

Exemption, *self*-exemption, and compassionate self-excuse

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ABSTRACT

Philosophers traditionally distinguish between excuses and exemptions. We can excuse someone and still see them as a participant in normal human relationships, but when we exempt, we rather see them as something to be managed and handled: we take an objective attitude to them. Madness is typically assumed to ground exemptions, not excuses. So far, the standard philosophical picture. Seeing other people as objects to be managed and handled rather than persons one can have relationships with is already ethically problematic; if I am mad myself, consistently seeing myself this way becomes downright unsustainable. A better option is to fully appreciate my own difficulties and learn to show myself compassion and understanding; I can then *excuse* myself on those grounds. A compassionate self-excusing attitude furthermore leaves room for both nuance and improvement in a way that total exemption does not. Finally, I argue that many mad actions ought to be considered justified rather than in need of exemption or excuse.

Keywords: P.F. Strawson; the objective attitude; exemption; excuse; mental disorder; madness

1. Moral-philosophical introduction

The first section of this article sets the stage, by introducing readers to the field of moral responsibility philosophy and its customary take on madness. I also briefly discuss some of its problems. In sections two and three, I discuss, in depth, a hitherto ignored problem with traditional philosophical approaches to madness: it can only be applied to others, not to oneself. In sections four and five, I present compassionate excuses and neurodiversity-embracing justifications as preferable alternatives.

1.1. Excuses and exemptions, participant and objective attitudes.

Philosophers traditionally distinguish exemptions from excuses. The way these terms are used in philosophy do not quite map on to how they are used in law, nor in everyday English – though they are meant to capture a common-sensical distinction. If you have done something bad which

you would normally be blamed for, you can be *excused* if you suffered from something like temporary loss of control, or if you were innocently ignorant of relevant matters. Suppose I stepped hard on someone else's foot, but only because I slipped on an ice-patch and lost control, or kept my neighbour up all night by blasting loud music, because I believed (for understandable reasons) that he was out of town – I might then be *excused* for my behaviour. People are *exempted* when they are not intelligent, rational, or generally controlled enough to count as responsible agents in the first place; they might have intellectual disabilities, serious mental disorders, or they are little children. So far, the standard philosophical picture. Despite some notable criticism of the supposed sharp distinction between excuse and exemption, it remains commonplace in moral philosophy.¹

In texts building on P.F. Strawson's enormously influential paper "Freedom and resentment", the distinction is often made by reference to his "participant" and "objective" attitudes. When we excuse someone, we retain a *participant attitude* to them: we see them as fellow members of the moral community and as participants in normal human relationships. When we exempt someone, on the other hand, we take an *objective* attitude to them (Strawson 1962/2013: 68-69, 75-76). When you adopt the objective attitude to another person, Strawson writes, you see him as something to be managed, handled, cured or trained, in your interest, or society's, or even his own (ibid: 69, 72). You can no longer fight or quarrel with him, and you cannot reason with him, although you might pretend to do so (because, perhaps, you think it will have desirable effects) (ibid: 69, 70). When we see someone as hopelessly irrational, our anger and resentment against him melt away; when we see him as beyond the reach of argument and quarrels, it does not make sense to blame him either (ibid: 75-76). Strawson does not merely report common tendencies in how society regard and treat madpeople; with obvious endorsement he writes that this is how "civilized" people tend to view the mad (ibid: 70).

Now, what is a madperson like me to make of all this?

1.2. The objective attitude beyond the philosophy seminar

Even though the name "P. F. Strawson" is not widely known among non-philosophers, he builds on common and widespread ideas in his article, and said ideas continue to have wide reach. Therefore, it is problematic that most moral philosophers who write about the subject, some of

¹ Brink and Nelkin (2013: 291-292) write that textbook examples of excuses feature external conditions that rob an agent of responsibility locally and for a short time, whereas likewise standard examples of exemptions feature internal conditions that rob an agent of responsibility for a wide scope of actions and for a long time. However, they write, these three dimensions – internal/external, scope, and duration – need not go together.

whom are read by philosophically interested psychiatrists or in other ways reach outside the ivory tower, continue to defend them.

