Bioethics*; and *Philosophical Psychology*.

D6. When philosophers do engage with autism, this engagement is often unreflective and uncritical.

This claim is supported by the frequent repetition of myths surrounding autism and the lack of engagement with non-pathologising theories.

D7. Despite **D5**, the claims forwarded (or presupposed) by philosophers are predominantly negative, insofar as they stigmatise, dehumanise, or pathologise autistics and autistic behaviour (if only inadvertently).

We have seen that those articles that even *mention* autism are predominantly negative. This trend has shifted slightly in the last five years. When philosophers do engage with autism, nearly 3/4 of articles employ ableist language (0.7193), and more than half (0.5279) describe autism with negative connotation—where negative connotation was specifically defined as employing dehumanising, stigmatising, or pathologising language. Hence, (D7) is true.

We have now provided empirical evidence to substantiate or deny each of the descriptive claim forwarded at the outset. However, it is an open question how widely these claims are supposed to apply. We have been using generic terms like "philosophical research", "philosophical work", and "philosophers". However, because of the method we have employed, one might worry whether our corpus is really representative. For example, we claimed that (D5) is false, but if our corpus of journal articles were not representative of philosophical research, then we would only be warranted in claiming, narrowly, that the claim "recent philosophical work *published in the aforementioned journals* reflects a more sympathetic and nuanced understanding of autism" is false. These, and other potentially limiting considerations arising from the method we have employed in this review are addressed in the next section.

5.1. **Limitations of Method.** It is important to pause and reflect on the limitations of our method, as described in Section 2. As noted in the introduction, claims similar to ours have often been made anecdotally in previous discussions. For autistic researchers and self-advocates seeking to highlight issues such as the use of dehumanising language in a given research field, anecdotal evidence leaves room for dismissive responses—e.g., that such instances are merely exceptions or that such views are no longer prevalent. To address this, we employed a scoping review method to provide systematic evidence of three key claims:

(1) Despite the appearance of increasing engagement, there are significant gaps in the philosophical literature on autism.
(2) Despite the appearance of more sympathetic or nuanced perspectives, the vast majority of philosophical work that references autism does so with a predominantly negative connotation, often relying on outdated stereotypes.

(3) Despite the appearance of nuance, most philosophical discussions of autism remain uncritical and unreflective.

Moreover, these trends are not only present in contemporary work but often dominate the discourse. Given our objectives, a systematic scoping review was the appropriate choice, as it allowed us to map the existing literature, identify key concepts and gaps, and clarify broader trends in philosophical research on autism. Our findings serve to substantiate or refute the descriptive claims described.

That said, adopting a systematic approach also imposed certain constraints on our analysis. Some of our initial methodological decisions had downstream effects. For instance, limitations in time and resources prevented us from reviewing additional journals—some of which might have influenced the statistical trends we report. Moreover, we deliberately focused on what can be considered "mainstream" philosophical work on autism. By definition, this approach likely excludes some of the most innovative and critical work in the field, including contributions from philosophers publishing in less prominent journals or from non-philosophers publishing in psychology or autism-focused journals.

A broader approach could have involved reversing our search criteria—e.g., searching autism journals for philosophical discussions rather than philosophy journals for mentions of autism. However, given practical constraints, we had to draw firm boundaries. Since our goal was to capture a snapshot of "typical" or "mainstream" philosophical discourse on autism, we believe our methodological choices were justified, even as we acknowledge their limitations.

It is also crucial to clarify the scope of our conclusions. While we find that mainstream philosophical discussions of autism often rely on dehumanising, pathologising, and stigmatising language, as well as superficial or stereotypical understandings, this does not imply that all philosophical discussions of autism are lacking in nuance. In less visible academic spaces, autistic self-advocates and social activists have been contributing to richer, more thoughtful discussions for decades. The fact that our focus on mainstream philosophy effectively excluded many of these voices is itself a telling result.

