Habitual familiarity in autism

Abstract: The peculiar habituality of autistic people in the form of repetitive and stereotyped patterns of behavior is often mentioned but rarely analyzed. A detailed account of autistic habituality is missing in philosophical literature. I propose that we advance our understanding of autistic experience by drawing on conceptual resources from the phenomenology of habit, specifically the feeling of familiarity that accompanies habitual actions (Merleau-Ponty, 2012; Hornett, 2022). I apply this notion to autism and provide a phenomenological analysis by showing that the autistic experience of the world and others is riddled with unfamiliarity. To counter constant anxiety and attune to the world, to feel at home in the world, in a mostly alien and hostile sensory environment, autistic individuals rely on actions and environments that feel familiar in a positive, safe, and predictable way. Through autistic special interests, I demonstrate how the habitual and the sensory are meshed in habitual favourites (Rourke, 2019). Although the familiarity aspect of habituality cuts across the autistic/neurotypical divide and is universal across the human spectrum, it is particularly pertinent in autistic phenomenology, as will be evident from qualitative research, autoethnography, and first-person accounts.

References:

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