T.M. Luhrmann, in her anthropological study of psychiatrists, writes (without using that term) of how the objective attitude is often seen as an ideal to strive for. Psychiatrists tell Luhrmann that one must not believe borderline personality disorder patients who say that they have been badly treated by other staff members – that is just splitting behaviour, something BPD patients do (Luhrmann 2000: 116-117).² A doctor says that it would be easier to control psychosis patients and treat them “like children” if she could see them as simply “crazy”. But her job is made more difficult by the fact that “I still see that there is a person there” (ibid: 138).

Important ethical discussions about whether to dismantle coercive psychiatric care altogether becomes muddled by psychiatrists who do not understand why they should listen to patients talking about their traumas, since they hold the Strawsonian belief that patients should be managed and handled, not included in arguments (Aftab 2021). Many madpeople have personally experienced being seen as objects to be handled rather than persons worthy of respect, with all that this entails.

Now, the above philosophical tradition is not wholly without criticism in the published literature. Jeanette Kennett writes:

Kant believed that persons had intrinsic worth and dignity and as such were never to be used merely as means. To treat a person as an object is clearly to mistreat them. The demand for respect and goodwill in our dealings with each other is, in the first place, the demand that we approach each other from within the participant stance. It is minimally the demand that we do not ignore or undermine each other's agency (Kennett, 2009, p.111).³

Still, it remains commonplace for philosophers who work in the moral responsibility field to assume that madpeople must either be regarded objectively, or else resented and blamed for their mad behaviour. They move from recognizing the latter as unfair to seeing the former as beneficial. But madpeople who are regarded objectively also suffer injustice.

1.3. The objective attitude and injustice

The term “epistemic injustice” was first coined by Miranda Fricker (2007), and describes a previously often overlooked aspect of oppression and discrimination: women and members of various minority groups are undermined in their capacity as knowers.

² Fortunately, Day et al (2018) detect gradually improving attitudes among mental health staff towards BPD patients over time.

³ See also Brandenburg (2022) for criticism.

I already touched upon this in the previous subsection: madpeople, both in psychiatric care and personal relationships, are subjected to testimonial injustice when what they say is perceived as “illness noises” and the content ignored (Arpaly 2005; Jeppsson 2021). Furthermore, the academic debate dominated by sane scholars who discuss how “we” should relate to and treat madpeople is hermeneutically unjust (Leblanc and Kinsella 2016). (Insofar as we distinguish neurodivergence from madness, this is a serious problem for neurodivergent scholars as well. See Stenning 2020 and Chapman 2020.) Sane philosophers who build on Strawson argue, in seminar discussions and conferences, that there is no saneism to be found in his “Freedom and resentment”. The objective attitude is not *objectifying*, they say, because Strawson writes that we also take this attitude towards children.⁴ It is supposed to be compatible with, not only fear and repulsion, but also pity and some kinds of love. *Not* “the sort of love which two adults can sometimes be said to feel reciprocally, for each other” – *that* is out of the question if you are mad – but with *some* kinds of love (Strawson 1962/2013: 69). How comforting. The objective attitude need not be cold, but can be filled with *warm* feelings, like pity, and some kinds of love!

Moving from epistemic injustice to injustice in general, being seen as irrational and deranged might not even protect one from blame and punishment. Strawson *claims* that when “we” (civilized people, that is) see someone this way, our indignation and resentment tend to melt away, and we no longer feel inclined to blame them (Strawson 1962/2013: 75-76). This is supposed to be an apt description of how our practices largely work, not just a moral ideal, and countless later philosophers have accepted – without evidence – that Strawson is right. In reality, black and aboriginal people are often perceived as less rational and as having less self-control than white people, but they are simultaneously deemed *more* culpable for criminal behaviour, and considered fully morally responsible at *lower* ages than their white peers (Ciurria 2020: 122, 146; Hutchison 2018; Atkins-Loria, Macdonald and Mitterling 2015: 9).

The domination of sane people in philosophical discussions about madness and moral responsibility further shows in how madpeople are always talked about in the third person. Excuses supposedly apply to *us* from time to time, to the writers and readers of philosophy texts, whereas exemptions only apply to *them*.

