

Felix hoenikker: the man, the disorder, the misperceptions



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Post-World War II, scientists were considered the heroes of modern society. The nation's science labs were heavily mobilized and federal spending on research development was over twenty times what it had been prior to the start of the war (Hampson). This society is what laid the ground work for Kurt Vonnegut's satirical masterpiece *Cat's Cradle*. In which, Vonnegut's main character, Felix Hoenikker, is well known for being not only the father of the atomic bomb, dropped on Hiroshima, but also an odd man in general. Hoenikker's subsequent oddness can be explained by Asperger's syndrome, a disorder first recognized by Hans Asperger in the mid 1940's. Hans Asperger studied a group of boys with "autism-like behaviors and difficulties with social and communication skills in boys who had normal intelligence and language development. Many professionals felt Asperger's syndrome was simply a milder form of autism and used the term 'high-functioning autism' to describe these individuals" (Autism Society). By modern standards, Dr. Hoenikker's actions and aptitudes as well as his creation of multiple weapons of mass destruction is attributed to Felix having Asperger's syndrome.

Although Asperger's syndrome wasn't a well-known phenomenon at the time Dr. Hoenikker did his most prevalent work, even his boss, Dr. Breed, knew that something was different about Hoenikker than all his other employees. For one, Breed knew he wasn't truly in charge of Felix. When interviewed by the narrator, John, Dr. Breed stated that even he knew he was only Hoenikker's boss "on paper" (21). He further described how difficult it was to control Felix saying that "if [he] actually supervised Felix, [...] then [he's] ready now to take charge of volcanoes, the tides, and the migration of birds and lemmings" (21). And that Dr. Hoenikker "was a force of nature no

mortal could possibly control" (21). The behaviors in this situation give readers reason to believe that Felix is suffering from Asperger's because of his "rigid inflexible behavior" (ASO) and his "problems understanding social cues" (ASO) both of which are characteristics defined by the Asperger's society of Ontario to be markers for diagnosing a person with Asperger's syndrome. Furthering the argument that Hoenikker's Asperger's are to blame for the destructive weapons created by Hoenikker is Matt Wallace in his article Dr. Felix Hoenikker in Kurt Vonnegut's *Cat's Cradle*: good or evil? Wallace builds his argument by creating reasonable doubt that Felix is responsible for both creating the deadly weapons and the destruction they caused. Instead, Wallace insists that Dr. Hoenikker is more childlike than evil and it is his child like wonder that makes him the pristine scientist he is known to be. Furthermore, Wallace points out that Felix is incapable of being a responsible adult. He blames the destruction of Dr. Hoenikker on those who have manipulated his child like mind which can be refocused by suggestions from others. Essentially, Wallace is defending Hoenikker and placing the blame of the atomic bomb and Ice-Nine on those responsible for him and responsible for using his child like mind to manipulate him.

While I believe that Wallace's argument is valid, I also think he is missing key points that could even further validate it. First, with the theory that Hoenikker has Asperger's in mind, Felix wouldn't have been able to understand the concept of manipulation because of his Asperger's. Therefore, if the other character were to manipulate Felix throughout his career he may never know he was being manipulated because nothing in his daily interactions had changed. Secondly, if Felix's counterparts such as Dr.

Breed were aware that he was mentally incompetent they would have given him the ethically debatable “chores”. By doing this, Breed could blame everything on Felix being mentally incompetent when things went wrong or the ethics of the laboratory were called into question. Essentially, the people in Hoenikker’s life are responsible for his actions and for not ensuring his and others protection.

