

Autism and Interpersonal Ethics: Who can we blame when things don't go well?

KEN RICHMAN
PROFESSOR OF PHILOSOPHY AND HEALTHCARE ETHICS
www.richmanweb.com



MCPHS
UNIVERSITY

Boston



Slide 1 of 43

MORAL RESPONSIBILITY

MORAL RESPONSIBILITY BASICS

Full-on lecture mode until slide 26



Slide 2 of 43

MORAL RESPONSIBILITY

‘John is *responsible* for what he did’ means that John is *accountable for* what he did.

blameworthy



praiseworthy



Slide 3 of 43

Blame: <http://www.dietdetective.com/blame-game-how-your-behavior-might-be-hindering-your-weight-control-2/>

MORAL RESPONSIBILITY

~~oops~~
~~just something that happened~~
~~not mine~~
~~not my fault~~

Slide 4 of 43

MORAL RESPONSIBILITY

People do things for which we are morally accountable.



Slide 5 of 43

<https://www.picgifs.com/graphics/pickpocketing>

MORAL RESPONSIBILITY

People do things for which we are not morally accountable.



Slide 6 of 43

<https://touchstoneblog.org.uk/2015/04/the-slowest-ever-recovery-slows-down-again/>

MORAL RESPONSIBILITY

Moral responsibility is about these questions:

- *When is it appropriate to blame/praise someone for what she did?*
- *What excuses someone from deserving blame for an action?*
- *Under what circumstances would a person be entirely exempt from responsibility for whatever she does?*

MORAL RESPONSIBILITY

blameworthy



excused



exempt



Burglar: <https://www.247homerescue.co.uk/peak-burglary-season-is-upon-us-are-you-prepared/>

Stinky diaper: <http://divinesecretsofthewritingsisterhood.blogspot.com/2012/11/smell-discrimination.html>

WHEN WE DISAGREE

We want to respect differences in judgement,
but we don't want to say that
all different perspectives are equally acceptable.

*Some behavior is just not OK.
Some people sometimes deserve blame.*

WHEN WE DISAGREE

We want there to be correct answers to at least some moral questions.

Killing people with nerve agents is bad.
Getting food to hungry people is good.

THE BASIS OF MORAL TRUTH

Religion is one tool for identifying moral truth.
With religion, **piety** is taken as a sign of good morals.



Slide 11 of 43

By Chris Downer, CC BY-SA 2.0,
<https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=11739464>

THE BASIS OF MORAL TRUTH

Another way is to have non-religious authority.
(aristocracy)

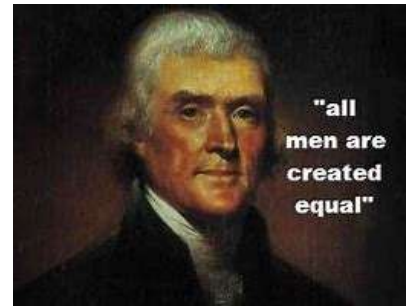


Slide 12 of 43

Charlemagne: <https://www.pinterest.com/pin/541346817683238936/>

THE BASIS OF MORAL TRUTH

Politics and philosophy became more egalitarian in the Enlightenment.



Charlemagne: <https://www.pinterest.com/pin/541346817683238936/>

Jefferson: <http://www.redhotconservative.com/tag/white-men/>

THE BASIS OF MORAL TRUTH

In Enlightenment thinking, **human nature** replaces God as the foundation of ethics.

This is supposed to:

- create universal common ground
- allow that everyone can access truth
- allow us to speak truth to power



Slide 14 of 43

<http://carneades.pomona.edu/1998-2006/2006-ImageGod/pictures.shtml>

THE BASIS OF MORAL TRUTH

But then being “normal” replaces being pious.

*We are expected to be able to
look into ourselves and
see/feel/reason the same moral truths
as everyone else.*

THE BASIS OF MORAL TRUTH

If someone does NOT see/feel the same moral truths as everyone else, then she is either:

blameworthy / a bad person

OR

an invalid / not a full member of the moral community.

THE BASIS OF MORAL TRUTH

In order to save moral truth, Enlightenment-inspired morality requires that human nature be the same in everyone.

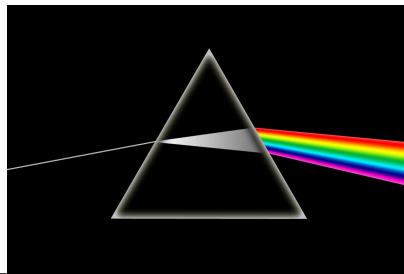
THE BASIS OF MORAL TRUTH

Enlightenment ethics rejects differences based on social position / power by claiming we are all the same.

If we are all the same, then we will each find the same, common moral truths.

THE BASIS OF MORAL TRUTH

How do we embrace diversity without giving up truth?



Slide 19 of 43

<https://he.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/קובץ:Optical-dispersion.png>

AUTISM AND MORAL RESPONSIBILITY

Does (or can) autism affect whether the autistic person is responsible for actions?

(Responsible? Excused? Exempt?)