Autobiographical sidenote: For this reason, it took me a long time to grasp that *I* was one of the “warped and deranged” that Strawson talks about, and one of those with “mental disorders”

⁴ Of course, one might just as well draw the conclusion that Strawson’s attitude to children is problematic.

discussed in modern philosophy papers. My madness involves fear of demons, illusions and hallucinations, I was on antipsychotic medication for many years, and have been in hospital for psychosis – in short, I do not have the kind of madness of which people might dismissively say “well, we all struggle with that from time to time”. Nevertheless, I *still* thought of the madpeople discussed in the philosophical literature as *much madder* than me. After all, I was a philosopher: I was one of *us*, not one of *them*. A colleague even told me once that Strawson’s objective attitude does not apply to people like me, because I am, quote, “mostly normal”.⁵

Of course, these prejudiced us-and-them-formulations abound, not only in philosophy, and not only regarding madness. In older philosophical texts, it is implicitly assumed that everyone is male, but we rarely see this problem in newer texts, which tend to use singular “they” or alternate between “he” and “she” when discussing people in general. The new pronouns do not magically cure philosophy of sexism, but they could be inserted without changing the arguments. The problem of only discussing madpeople in the third person runs deeper than that.

It is problematic – for reasons discussed above – for sane people to regard madpeople objectively, but it remains *possible*. However, if *I* am mad and try to apply this view to *myself*, it becomes unsustainable, and will crumble from the inherent tensions and contradictions.

In the next two sections, I will argue first that I cannot consistently see myself as hopelessly unreasonable and uncontrolled, and second that I cannot consistently regard myself as a causal system which must be managed and handled. In sections 4 and 5, I will finally present a more constructive alternative than either angrily blaming or exempting myself.

2. Applying the objective attitude to myself: Seeing myself as hopeless

2.1. Below the rationality threshold

Let us briefly return to traditional moral philosophy again, and its view on moral responsibility. Philosophers disagree on what is required to be morally responsible, but they tend to agree that people need *at least* the following capacities: they must be able to assess their reasons for action, think rationally about their options, and have enough control over themselves to act on their decisions.

⁵ A charitable interpretation is that people should only be regarded objectively when they are in a state of florid psychosis. However, Strawson and many later philosophers frequently make blanket statements: people with mental disorders must be regarded objectively and lack moral responsibility. Furthermore, I have written at length elsewhere of how important it is to try to understand and empathize with people *even when* they are psychotic (Jeppsson 2021).

Most people presumably fulfil these requirements, because rationality and willpower need not be perfect, nor do people have to use them all the time. Sometimes people are blameworthy precisely *because* they failed to do so when they *should have*. Nevertheless, these requirements for morally responsible agency explain – or so the traditional view goes – why little children, non-human animals, intellectually disabled people and madpeople cannot be responsible for their actions. The law makes similar assumptions: only humans above a certain age limit can be held legally responsible, and a person might escape conviction in a criminal court on grounds of madness or intellectual disability. As already noted, people considered irrational and out of control are often subjected to more blame and harsher punishments *in practice*. Nevertheless, many laypeople and legal texts agree *in theory* that if you cannot see reason and/or cannot control yourself, and this is not your fault, you are not morally responsible for what you do.

If I feel guilty over mad things that I have done in the past, I might therefore tell myself that I am not responsible for what happened – because of my madness, I fall below the rationality threshold. I was too unreasonable and/or too out of control to be blamed. But where exactly is that threshold? The philosophical literature is vague (e.g., Fischer and Ravizza’s “moderate reasons-responsiveness” 1998), and the commonsense morality of laypeople is, if anything, even vaguer. Even if I had precise criteria at hand, the problem of finding out via introspection whether I fall below the threshold would remain.

This might be why people often make extreme claims when trying to escape blame and feelings of guilt: they categorically state that they had *no* control, *could not* help it, etc. Nevertheless, this view of oneself tends to be unstable, because it often clashes with our experiences and memories. We might honestly say that we lack control over being mad in the first place, but it is often false that we lack control over every mad decision made and mad action performed.

2.2. Agency in everyday struggles

Let us first look at problems common among people diagnosed with a wide array of mental disorders. Many of us have struggled to make plans and see them through, and blame ourselves for failing.

