

Jerks: A Field Guide

Eric Schwitzgebel

Picture the world through the eyes of the jerk. The line of people in post office is a mass of unimportant fools; it's a felt injustice that you must wait while they bumble with their requests. The flight attendant is not a potentially interesting person with her own cares and struggles but instead the most available face of a corporation that stupidly insists you shut your phone. Custodians and secretaries are lazy complainers who rightly get the scut work. The person who disagrees with you at the staff meeting is an idiot to be shot down. Entering a subway is an exercise in nudging past the dumb schmoes.

We need a theory of jerks. We need such a theory because, first, it can help us achieve a calm, clinical understanding when confronting such a creature in the wild. Imagine the nature-documentary voice-over: 'Here we see the jerk in his natural environment. Notice how he subtly adjusts his dominance display to the Italian restaurant situation....' And second – well, I don't want to say what the second reason is quite yet.

As it happens, I do have such a theory. But before we get into it, I should clarify some terminology. The word 'jerk' can refer to two different types of person (I set aside sexual uses of the term, as well as more purely physical senses). The older use of 'jerk' designates a kind of chump or an ignorant fool, though not a morally odious one. When Weird Al Yankovic sang, in 2006, 'I sued Fruit of the Loom 'cause when I wear their tightie-whities on my head I look like a jerk', or when, on March 1, 1959, Willard Temple wrote in the *Los Angeles Times*: 'He could have married the campus queen... Instead the poor jerk fell for a snub-nosed, skinny little broad', it's clear it's the chump they have in mind. The jerk-as-fool usage seems to have begun as a derisive reference to the unsophisticated people of a 'jerkwater town': that is, a town not rating a full-scale train station, requiring the boilerman to pull on a chain to water his engine. The term expresses the travelling troupe's disdain. Over time, however, 'jerk' shifted from being primarily a class-based insult to its second, now dominant sense as a term of moral condemnation. Such linguistic drift from class-based contempt to moral deprecation is a common pattern across languages, as observed by Nietzsche in *On the Genealogy of Morality*. (In English, consider 'rude', 'villain', 'ignoble'.) And it is the immoral jerk who concerns me here.

Why, you may be wondering, should a philosopher make it his business to analyse colloquial terms of abuse? Doesn't Urban Dictionary cover that kind of thing quite adequately? Shouldn't I confine myself to truth, or beauty, or knowledge, or why there is something rather than nothing (Sidney Morgenbesser's answer: 'if there was nothing, still you'd complain')? I am, in fact, interested in all those topics. And yet I suspect there's a folk wisdom in the term 'jerk' that points toward something morally important. I want to extract that morally important thing, to isolate the core phenomenon towards which I think the word is groping. Precedents for this type of work include Harry Frankfurt on bullshit and, closer to my target, Aaron James on the asshole. Our taste in vulgarity reveals our values..

I submit that the unifying core, the essence of jerkitude in the moral sense, is this: *the jerk culpably fails to appreciate the perspectives of others around him, treating them as tools to be manipulated or idiots to be dealt with rather than as moral and epistemic peers*. This failure has both an intellectual dimension and an emotional dimension, and it has these two dimensions on both side of the relationship. The jerk himself is both intellectually and emotionally defective, and what he defectively fails to appreciate is both the intellectual and emotional perspectives of the people around him. He can't appreciate how he might be wrong and others right about some matter of fact; and what other people want or value doesn't register as of interest to him, except derivatively upon his own interests. The bumpkin ignorance captured in the earlier use of 'jerk' has changed into a type of moral ignorance.

Some related traits are already well known in psychology and philosophy – the 'dark triad' of Machiavellianism, narcissism, and psychopathy, and Aaron James's conception of the asshole, already mentioned. But my conception of the jerk differs from all of these. The asshole, James says, is someone who allows himself to enjoy special advantages out of an entrenched sense of entitlement. That is one important dimension of jerkitude, but not the whole story. The callous psychopath, though cousin to the jerk, has an impulsivity and love of risk-taking that need be no part of the jerk's character. Neither does the jerk have to be as thoroughly self-involved as the narcissist or as self-consciously cynical as the Machiavellian, though narcissism and Machiavellianism are common enough jerkish attributes. My conception of the 'jerk' also has a conceptual unity that is, I think, both theoretically appealing in the abstract and fruitful in helping explain some of the peculiar features of this type of animal, as we will see.

