



## “A Theory of Jerks” by Eric Schwitzgebel

### Activity Instructions

The passage, questions, and images below can be used to engage students in critical thinking and in-class discussion around key concepts that will be tested during the AP exam. To help get you started, we have provided several suggestions on how to use this activity.

- Print out the passage to give to each student or pairs/groups of students.
- Read the passage to students or have students read it independently.
- Pose the following questions to your students. Have students either work together to formulate their answers or have students respond individually.
- Have students share their answers with the class and discuss.
- After the activity, print the images as posters to hang in your classroom to reinforce the literary concepts.

### Activity Prompts

1. Throughout this passage, the author uses a blend of formal and colloquial language. List four examples of each. What is the effect of this combination on the reader?
2. In paragraph 8, the author uses the word “self-disapprobation” to describe a response to criticism. What context clues help you determine what this word means?
3. What is the author’s claim in this passage? How does the author use qualification in his argument?



## “A Theory of Jerks” by Eric Schwitzgebel

### Passage

First, no one is a perfect jerk or a perfect sweetheart. Human behavior — of course! — varies hugely with context. Different situations (department meetings, traveling in close quarters) might bring out the jerk in some and the sweetheart in others.

Second, the jerk is someone who culpably fails to appreciate the perspectives of others around him. Young children and people with severe cognitive disabilities aren't capable of appreciating others' perspectives, so they can't be blamed for their failure and aren't jerks. (“What a selfish jerk!” you say about the baby next to you on the bus, who is hollering and flinging her slobbery toy around. Of course you mean it only as a joke. Hopefully.) Also, not all perspectives deserve equal treatment. Failure to appreciate the outlook of a neo-Nazi, for example, is not a sign of jerkitude — though the true sweetheart might bend over backwards to try.

Third, I've referred to the jerk as “he,” since the best stereotypical examples of jerks tend to be male, for some reason. But then it seems too gendered to call the sweetheart “she,” so I've made the sweetheart a “he” too.

I've said that my theory might help us assess whether we, ourselves, are jerks. In fact, this turns out to be a strangely difficult question. The psychologist Simine Vazire has argued that we tend to know our own personality traits rather well when the traits are evaluatively neutral and straightforwardly observable and badly when the traits are highly value laden and not straightforward to observe.

If you ask people how talkative they are, or whether they are relatively high-strung or mellow, and then you ask their friends to rate them along those same dimensions, the self-ratings and the peer ratings usually correlate well — and both sets of ratings also tend to line up with psychologists' 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, okay to be a bouncing bunny and okay 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 behavior in somewhat complicated ways; we can always



cling to the idea that we've been misunderstood by those who charge us with such defects. Thus, we overlook our 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 "jerk" is morally loaded, and rationalization 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 moment, 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 his 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 probably 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 theory 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 jerks themselves — 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 that this admission 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.

Schwitzgebel, Eric. "A Theory of Jerks." Aeon Media Group, June 4, 2014. (Used with permission)



## Qualification

Added information that puts conditions or limitations on a claim



### Claim

Jumping out of an airplane is a terrible idea...

### Qualification

...unless you have a parachute.

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## Colloquial vs Formal



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## Context

Surrounding text that clarifies the meaning of a word or idea