Suppose, to borrow an example from sociologist David Karp (1992: 155), that I have repeatedly signed up for college courses only to later drop out. I feel guilty; even if these repeated educational failures hurt only me, I have let myself down. I try to exempt myself, by reminding myself that I am diagnosed with one or more mental disorders, and therefore could not help dropping out. Still, I remember how I read up on yet another college course, and

thought to myself that I had good reasons to sign up for it. I remember telling myself that *this* time, I would be more disciplined and persevere. I remember *deciding* to sign up for it, and doing so. I further remember what happened later: I thought something like “It’s just too much, I can’t be bothered! I know I was supposed to pull through this time, but I just can’t!” – and then dropped out *again*. I recall making decisions based on reasons that seemed to make sense at the time, both when I signed up, and later when I thought that “it’s just too much” and dropped out again – even though I think, in hindsight, that they were shortsighted and weak-willed. I recall acting on those decisions, not being jerked around like a puppet on strings. When these memories hit, so does the guilt.

The above scenario is common enough. I might be able to cling to an out-of-control and therefore blameless self-image for brief stints of time, but soon enough it crumbles in the face of contrary memories.

I do not want to over-generalize. Sometimes madpeople do experience a profound loss of control over what they are doing. Wilda White (2021) describes how she, in a state of medication-induced mania, did more and more reckless things and destroyed her own life, feeling almost *possessed* and helpless to stop herself, despite realizing how destructively she behaved. Nevertheless, it is also common to struggle and fail at following through college courses, get to work on time, take care of one’s relationships, keep one’s promises, etc., while retaining enough agency that it would be disingenuous to claim that one should be wholly exempt from responsibility due to loss of control. Even people who suffer from compulsions that they lack *direct* control over, can often control the ways in which they deal with them (Gorman forthcoming).

2.3. Agency in psychosis

Psychosis is often considered the paradigm case of complete non-responsibility. Anyone who has been to a self-help group for psychosis sufferers knows that people often feel guilty over things they have done in more florid states. People try to tell each other, though, that there is no reason for guilt, because in psychosis, you are both devoid of reason and completely out of control. Nevertheless, if I remember thinking through my (perceived) options, assessing my reasons, making decisions, and acting on them, I will have a hard time accepting these supposed grounds for exemption.

Suppose that I fear demon assassins whom I think hide in my apartment, ready to kill me as soon as I let my guard down. To lose them, I go downtown, and mingle with the crowds outside bars and nightclubs. Eventually, I am satisfied that they have lost track of me. I am horribly

tired, but if I go back home, they will find me again. I decide to call a friend and ask to stay the night; we are not that close, but they live in the middle of the city, so I can go there without leaving the cover of the crowds. The phone rings for ages before I manage to wake them up – it is 2 am on a weekday – but they eventually let me in.

Later, I feel guilty over disturbing my friend, perhaps causing them trouble at work due to lack of sleep. I think that I should not have endangered myself by running through city traffic. I even feel guilty about accepting that the demon assassins were real, or at least lending that hypothesis enough credibility to act on it.

This might actually be a common type of psychotic experience (Jones et al 2016: Jones et Shatell 2016; Jeppsson 2021), even though psychiatry at large has failed to catch up. If I tell my psychiatrist that I feel guilty, she likely replies that I have no reason to blame myself; as a matter of fact, she says, psychosis renders a person wholly out of control. Support group peers will say the same thing, repeating what their own psychiatrists have told them. Nevertheless, that claim contradicts my memories of events; I remember choosing and acting for reasons, albeit under extreme stress and caught up in bizarre experiences.

If you are stalked by assassins, you have *reason* to try to lose them in a crowd. You have *reason* to hide from them. I remained an agent throughout, doing the best I could in a bizarre and frightening situation. Even “giving in” to psychosis rather than stubbornly clinging to sane reality was a choice. Certainly not a free and happy one – more like hanging from a tree branch I managed to grasp when I fell down a river, feeling the currents pull at me, feeling my arms burn and tremble with lactic acid, eventually thinking that it is not worth the pain and effort, I might just as well release my grip and let the currents carry me off – but still a choice.

To sum up: It is one thing to see *others*, in Strawson’s words, as “hopeless schizophrenics” (or hopeless bipolars, hopeless schizoaffectives, hopeless depressives, etc.) from whom nothing can be demanded. As ethically problematic as this is, it is at least possible. It might not be similarly possible to take this view on myself, when I have lived through all my mad decisions and actions and experienced them from the inside; when I have seen firsthand that as mad as I was or am, I was never “hopelessly” unreasonable and out of control.