That said, our findings suggest that work by autistic philosophers and activists has yet to significantly influence mainstream philosophical discourse on autism. If such work had meaningfully permeated mainstream philosophy, we would expect to see its impact reflected in the journals we reviewed.[65] These considerations on method raise a potential concern: our descriptive claims assume that the journals we analysed are representative of broader trends in philosophical work on autism.

[65]Again, this is not to suggest that such work does not exist—indeed, we have highlighted positive examples within our corpus throughout this paper. But, we have also shown that, statistically speaking, these remain exceptions rather than the norm.

If these journals are not truly representative, or if their publication patterns reflect systematic biases, then our conclusions may be affected.

Regarding representativeness, as outlined in Section 2, we selected our candidate journals by aggregating five different lists of leading philosophy journals, which showed considerable overlap. Additionally, we included eight specialist journals chosen specifically for their relevance to autism. Given this selection process, we believe these journals fairly represent mainstream philosophy. If one were to challenge this claim, they would need to propose an alternative set of journals that more accurately reflects the views of mainstream philosophy. However, it seems implausible that such a set would not significantly overlap with the one we analysed, given what it means for something to be considered "mainstream".

As for systematic bias in what gets published in these venues, rather than undermining our findings, this possibility reinforces our argument. If these journals, as mainstream outlets, consistently publish work that frames autism in a negative light, and if this is due to systemic bias, then this bias itself constitutes a defining feature of mainstream philosophical discourse on autism—which is precisely what, we believe, our analysis demonstrates. In light of the shortcomings of mainstream philosophical discourse on autism, we offer a few tentative suggestions in the final section.

5.2. **Recommendations.** Awareness of autism has grown significantly over the last two decades. However, as we noted in the Introduction, philosophers have largely failed to engage with critical and conceptual developments surrounding autism. Based on the empirical evidence from our review, we advocate for the following normative claims.[66] First,

N1. Reflect upon the language used to describe autistics.

Related to the uncritical and negative depictions of autism described by (D6) and (D7), we note that around 2/3 of those articles that engage with autism utilise employ person-first language, despite empirical research showing that many autistic individuals prefer identity-first language.[67] While no community is monolithic, and person-first language may be justified in certain contexts, such choices should be made intentionally and explicitly acknowledged. However, only 6 articles in our

[66]In Appendix B, we recommend a few resources for those who would accept these normative claims. See also the list of resources provided at the *Philosophy on the Spectrum* webpage: https://autphi.github.io.

[67]See, e.g., Kapp et al. (2013); Kenny et al. (2016); Bury et al. (2020); Lei et al. (2021); Keating et al. (2023); Taboas et al. (2022); Grech et al. (2024).

corpus justify their linguistic choices by referencing the preferences of autistic communities.[68] Hence, most articles that use person-first language appear to do so by default.

Explicitly reflecting on and justifying language choices would demonstrate a conscious engagement with autistic perspectives. If philosophers genuinely considered this issue, most would likely adopt identity-first language. Note that all but one of those articles that justify their linguistic conventions *do* employ identity-first language, and the exception discusses the disability community *generally* rather than autism specifically; hence, they choose to use person-first *and* identity-first language interchangeably, acknowledging the dilemma of diversity of opinions—i.e., although autistic communities often prefer identify-first language, some in the wider community of disabled people prefer person-first language. Identity-first language acknowledges autism as an integral aspect of identity rather than something separate from the individual; this practice would help to weaken the current evidence for the truth of (D6).