AUTISM AND MORAL RESPONSIBILITY

Some philosophers have claimed that autism makes people unable to understand ethics.

Someone unable to understand is **exempt** from responsibility.



Slide 21 of 43

Stinky diaper: <http://divinesecretsofthewritingsisterhood.blogspot.com/2012/11/smell-discrimination.html>

AUTISM AND MORAL RESPONSIBILITY

“...if social conventions and connectedness are opaque to [people with Asperger’s Syndrome] how can they **authentically** appreciate that their actions are morally wrong ...”?

(Barry-Walsh and Mullen 2004, p. 106)

AUTISM AND MORAL RESPONSIBILITY

Philosopher David Shoemaker argues that autists are not accountable for their actions because they are unable to engage in moral thinking at all.

AUTISM AND MORAL RESPONSIBILITY

“...their ends may be less about doing the right thing or taking others’ interests as reason-giving and more about ‘their need to abide by whatever rules they have been taught...’”

Shoemaker 2015 pp. 169-170, quoting
Victoria McGeer 2007

AUTISM AND MORAL RESPONSIBILITY

But **this seems wrong**. (Doesn't it?)

Theory and “data” conflict.

At least one needs to be revised.

BREATHE / STRETCH

GET READY FOR MORE

Case 1: Over-texting

“I befriended this one girl with Asperger’s and she latched on to me quickly always texting me and not knowing when to stop. ... I laid out specific boundaries for her and she still could not follow them. I would even explicitly say ‘Stop texting me.’ and she couldn’t understand it. I grew to resent her and I still do.”

https://www.reddit.com/r/aspergers/comments/2dcijz/nt_here_do_some_people_with_aspergers_have/



Slide 27 of 43

<https://www.techlicious.com/blog/iphone-crash-prank/>

Case 2: Poor prioritizing

“Once as a child I had been badly injured... The injury was so severe I was in real danger of bleeding to death. My mother was in the car with me, trying to put pressure on the wound. Meanwhile, we were all waiting on my father, who had been dressed but shirtless at the time I got hurt. I was sitting in the back seat of the car bleeding, and he was looking for a shirt to put on so he wouldn't have to go to the hospital without one. <https://aspar.wordpress.com/stories/>



Slide 28 of 43

https://www.compliancesigns.com/media/NH/policy-rules/1000/Customer-Policies-Sign-NHE-9591-Black_on_White_1000.gif

Case 3: Awkward truth-telling

Mum: “Doesn’t your sister look pretty?”

Johnny: “I don’t think so.”

How should we respond to these cases?

Not bad?

Blameworthy?

Excusable?

Exempt?

REASONS RESPONSIVENESS

Reasons responsiveness
is a widely-discussed
theory of moral responsibility.

REASONS RESPONSIVENESS

Normative competence

*“requires responsible agents to be able to
recognize and respond to reasons for action.”
(Brink and Nelkin 2013 p. 292)*

Slide 32 of 43

“...responsibility must be predicated on the possession, rather than the use, of such capacities. We **do** excuse for lack of competence. We **do not** excuse for failures to exercise these capacities properly.”

(Brink and Nelkin 2013 p. 292)

REASONS RESPONSIVENESS

epistemic criterion

ability to know
reasons receptivity

volitional criterion

ability to respond
reasons reactivity

EXECUTIVE FUNCTION & NORMATIVE COMPETENCE

Autism is associated with atypical lower executive function in:

- Shifting/Cognitive flexibility
- Initiation/fluency/generativity
- Working memory

EXECUTIVE FUNCTION & NORMATIVE COMPETENCE

These EFs are used in:

- taking in & adjusting to new information about people and circumstances
- seeing alternative ways to respond

Challenges in these areas may make for **reasons blockage**.

*Request for assistance—
Reasons blindness? Reasons blinkered?*

Slide 35 of 43

REASONS BLOCKAGE

Reasons blockage is not a failure of character or of general moral sensibilities.

REASONS BLOCKAGE

Like visual impairments, reasons blockage can keep some relevant facts from being available to a person.

Reacting to those facts cannot therefore be “properly morally demanded of” that person.
(Björnsson 2017)

REASONS BLOCKAGE

Everyone has these blocks some of the time.

*Autism may just make for
more excuses,
not new or different ones.*

REASONS BLOCKAGE

D Milton's discussions of **the double empathy problem** suggest that neurotypicals may have reasons blockages that could be excuses for their behavior towards autists.



Slide 39 of 43

See Things My Way logo from the Miriam Foundation (Montreal)

TIME

PRESENT: We have been taking a snapshot approach.

Slide 40 of 43

TIME

PAST (*Tracing*): Decisions we made earlier can affect our ability to be responsible now.

Can we blame autists if they failed to prepare themselves for moral engagement?

TIME

FUTURE: It can make sense to hold someone responsible with the goal of changing behavior in the future independent of considerations about the past or the present.

Would future-oriented accountability practices be appropriate for any of these cases?

MORE IDEAS FOR POTENTIAL DISCUSSION

The capacity for moral engagement is different from other capacities we may have, such as the capacity to become good at archery.

If we have the capacity for moral engagement, then we have an obligation to develop that capacity.