3. Applying the objective attitude to myself: a causal perspective

There is more to the objective attitude than the idea that madpeople are “hopeless”. Strawson’s talk of “managing and handling” presents a picture of madpeople as causal systems, where you should push the right buttons to produce the desired outcome. However, this is also untenable to apply to one’s own case.

3.1. The causal perspective

When we want to stop blaming ourselves for mad actions, we often take a step back to focus on what presumably caused them. For instance, someone who keeps dropping out of college courses might say that they were caused to do so by some neural dysfunction hypothesized to underlie – or be identical to – their mental disorder. Causation is often not distinguished from constitution in these contexts, but the strategy remains the same if I tell myself that “low serotonin caused me to be depressed which caused me to drop out of college” or “low serotonin/depression caused me to drop out of college”. This strategy might temporarily liberate me from guilt by invoking an image of myself as essentially machine-like, a mechanism where input gives output, it is what it is and there is nothing to judge.

However, that is *all* this strategy does. It does not provide an argument for my non-responsibility. As previously noted, madpeople usually have some agency and control. Hypotheses about underlying neurological dysfunctions, even if they were proven,⁶ do not change this.

There are different philosophical theories about the mind-body relationship, but no one in the debate believes that the mind can act independently of the brain. All mental phenomena, whether mad or sane, must have underlying neurological features (Jefferson 2022). If the mere existence of underlying neurological features undermines agency (choice, control, etc.), it does so for everyone, and we arrive at radical scepticism about moral responsibility. However, sceptics tend to argue that although full-blown moral responsibility does not exist, and no one can truly *deserve* blame or punishment, certain everyday moral responsibility practices can still

⁶The state of evidence for specific brain dysfunctions underlying particular mental disorders is slimmer, patchier, and more complicated than most people realize. Stephen Stahl’s (2018) psychosis research overview, which describes how a simpler dopamine hypothesis gives way to more complicated ones according to which there are different kinds of psychosis involving different neurotransmitters, provides a nice illustration. Even the latest research relies heavily on indirect evidence and inferences from the effects of various drugs.

be justified (see Jeppsson 2022 for an overview). Thus, if we accept scepticism, we must still figure out whether madpeople can be apt targets for these practices. If we set scepticism aside and assume that the mere existence of underlying neurological features *does not* undermine agency and moral responsibility, we cannot exempt madpeople simply by pointing out brain differences. It would have to be shown for each kind of madness that these specific neurological features undermine agency and thereby responsibility.

Thus, as a madperson racked with guilt over past mad actions, actions I remember actively doing for reasons, I cannot turn to biological psychiatry or neurology for proof that I was so beyond reason and so out of control that I should be wholly exempted. But I *can* elicit an intuition or feeling that I lack responsibility for anything I have done, by thinking of, e.g., my neurotransmitters going awry and causing me to do this or that. No responsibility here, just one thing causing another causing a third, input giving output, it is what it is and there is nothing to judge.

This strategy is reminiscent of popular thought experiments used in the philosophical moral responsibility debate. Unfortunately, it is far less effective for real people than thought experiment characters.

3.2. The causal perspective in philosophical thought experiments

Some philosophers argue that moral responsibility is incompatible with determinism, and perhaps with *any* way the universe might plausibly work. They construct thought experiments, in which the main characters are portrayed as causal systems, to pump their audience's intuitions.

In Derk Pereboom's "four-case manipulation argument", Professor Plum murders Miss White. Plum is stipulated to be highly rational: he carefully weighs his options, think through his decisions, and then act in a way consistent with his values and character (Pereboom 2001 Ch. 4; 2014 Ch. 4). Nevertheless, when we focus on the causal history behind his thoughts and actions – involving, in different versions of the thought experiment, everything from nefarious scientists directly tinkering with his brain to being raised in a community that value and encourage selfish behaviour – he does not seem morally responsible to us, regardless of how rational and mentally healthy he is.