The opposite of the jerk is the *sweetheart*. The sweetheart sees others around him, even strangers, as individually distinctive people with valuable perspectives, whose desires and opinions and interests and goals are worthy of attention and respect. The sweetheart yields his place in line to the hurried shopper, stops to help the person who dropped her papers, calls an acquaintance with an embarrassed apology after having been unintentionally rude. In a debate, the sweetheart sees how he might be wrong and the other person right.

The moral and emotional failure of the jerk is obvious. The intellectual failure is, too: no one is as right about everything as the jerk thinks he is. He would learn by listening. And one of the things he might learn by listening is the true scope of his jerkitude – a fact about which, as I will explain shortly, the all-out jerk is inevitably ignorant. Which brings me to the other great benefit of a theory of jerks: it might help you figure out if you yourself are one.

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Some clarifications and caveats.

First, no one is a perfect jerk or a perfect sweetheart. Human behaviour – of course! – varies hugely with context. Different situations (sales-team meetings, travelling in close quarters) might bring out the jerk in some and the sweetie in others.

Second, the jerk is someone who *culpably* fails to appreciate the perspectives of others around him. Young children and people with severe mental disabilities aren't capable of appreciating others' perspectives, so they can't be blamed for their failure and aren't jerks. Also, not all perspectives deserve equal treatment. Failure to appreciate the outlook of a neo-Nazi, for example, is not sign of jerkitude – though the true sweetheart might bend over backwards to try.

Third, I've called the jerk 'he', for reasons you might guess. But then it seems too gendered to call the sweetheart 'she', so I've made the sweetheart a 'he' too.

I said that my theory might help us to tell whether we, ourselves, are jerks. But in fact this turns out to be a peculiarly difficult question. The psychologist Simine Vazire has argued that we tend to know our own characteristics quite well when the relevant traits are evaluatively neutral and straightforwardly observable, and badly when they are loaded with value judgments and not straightforwardly observable. If you ask someone how talkative she is, or whether she is relatively high-strung or relatively mellow, and then you ask her friends to rate her along the same dimensions, the self-rating and the peer ratings usually correlate quite well – and both sets of ratings also tend to line up with psychologists' best attempts to measure such traits objectively. Why? Presumably because it's more or less fine to be talkative and more or less fine to be quiet, OK to be a bouncing bunny and OK instead to keep it low-key, and such traits are hard to miss in any case. But few of us want to be inflexible, stupid, unfair or low in creativity. And if you don't want to see yourself that way, it's easy enough to dismiss the signs. Such characteristics are, after all, connected to outward behaviour in somewhat complicated ways; we can always cling to the idea that we have been misunderstood. Thus we overlook our own faults.

With Vazire's model of self-knowledge in mind, I conjecture a correlation of approximately zero between how one would rate oneself in relative jerkitude and one's actual true jerkitude. The term is morally loaded, and rationalisation is so tempting and easy! Why did you just treat that cashier so harshly? Well, she deserved it – and anyway, I've been having a rough day. Why did you just cut into that line of cars at the last minute, not waiting your turn to exit? Well, that's just good tactical driving – and anyway, I'm in a hurry! Why did you seem to relish failing that student for submitting her essay an hour late? Well, the rules were clearly stated; it's only fair to the students who worked hard to submit their essays on time – and that was a grimace not a smile.

Since the most effective way to learn about defects in one's character is to listen to frank feedback from people whose opinions you respect, the jerk faces special obstacles on the road to self-knowledge, beyond even what Vazire's model would lead us to expect. By definition, he fails to respect the perspectives of others around him. He's much more likely to dismiss critics as fools – or as themselves jerks – than to take the criticism to heart.

Still, it's entirely possible for a picture-perfect jerk to acknowledge, in a *superficial* way, that he is a jerk. 'So what, yeah, I'm a jerk', he might say. Provided this label carries no real sting of self-disapprobation, the jerk's moral self-ignorance remains. Part of what it is to fail

to appreciate the perspectives of others is to fail to see your jerkishly dismissive attitude toward their ideas and concerns as inappropriate.

Ironically, it is the sweetheart who worries that he has just behaved inappropriately, that he might have acted too jerkishly, and who feels driven to make amends. Such distress is impossible if you don't take others' perspectives seriously into account. Indeed, the distress itself constitutes a deviation (in this one respect at least) from pure jerkitude: worrying about whether it might be so helps to make it less so. Then again, if you take comfort in that fact and cease worrying, you have undermined the very basis of your comfort.