Underlying some of the problematic aspects of typical philosophical treatments of autism is the simple fact that philosophers often approach the topic in the abstract—which is to say, they often fail to grasp that when they discuss the "idea" of autism, they are also discussing the lived experience of real people. Acknowledging the lived experiences of autistic individuals, and not solely "autism" as a general concept, would help remind philosophers the potential consequences of their conjecturing. Adopting identity-first language when discussing these autistic individuals would, at the very least, demonstrate a basic awareness of the autistic community and their preferences. This can also help to challenge pathologising views by acknowledging that autism is a very real part of who an autistic person is, and is not something which an autistic person merely "has" (much less, "lives with", "suffers from", etc.). Using identity-first language is thus not only appropriately respectful to the average preferences of autistics, but it might also go some distance towards grounding philosophical discussion in the lived experiences of autistics, as well as helping challenge stigmatising and pathologising views of autism—i.e., weakening the evidence for (D7).

Philosophical discussions of autism often conflate autism (as a neurocognitive identity) with ASD (a diagnostic category laden with medicalised descriptions). This conflation perpetuates stigma by applying pathologising language to autism as a whole rather than distinguishing between autism and ASD. This raises an imperative to ensure that the scope of the claims being made actually apply to the thing under discussion—i.e., some true claims about ASD will not be true

[68]These are McCoy et al. (2020); Catala et al. (2021); van der Weele (2021); Cascio and Racine (2022); Petrolini and Vicente (2022); de Carvalho and Krueger (2023).

about autistics. Hence, conflating these two things serves to perpetuate stigma and pathologisation by misapplying claims about ASD to autism or autistics generally. Hence,

N2. Be precise.

Philosophers can avoid dehumanising autistic individuals by adopting the language of the neurodiversity paradigm. Doing so would directly weaken current evidence in favour of (D7) while strengthening (D5). One example from our corpus that treats discusses autism using standard deficit language, but without dehumanising autistics is Mole (2017), who critically examines whether autism should be classified as a disease. When it comes to considering the possible arguments in favour of such a classification, it would have been easy to (unreflectively) defer to deficit-based language and pathologising descriptions of autistics. Instead, Mole makes that case classifying autism as a disease "might give welcome recognition to the experience of people living with autism" (1128) and failure to recognise "symptoms" of autism run the risk of depriving an autistic "certain social entitlements that ought properly to be his" (1129). So, despite that the framing of the debate looks pathologising by its very nature, Mole (2017) avoids pathologising or dehumanising autistics and autistic behaviour. Part of his ability to do so comes from the fact that he is clearly reflective and intentional about his use of language throughout. For example, instead of describing autistic deficits, he describes features of autism "specified to be deficits" (1129). This is a subtle, and presumably conscious, choice.

However, even if philosophers accurately differentiate autism and ASD, and use appropriate language to describe each of these, it is worth noting that conceptions of autism have been in constant flux since the term was coined. Related to the lack of meaningful engagement by philosophers (described by our denial of D4), it is worth noting that much scientific research on autism is contentious at best and outdated at worst. This fact makes it surprising that philosophers typically refer to this research as if its findings were unquestionably true. For instance, while philosophers do not uncritically accept the "refrigerator mother" theory of autism (a dominant but discredited theory from the mid-20th century), many uncritically accept the idea that autism involves a theory-of-mind deficit despite that the "science" surrounding theory-of-mind deficits is questionable, at best, and pseudoscientific at worst.[69] Hence,

N3. Use contemporary sources on autism.

Rather than accepting outdated or controversial findings at face value, (N3) requires philosophers to engage with the most current conceptions of autism in the literature. However, it is worth remembering that science is not value-free, and

[69]See discussion in Gernsbacher and Yergeau (2019) and LaCroix (2023), respectively.

most "scientific" research on autism has been conducted by non-autistic scholars. As a result, prevailing narratives about autism often reflect non-autistic perspectives rather than autistic experiences. Hence, even if a popular belief about autism is deeply entrenched in the discourse, such platitudes with should be approached with caution as they may reinforce stereotypes rather than accurately represent autistic individuals. Hence,

N4. Challenge dominant narratives to avoid cliché and stereotypes.