I have previously argued that other agents' involvement in making Plum the way he is does *not* play a crucial part in pumping our intuitions. After all, we sometimes read or watch science fiction stories with robots and A.I.s programmed by engineers, and still think of them as morally responsible agents. I use Star Trek Voyager's Hologram Doctor as an example; we

spontaneously consider him responsible for his actions, even though an engineer programmed him (Jeppsson 2020). But the Hologram Doctor is a fully fleshed-out character, and Professor Plum is not.

Pereboom's description of Professor Plum draws attention to the way in which he resembles a highly sophisticated vending machine. Insert a coin, out comes a candy bar – insert the scientists' program and the right environmental factors, out comes a murder. We are told that Plum is reasons-responsive, has a first-order will which corresponds to his second-order volitions and so on – but all those agential features seem like nothing but cogs in a sophisticated machine. Even though we are *told* that Plum is a fully-fledged rational agent, it is hard to fully *appreciate* this fact when he is described the way he is. (Jeppsson 2020: 1938)

Even with a rational agent like Plum, we can thus mollify our reactive attitudes if we look at him from a detached, causal angle; if we see him as an *object*, where one step in the causal chain leads to another and eventually results in an action, it is what it is, there is nothing to judge. However, the more of a fleshed-out person a fictional character/robot/A.I. is, the more likely we are to see them as a morally responsible agent rather than a causal system.

Although a similar, mechanical, and object-like picture can be painted of real humans if we focus on their genes and neurotransmitters, giving rise to brief non-responsibility intuitions, real humans are always fully fleshed-out persons. Seeing someone *you know* from this perspective is particularly difficult – not to mention seeing yourself this way.

In the internet era, the view that madness is caused or constituted by imbalanced neurotransmitters and/or hyper- and hypo-activity in various parts of the brain, is spread not just by countless popular articles on the subject, but also by madpeople who share texts and memes on social media. In support groups, people reassure each other that they should not feel guilty, since their failures were caused by faulty neurotransmitters (observed already by Karp 1992:154-156). And yet, the causal perspective does not extinguish our intuitions about guilt and blame as effectively for real people as for Professor Plum. Most philosophers admit to feeling that Plum lacks responsibility when reading the thought experiment; if that feeling does not fit their philosophical theory, they work hard on arguments intended to show that the feeling, albeit strong, is unreliable (McKenna 2008; 2013). When madpeople try to escape guilt and blame by stressing how we were caused to do what we did, it is often the other way around. We try *so hard* to cling to the non-responsibility view, but constantly slide back into seeing ourselves as responsible agents who deserve blame.

There might be several explanations for this, all of which play a part. I already mentioned that we naturally see fully fleshed-out characters as morally responsible. Karp (1992: 156-157) discusses how seeing oneself as a passive victim of faulty neurotransmitters not only feels liberating as one lets go of guilt, but simultaneously enfeebling. Studies indicate that belief in a just world and/or free will can make people more prone to blame the mentally ill (Rüsh et al 2010; Chandrashekar 2020). I will argue that in addition to other explanations, it is impossible to sustain a strict causal focus on oneself, mad or not. Therefore, the release from guilt I can achieve in this manner will always be fragile and fleeting.

3.3. The impossibility of consistently seeing myself from a causal perspective

As already stated, it is easy to regard a briefly described thought experiment character from a causal perspective, more difficult with a fully fleshed-out fictional character, and very difficult with people we meet and interact with in real life. If I regularly interacted with Professor Plum or Star Trek's Hologram Doctor, it would soon become unfeasible to stick to an objective, exempting attitude, even if I knew that they had been created and programmed by engineers to be the way they are (Russell 2010: 158-160).

Strawson similarly writes that we cannot keep up an objective attitude to “normal” people for too long, even though it comes naturally to us when encountering “abnormalities or immaturities” and “the compulsive behaviour of the neurotic” (Strawson 1962/2013: 70). There might be *some* truth in what he writes – it might be somewhat less difficult for a sane person to regard madpeople this way. Madpeople sometimes talk and behave in ways others find weird, scary, and alienating. *Less* difficult, but still not *easy* – remember the psychiatrist from subsection 1.2. who talked about “seeing the person” in her patients. And when it comes to one's own case – if *I* try to take a detached, causal perspective on *myself* – it will inevitably crumble.

