

The problem with self-exemption

Moral philosophers traditionally distinguish between excuses and exemptions. In the Strawsonian tradition, this distinction is often framed in terms of the participant and objective attitudes (Strawson 1962). We can excuse someone and still see them as a participant in normal human relationships, but when we exempt someone, we rather see them as an object to be managed and handled. Serious mental disorders are typically assumed to ground exemptions, not excuses.

In the moral responsibility literature, it is normally assumed that exemptions apply only to *other* people, not the readers and writers of philosophy. *We* discuss whether to take an objective attitude towards *them*. But what if I have a serious mental disorder *myself*? Should I, then, take up an objective attitude towards myself, and exempt myself from any wrongful actions, instead of feeling guilty? This is easier said than done.

I can sometimes regard future time-slices of myself, or certain aspects, somewhat like objects to be managed and handled, but I cannot consistently see myself this way. Whenever I choose and act, I experience myself as an agent, and my agency also looms large in memories of what I have previously done (Korsgaard 1996: 162; Jeppsson 2020). I can certainly *try* to stop feeling guilty and being angry with myself by adopting an objective attitude, but I am doomed to slipping out of it over and over. Every time I do, guilt and self-directed anger threaten to rush back in.

I argue that it is better to opt for compassionate self-excuses than self-exemption. Instead of taking up a detached and objective view on my own past wrongdoings, I should dive into my memories and fully appreciate how difficult certain things were and how much I struggled. Wrongdoing is less blameworthy when abstaining from doing wrong requires a huge effort and/or comes at a serious cost (Nelkin 2016; Wolf 1990: 86-87). Thus, I might often find that I have grounds for a partial or even full excuse for my mentally disordered wrongdoing, while still seeing myself as an agent, not an object to be managed. Furthermore, compassionate and understanding excuses allow for more nuance and growth than blanket exemptions do.

Philosophers have previously argued that mental disorders might ground excuses rather than exemptions, but with a focus on milder cases only (Kozuch and McKenna 2016). I stress that compassionate self-excuse is often a better alternative than self-exemption even for psychosis disorders, and other serious cases. Even in the grip of psychosis, people often make choices and exercise their agency in various ways (Jeppsson forthcoming; Jones and Shattell 2016; Jones et al 2016).

Finally, I discuss neurodiversity as an ideal, and the possibility that some – albeit not all – of my supposedly wrongful actions should be considered justified rather than excused.

References

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