One way to challenge dominant narratives is to diversify representations of autism in philosophical discourse. Autism is often depicted as a condition that primarily affects white male children, ignoring the diverse realities of autistic individuals across different genders, races, and age groups. Philosophers should make a conscious effort to include identity markers that disrupt this narrow stereotype.

Beyond changing how non-autistic philosophers discuss autism, doings so must involve systemic change to increase autistic representation within the field. The following three suggestions would provide some additional guidance with (N1) through (N4):

N5. Prioritise autistic voices in the field.

N6. Amplify autistic contributions to philosophy.

N7. Recognise autistic expertise.

These suggestions require addressing the barriers that prevent autistic individuals from entering and thriving in academic spaces. Academia has historically been hostile toward autistic people, which is to the detriment of philosophy itself. Autistic scholars bring valuable insights, and diversity benefits epistemic communities (O'Connor and Bruner, 2019). When possible, non-autistic philosophers should seek to collaborate with autistic researchers as a way of realising (N5)-(N7). However, in doing so, one must be sensitive to the inherent power dynamics at play in such collaborations.

Taken together, these recommendations, (N1)-(N7), call for a shift from the pathology paradigm to the neurodiversity paradigm. Philosophers, who pride themselves on critical thinking, should challenge outdated assumptions about autism rather than uncritically reproducing them. Engaging with interdisciplinary research, particularly work produced by autistic scholars, can help philosophy move beyond a narrow, deficit-based view of autism.[70]

[70]Some work that is contained in our corpus that at least seem to aspire to following some of these normative claims include Mole (2017); Chapman (2019, 2020); Catala et al. (2021); Chapman and Carel (2022); Boldsen (2022); Krueger (2023). Of course, as as been highlighted throughout this paper, much work outside of our corpus (again, sometimes by autistics, some of whom are philosophers) also satisfies many of these normative proposals—see, e.g., Jaegher (2013); Ekdahl (2024); Chapman (2021, 2023); Walker (2021); White (2024). Some additional resources are offered in Appendix B.

Research that takes these imperatives seriously would add to the body of literature that engages, reflectively and critically, on autism while avoiding stigmatising, dehumanising, or pathologising autistics, which is directly relevant to weakening the evidence in favour of (D6) and (D7) in the present discourse. This would additionally add to work that engages with autism, reflecting a more nuanced understanding (relevant to (D1) and (D5)). Moreover, critical reflection may shed light on the fact that there is much more that is philosophically worthwhile about autism than just questions pertaining to ethics or mind; hence, this would widen philosophical research, helping to establish a "philosophy of autism" as a proper subfield of philosophy.

Although it is undeniable that much about autism has changed in the last decade, the results of our review, along with our analysis of these data, suggest that the more things change, the more they stay the same. Despite *apparent* advancements, certain fundamental aspects of prevailing patterns remain unchanged over time. Perhaps, in this case, the field would benefit from less "philosophy of" autism and more autistic philosophy.

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Appendix A. Complete List of Journals

A.1. **Devitt's LGSCD-Index.**

(4) *American Philosophy Quarterly* (JStor, Scholarly Publishing Collective)
(5) *Analysis* (Oxford Academic)