Let us reuse Karp's habitual college dropout. Suppose I want to go back to college again. Still, I hesitate. My mental disorder has caused me to drop out before. Perhaps it will cause me to be too apathetic to enrol in the first place this time. However, if I sit back and wait to see what my disorder will cause me to do, I have effectively decided *not* to enrol again. As long as I sit and wait for some action or other to emerge, I will remain passive.⁷ Suppose next that I realize this,

⁷ I was challenged on this point by Polaris Koi, who described meditation techniques where you sit and wait for an action to emerge, without actively deciding anything. This might be possible for some people sometimes. Nevertheless, they would still have decided, first, to engage in this kind of

but since I still think of myself as a causal system where the right buttons must be pushed for action to happen, I try to push *my own* buttons – to manage and handle myself, so to speak. I might, for instance, tell other people to encourage me to enrol in college again, or try to influence myself to do so by surrounding myself with media portraying the college experience in a positive light.

Nevertheless, eventually I must *decide* whether to enrol, or I have effectively decided not to. Having my friends encourage me and consuming inspiring media can very well be a good idea, but it cannot replace the actual decision, which I must still make (see also Korsgaard 1996: 162). Furthermore, button-pushing requires a pusher, not just a “pushee”. When I try to influence myself by surrounding myself with the right media and people, I *already* exercise my agency by choosing these methods and implementing them.

The inevitability of exercising my agency, choosing and acting rather than just pushing my own buttons makes the causal perspective on myself fundamentally unstable.

This is true not just for the college dropout, but also for more dramatic, psychotic cases where I still have agency. Suppose I once again feel the demons closing in on me. What should I do about it? Should I muster up all my willpower, and cling to the belief that I am safe because demons do not exist, despite *feeling* terrified? If I give up on that endeavour, and let madness sweep me away, I still have at least two options: I can attempt to flee or to defend myself – perhaps via magical means which make sense from inside my madness. I cannot just wait and see what my madness/my genes and environment/my wildly fluctuating neurotransmitters will cause me to do this time. If I try to just wait and see, I have essentially decided to remain passive while my terror rises until it becomes unbearable, at which point I will probably decide to flee anyway. Even in this state, I inevitably exercise my agency.

4. A more sustainable alternative: Compassionate self-excuse

We cannot consistently regard ourselves objectively. We cannot consistently see ourselves as hopeless cases, too out of control to be responsible for anything we do; nor can we consistently think of ourselves as causal systems where one thing causes another, input gives output, it is what it is and there is nothing to judge. People must decide and act. We might find ourselves in situations where all options are terrible, but we must still choose which one to take. This

meditation. Second, this is something some people do from time to time, not a permanent state in which one can live one’s whole life.

fundamental fact of the human condition does not disappear because I am diagnosed with a mental disorder. It does happen sometimes that people experience themselves completely paralysed, or helplessly controlled by alien powers, but this is *often* not the case, not even in states of florid psychosis.

Nevertheless, I should not beat myself up over mad things I have said and done. Compassionate self-excuses offer a more constructive alternative.

4.1. Diving in instead of stepping back

Instead of taking up a detached, causal, objective view, I can liberate myself from oppressive feelings of guilt by doing quite the opposite: diving into my own memories and experiences, and fully appreciate how much I have suffered and struggled. When fully appreciating how serious my past difficulties were, I can cultivate *compassion* for myself, and *excuse* myself on compassionate grounds. I might, sadly, suffer from all kinds of psychological hang-ups and obstacles which make it hard for me to show myself compassion, but unlike seeing myself as a hopeless case or taking up a causal perspective on myself, there is nothing essential about *being an agent* that prevents compassion. (Neither does being close to a person hinder compassion for them, the way it hinders seeing them as causal systems. On the contrary, compassion often grows stronger the closer we get to someone.)

When I feel guilty about past wrongdoings, I should try to recall *what it was truly like* for me when I did wrong. I was, perhaps, stressed-out, and felt completely overwhelmed by a combination of work tasks and household chores. I was anxious, perhaps downright terrified, about my prospects on a precarious job market.