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All normal jerks distribute their jerkishness mostly *down* the social hierarchy, and to anonymous strangers. Waitresses, students, clerks, strangers on the road – these are the unfortunates who bear the brunt of it. With a modicum of self-control, the jerk, though he implicitly or explicitly regards himself as more important than most of the people around him, recognises that the perspectives of those above him in the hierarchy also deserve some consideration. Often, indeed, he feels sincere respect for his higher-ups. Perhaps respectful feelings are too deeply written in our natures to disappear entirely. Perhaps the jerk retains a vestigial kind of concern specifically for those whom it would benefit him, directly or indirectly, to win over. He is at least concerned enough about their opinion of him to display tactical respect while in their field of view. However it comes about, the classic jerk kisses up and kicks down. The company CEO rarely knows who the jerks are, though it's no great mystery among the secretaries.

Because the jerk tends to disregard the perspectives of those below him in the hierarchy, he often has little idea how he appears to them. This leads to hypocrisies. He might rage against the smallest typo in a student's or secretary's document while producing a torrent of errors himself; it just wouldn't occur to him to apply the same standards to himself. He might insist on promptness while always running late. He might freely reprimand other people, expecting them to take it with good grace, while any complaints directed against him earn his eternal enmity. Such failures of parity typify the jerk's moral shortsightedness, flowing naturally from his disregard of others' perspectives. These hypocrisies are immediately obvious if one genuinely imagines oneself in a subordinate's shoes for anything other than selfish and self-rationalising ends, but this is exactly what the jerk habitually fails to do.

Embarrassment, too, becomes practically impossible for the jerk, at least in front of his underlings. Embarrassment requires us to imagine being viewed negatively by people whose perspectives we care about. As the circle of people whom the jerk is willing to regard as true peers and superiors shrinks, so does his capacity for shame – and with it a crucial entry point for moral self-knowledge.

As one climbs the social hierarchy it is also easier to *become* a jerk. Here's a characteristically jerkish thought: 'I'm important, and I'm surrounded by idiots!' Both halves of this proposition serve to conceal the jerk's jerkitude from himself. Thinking

yourself important is a pleasantly self-gratifying excuse for disregarding the interests and desires of others. Thinking that the people around you are idiots seems like a good reason to disregard their intellectual perspectives. As you ascend the hierarchy, you will find it easier to discover evidence of your relative importance (your big salary, your first-class seat) and of the relative idiocy of others (who have failed to ascend as high as you). Also, flatterers will tend to squeeze out frank, authentic critics.

This isn't the only possible explanation for the prevalence of powerful jerks, of course. Maybe jerks are actually more likely to rise in business and academia than non-jerks – the truest sweethearts often suffer from an inability to advance their own projects over the projects of others. But I suspect the causal path runs at least as much in the other direction. Success might or might not favour the existing jerks, but I'm pretty sure it nurtures new ones.

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The *moralistic jerk* is an animal worth special remark. Charles Dickens was a master painter of the type: his teachers, his preachers, his petty bureaucrats and self-satisfied businessmen, Scrooge condemning the poor as lazy, Mr Bumble shocked that Oliver Twist dares to ask for more, each dismissive of the opinions and desires of their social inferiors, each inflated with a proud self-image and ignorant of how they are rightly seen by those around them, and each rationalising this picture with a web of moralising 'should's.

Scrooge and Bumble are cartoons, and we can be pretty sure we aren't as bad as them. Yet I see in myself and all those who are not pure sweethearts a tendency to rationalise my privilege with moralistic sham justifications. Here's my reason for trying to dishonestly wheedle my daughter into the best school, my reason why the session chair should call on me rather than on the grad student who got her hand up earlier, my reason why it's fine that I have 400 library books in my office.... Philosophers seem to have a special talent for this: we can concoct a moral rationalisation for anything, with enough work! (Such skill at rationalisation might explain why ethicist philosophers seem to behave no morally better, on average, than comparison groups of non-ethicists, as my collaborators and I have found in a series of empirical studies looking at a broad range of issues from library book theft and courteous behaviour at professional conferences to rates of charitable donation and Nazi party membership in the 1930s.) The moralistic jerk's rationalisations justify his disregard of others, and his disregard of others prevents him from accepting an outside corrective on his rationalisations, in a self-insulating cycle. Here's why it's fine for me to proposition my underlings and inflate my expense claims, you idiot critics. Coat the whole thing, if you like, in a patina of academic jargon.