~~*Archiv fur Geschichte der Philosophie*~~
(6) *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* (Taylor and Francis)
(7) *Biology & Philosophy* (Springer)
(8) *British Journal for the History of Philosophy* (Taylor and Francis)
(9) *British Journal for the Philosophy of Science* (University of Chicago Press)
(10) *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* (Cambridge Core)
(11) *Continental Philosophy Review* (Springer)
(12) *Economics and Philosophy* (Cambridge Core)
(13) *Erkenntnis* (Springer)
(14) *Ethics* (University of Chicago Press)
(15) *European Journal of Philosophy* (Wiley Online)
(16) *Inquiry* (Taylor and Francis)
(17) *Journal of Philosophical Logic* (Springer)
(18) *Journal of Philosophy* (JStor, Philosophy Documentation Center)
(19) *Journal of Political Philosophy* (Wiley Online)
(20) *Journal of the History of Philosophy* (Project Muse)
(21) *Mind* (Oxford Academic)
(22) *Mind & Language* (Wiley Online)
(23) *Monist, The* (Oxford Academic)
(24) *Notre Dame Journal of Formal Logic* (Project Euclid)
(25) *Noûs* (Wiley Online)
(26) *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly / The Personalist* (Wiley Online)
(27) *Philosophical Quarterly, The* (Oxford Academic)
(28) *Philosophical Review, The* (JStor, Duke University Press)
(29) *Philosophical Studies* (Springer)
(30) *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* (JStor, Wiley Online)
(31) *Philosophy of Science* (Cambridge Core)
(32) *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* (Oxford Academic)
(33) *Ratio* (Wiley Online)
(34) *Review of Metaphysics* (JStor, Project Muse)
(35) *Social Philosophy and Policy* (Cambridge Core)
(36) *Synthese* (Springer)
(37) *Utilitas* (Cambridge Core)

A.2. **Additional Devitt Journals (Not Indexed by Google).**

(35) *History of Philosophy Quarterly* (JStor)
(36) *Linguistics & Philosophy* (Springer)
(37) *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* (Wiley Online, Philosophy Documentation Center)
(38) *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy* (Oxford Academic)
~~*Oxford Studies in Epistemology*~~
~~*Oxford Studies in Metaethics*~~
(39) *Philosophers' Imprint* (Philosophers' Imprint)
(40) *Philosophical Perspectives* (JStor, Wiley Online)
(41) *Philosophical Topics / The Southwestern Journal of Philosophy* (JStor)
(42) *Philosophy and Public Affairs* (JStor, Wiley Online)

A.3. **Top-20 Google Scholar Journals (Not Included in Leiter).**

~~*Journal of Consciousness Studies*~~

(43) *Metaphilosophy* (Wiley Online)
(44) *Phenomenology and the Cognitive Sciences* (Springer)
(45) *Philosophical Psychology* (Taylor and Francis)
(46) *Philosophy Compass* (Wiley Online)
(47) *Review of Philosophy and Psychology* (Springer)
(48) *Studies in Philosophy and Education* (Springer)

A.4. **2022 Leiter Ranking (Not Included in LGSCD-INDEX).**

(49) *Analytic Philosophy* (Wiley Online)
(50) *Ergo* (Michigan Publishing)
(51) *Journal of the American Philosophical Association* (Cambridge Core)
(52) *Thought* (Wiley Online)

A.5. **de Brouin's (2023) Meta-Analysis.**

(53) *Dialectica* (JStor, Wiley Online)
~~*Disputatio*~~
(54) *Episteme* (Cambridge Core)
~~*International Philosophical Quarterly*~~ (Philosophy Documentation Center)
(55) *Philosophia* (Springer)
(56) *Philosophical Explorations* (Taylor and Francis)
(57) *Philosophical Issues* (Wiley Online)
(58) *Philosophy* (Cambridge Core)
~~*Res Philosophica*~~ (Philosophy Documentation Center)
(59) *Southern Journal of Philosophy* (Wiley Online)

A.6. **Wild Cards.**

(60) *American Journal of Bioethics* (Taylor and Francis)
(61) *Bioethics* (Wiley Online)
(62) *European Journal for the Philosophy of Science* (Springer)
(63) *Feminist Philosophy Quarterly* (University of Western Ontario)
(64) *Hypatia* (Cambridge Core)
(65) *Journal of Social Philosophy* (Wiley Online)
(66) *Neuroethics* (Springer)
(67) *Philosophy, Psychiatry, and Psychology* (Project Muse)

Appendix B. Additional Resources

Although this list is necessarily partial (and static), we suggest some specific resources for those who would accept at least some of our normative claims, but do not know how or where to begin. Additional resources can be found at the *Philosophy on the Spectrum* research project webpage: https://autphi.github.io.