Above and beyond not being able to comprehend the idea of having a boss, Dr. Hoenikker is unable to adapt to both new surroundings and the idea of changing his every day routine. When approached about working on the Manhattan project, an honor that anyone else would accept regardless of the stipulations, Felix made it clear that he would not leave Ilium to work on the project. If they wanted Dr. Hoenikker on the project he would work where he wanted to, how he wanted to (9). This is not the only time Dr. Hoenikker avoided change or socialization. Throughout the novel, John tells of times when Felix is avoiding contact with others. In an encounter with John, Ms. Faust reminisces that, “Felix ate alone [...] in the cafeteria every day. It was a rule that no one was to sit with him, to interrupt his chain of thought” (49). His avoidance of change once again falls under the spectrum of traits possessed by someone with Asperger’s, as those with Asperger’s syndrome are known to be avoidant of social contact or events. Furthermore, when Felix did interact with others it was often times begrudgingly, he never initiated contact, and when others did initiate contact it wasn’t unusual for Felix to just walk away from them. As he did from his children, when he “stuck his head out a window, and he looked at Angela and [Newt] rolling on the ground, bawling, and Frank standing over [them], laughing. The old man

pulled his head indoors again, and never asked later what all the fuss had been about." (17). If Felix couldn't interact with his children, his own flesh and blood, there is no other explanation than his lack of interaction with others being caused by his Asperger's.

Other than avoidance of change and social conflict, another trait that is embodied in both Felix Hoenikker and those previously diagnosed with Asperger's syndrome is the inability to understand their feelings, and how to connect emotionally with others. Besides his wife dying from child birth and being left with their three children, Felix's home life seems run of the mill. Their family goes on vacation to Cape Cod in the summers and winters, they go to school and to work, everything seems normal. Seems being the operative word. However, those things weren't normal to Felix, if anything he saw those particular things as a bother. When characters spoke of "intimate things, family things, love things" (54). Ms. Faust tells readers that "Dr. Hoenikker had all those things in his life, the way every living thing has to, but they weren't the main things to him" (54). His work, and his science were what he considered the "main things to him." (54) From this characterization, readers can establish that personal relationships were of little to no interest to Hoenikker. He focused primarily on the scientific or factual side of life and because relationships weren't factual Hoenikker couldn't psychologically understand them. This leads to many readers thinking Felix is cold or inept when in actuality his lack of connection to other human beings is a symptom of his Asperger's.

Often, those with Asperger's syndrome experience frustration faster than those without it, and this coupled with their misunderstanding of social cues

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lead them to do things that can be perceived as unusual by others. Although Felix had an intellectually advanced mind, he was often frustrated quickly by simple, everyday tasks. Furthermore, socially Hoenikker wasn't up to par where a normal adult male his age would have been. Dr. Breed tells John that " Dr. Hoenikker, as a very young man, had simply abandoned his car in the middle of Illinois traffic one morning" (30). As most individuals would tell you, this is an unusual thing for one to do. When a typical person leaves their car in the middle of traffic it is usually for a reason such as they ran out of gas, or the battery failed. In each of these cases one would think to pull the car off to the side of the road where it would not further impede traffic. However, Hoenikker just left his, in the middle of the road, still running. With no mechanical failures and no issues other than he was tired of traffic and frustrated.

Although throughout the novel Dr. Hoenikker's characterization brings up clear elements relating to Asperger's and the reasons he creates weapons of mass destruction is related to the obsession he has for science, caused by his Asperger's syndrome. No one is as direct about Felix's characterization as Ms. Faust. In her declaration, that Dr. Hoenikker was " an unusual man" (57). Ms. Faust elaborates on her declaration by stating that " maybe in a million years everybody will be as smart as he [Dr. Hoenikker] was and see things the way he did. But, compared with the average person of today, he was as different as a man from Mars" (57). This quotation is one of the most vital to characterizing Felix as a person of Asperger's because it emphasizes the fact that he is nowhere near average and exceptionally smart. Some of the main benefits to being a person of Asperger's include " average to superior

intelligence, a detail oriented approach to tasks which may result in missing the ' bigger picture', and a preference of technical and factual information over abstract concepts and theories" (ASO).

Having been compared to those already diagnosed with Asperger's, it is logical to conclude that Felix Hoenikker too can be diagnosed with this syndrome. From his obsession with science, destructive science, to his emotional detachment to his wife and children, each of Hoenikker's social and moral taboos can be explained by Asperger's syndrome. Furthermore, it can be argued that Dr. Hoenikker's co-workers took advantage of his situation and the weapons of mass destruction that came out of Felix's time at the science laboratory weren't his fault.

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