The moralising jerk is apt to go badly wrong in his moral opinions. Partly this is because his morality tends to be self-serving, and partly it's because his disrespect for others' perspectives puts him at a general epistemic disadvantage. But there's more to it than that. In failing to appreciate others' perspectives, the jerk almost inevitably fails to appreciate the full range of human goods – the value of dancing, say, or of sports, nature, pets, local cultural rituals, and indeed anything that he doesn't care for himself. Think of the

aggressively rumpled scholar who can't bear the thought that someone would waste her time getting a manicure. Or think of the manicured socialite who can't see the value of dedicating one's life to dusty Latin manuscripts. Whatever he's into, the moralising jerk exudes a continuous aura of disdain for everything else.

Furthermore, *mercy* is near the heart of practical, lived morality. Virtually everything that everyone does falls short of perfection: one's turn of phrase is less than perfect, one arrives a bit late, one's clothes are tacky, one's gesture irritable, one's choice somewhat selfish, one's coffee less than frugal, one's melody trite. Practical mercy involves letting these imperfections pass forgiven or, better yet, entirely unnoticed. In contrast, the jerk appreciates neither others' difficulties in attaining all the perfections that he attributes to himself, nor the possibility that some portion of what he regards as flawed is in fact blameless. Hard moralising principle therefore comes naturally to him. (Sympathetic mercy is natural to the sweetheart.) And on the rare occasions when the jerk *is* merciful, his indulgence is usually ill-tuned: the flaws he forgives are exactly the one he recognises in himself or has ulterior reasons to let slide. Consider another brilliant literary cartoon jerk: Severus Snape, the infuriating potions teacher in J K Rowling's novels, always eager to drop the hammer on Harry Potter or anyone else who happens to annoy him, constantly bristling with indignation, but wildly off the mark – contrasted with the mercy and broad vision of Dumbledore.

Despite the jerk's almost inevitable flaws in moral vision, the moralising jerk can sometimes happen to be right about some specific important issue (as Snape proved to be) – especially if he adopts a big social cause. He needn't care only about money and prestige. Indeed, sometimes an abstract and general concern for moral or political principles serves as a kind of substitute for genuine concern about the people in his immediate field of view, possibly leading to substantial self-sacrifice. And in social battles, the sweetheart will always have some disadvantages: the sweetheart's talent for seeing things from his opponent's perspective deprives him of bold self-certainty, and he is less willing to trample others for his ends. Social movements sometimes do well when led by a moralising jerk. I will not mention specific examples, lest I err and offend.

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How can you know your own moral character? You can try a label on for size: 'lazy', 'jerk', 'unreliable' – is that really me? As the work of Vazire and other personality psychologists suggests, this might not be a very illuminating approach. More effective, I suspect, is to shift from first-person reflection (what am *I* like?) to second-person description (tell me, what *am I* like?). Instead of introspection, try listening. Ideally, you will have a few people in your life who know you intimately, have integrity, and are concerned about your character. They can frankly and lovingly hold your flaws up to the light and insist that you look at them. Give them the space to do this, and prepare to be disappointed in yourself.

Done well enough, this second-person approach could work fairly well for traits like laziness and unreliability, especially if their scope is restricted: laziness-about-X, unreliability-about-Y. But as I suggested above, jerkitude is not so tractable, since if one is

far enough gone, one can't listen in the right way. Your critics are fools, at least on this particular topic (their critique of you). They can't appreciate your perspective, you think – though really it's that you can't appreciate theirs.

To discover one's degree of jerkitude, the best approach might be neither (first-person) direct reflection upon yourself nor (second-person) conversation with intimate critics but rather something more third-person: Looking in general at *other people*. Everywhere you turn, are you surrounded by fools, by boring nonentities, by faceless masses and foes and suckers and, indeed, jerks? Are you the only competent, reasonable person to be found? In other words, how familiar was the vision of the world I described at the beginning of this essay?

If your self-rationalising defenses are low enough to feel a little pang of shame at the familiarity of that vision of the world, then you probably aren't pure diamond-grade jerk. But who is? We're all somewhere in the middle. That's what makes the jerk's vision of the world so instantly recognizable. It's our own vision. But, thankfully, only sometimes.