- Jim Sinclair. 1999. "Why I dislike 'Person-First' Language".
- Mel Baggs. 2007. *In My Language* (YouTube video).
- Naoki Higashida. 2007. *The Reason I Jump: The Inner Voice of a Thirteen-Year-Old Boy with Autism.*
- Ian Hacking. 2009. "How we have been learning to talk about autism: A role for stories" *Metaphilosophy.*
- Lydia Brown. 2011. The Significance of Semantics: Person-First Language: Why It Matters. *AutisticHoya.*
- Julia Bascom (Ed.). 2012. *Loud Hands: Autistic People, Speaking*

- Damian Milton. 2012. "On the Ontological Status of Autism: The 'Double Empathy Problem'. *Disability & Society* 27(6): 883-887.
- Joyce Davidson and Michael Orsini. 2013. *Worlds of Autism: Across the Spectrum of Neurological Difference*
- Anne McGuire. 2016. *War on Autism: On the Cultural Logic of Normative Violence.*
- Caren Zucker and John Donvan. 2016. *In a Different Key: The Story of Autism.* Broadway Books.
- Anand Prahlad. 2017. *The Secret Life of a Black Aspie: A Memoir.*
- M. Yergeau and Bryce Huebner. 2017. Minding theory of mind. *Journal of Social Philosophy* 48(3): 273–296
- Morton Ann Gernsbacher. 2018. "Critical review of autism and theory and mind: A technical report" Technical report, Open Science Framework.
- Natalie Engelbrecht and Eva Silvertant. 2018-2025. *Embrace Autism* (web resource).
- Morton Ann Gernsbacher and Melanie Yergeau. 2019. "Empirical Failures of the Claim That Autistic People Lack a Theory of Mind" *Archives of Scientific Psychology* 7: 102–111.
- Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha. 2019. *Care Work: Dreaming Disability Justice.*
- Hannah Gadsby. 2020. *Douglas*
- Steven K. Kapp (Ed.). 2020. *Autistic Community and the Neurodiversity Movement Stories from the Frontline.*
- Maxfield Sparrow. 2020. *Spectrums: Autistic Transgender People in Their Own Words.*
- Monique Botha. 2021. "Academic, activist, or advocate? angry, entangled, and emerging: A critical reflection on autism knowledge production. *Frontiers in Psychology* 12(727542): 1–12.
- Kristen Bottema-Beutel, Steven K. Kapp, Jessica Nina Lester, Noah J. Sasson, and Brittany N. Hand. 2021. Avoiding ableist language: Suggestions for autism researchers. *Autism in Adulthood.*
- Joe Gough. 2021. "Does the Neurotypical Human Have a 'Theory of Mind'?" *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders.*
- Nick Walker. 2021. *Neuroqueer Heresies: Notes on the Neurodiversity Paradigm, Autistic Empowerment, and Postnormal Possibilities.* Fort Worth, TX: Autonomous Press.
- Robert Chapman and Havi Carel. 2022. "Neurodiversity, epistemic injustice, and the good human life" *Journal of Social Philosophy* 53(4): 614-631.
- Devon Price. 2022. *Unmasking Autism: The Power of Embracing Our Hidden Neurodiversity.* Penguin.
- Robert Chapman. 2023. *Empire of Normality Neurodiversity and Capitalism.* Pluto Press.
- Amelia Hicks and Joanna Lawson. 2023. *Neurodiving* (Podcast).
- Meaghan Krazinski. 2023. "Celebrating neurodivergence amid social injustice" *Hypatia* 38: 726-774.
- Damian Milton and Sara Ryan (Eds.). 2023. *The Routledge International Handbook of Critical Autism Studies.*

- Kala Allen Omeiza. 2024. *Autistic and Black Our Experiences of Growth, Progress and Empowerment.*
- The Autism Books by Autistic Authors Project. 2025. https://autismbooksbyautisticauthors.com