The *full extent* of my stress and anxiety might very well be connected to something I have been diagnosed with; perhaps a sane and neurotypical person in the same situation would have coped better. Diagnoses can have a part to play here insofar as I tend to compare myself to others. They provide some evidence that even if I, say, struggle with common problems like forgetfulness and being easily distracted, I likely have it *harder* than most. I have only direct access to my own experiences, so if I want to compare myself to others, I must rely on indirect evidence, of which diagnoses can be part.

Nevertheless, what *directly* matters are my struggles, how I felt and what I experienced, not my diagnoses. I forgot an important promise I made to one friend and angrily cut off another with a deeply hurtful remark, but I was so overwhelmed and stressed out that it was truly *difficult* to remember previous conversations and control my impulses. I should show myself compassion, cut myself some slack – perhaps *lots* of slack – and excuse myself.

McKenna and Kozuch (2016) argue that it is better to excuse than to exempt a wrongdoer with a *mild* mental disorder, because the objective attitude has serious drawbacks. But there is no reason to assume that when moving from milder to more serious mental disorders, we must also move from excuses to the objective attitude and exemption. I may have agency in psychosis, but I am also under *a lot* of pressure in that state. Letting go of sane reality and allowing myself to be swept away by madness is comparable to letting go of a tree branch and be swept away by the currents when my arms already tremble and burn from lactic acid. I might have *been able* to stay at home throughout the night instead of disturbing my friend, desperately clinging to the belief that demons are not real, but doing so would have cost me dearly – cost me, in terms of intense mental effort and sheer terror (Gorman 2021). And once I gave in to the belief that supernatural assassins chased me, I did the best I could in my circumstances as I experienced them.

We can explain why I ought not to feel guilty or blame myself by invoking common textbook excuses like acting from a non-culpable false belief and acting under duress. Or we might invoke difficulty and cost directly, and appeal to commonsense moral principles according to which blameworthiness is diminished when acting right was very difficult and/or costly (Nelkin 2016; Wolf 1990: 86-87). But in order to see how ordinary excuses and moral principles apply to me, I must do the opposite of taking up a detached, causal perspective – I should delve into my memories, and fully appreciate how hard I struggled.

4.2. Diminished responsibility

A compassionate excuse will often diminish rather than wholly remove guilt and self-blame. In this, it differs from a causal-perspective-based exemption. For however long I manage to keep up a detached and causal view of myself, I might seem wholly non-responsible in my own eyes; input gives output, it is what it is, there is nothing to judge. But when I remember how I struggled with hard choices and acted under extreme pressure, I keep in mind that I *chose* and *acted*. On this picture, I should cut myself some slack – perhaps *lots* of slack – but I do not seem wholly non-responsible. I can still blame myself occasionally, as well as hold myself responsible in a more forward-looking and nurturing manner (Brandenburg 2018). This is a *feature* of compassionate excuses, not a bug. It allows for nuanced judgments, and leaves open the possibility that I might change and improve in various ways.

Seeing myself as a struggling agent who needs compassion and understanding might even hold *more* potential for self-improvement than seeing myself as fully responsible and guilty (Breines and Chen 2012). Of course, I should not think of myself as a broken thing that needs

to and can be fixed, if only I pull on my bootstraps hard enough; this would be contrary to compassion and understanding. Nevertheless, it is important to recognize the possibility of change, rather than seeing myself as hopeless (at least unless some external intervention, like a new medication regime, eventually strikes gold) (Snoek et al 2021). Complete self-exemption, even if it did provide a stable option for escaping guilt, would close the door to self-improvement; compassionate self-excuse does not have this problem.

I have deliberately spoken rather loosely of what self-compassion entails. I have explained how a compassionate self-excuse differs from attempts to exempt oneself with an objective attitude, but there is still much room for elaboration.

Self-compassion, and compassion overall, is often associated with Buddhist philosophy. However, one need not subscribe to this religion or philosophy to embrace this kind of attitude towards oneself. As Kristin Neff notes, similar ideas can be found in western psychology too, like Judith Jordan's self-empathy, or Carl Rogers' unconditional acceptance (Neff 2003).

Furthermore, several philosophers discuss holding oneself responsible as a balancing act. Robin Dillon (1992; 2001) writes that true self-respect requires walking the line between excessive self-blame and shrugging off and excusing every wrongful thing one does. Korsgaard (1996: Ch. 7) talks of balancing love and respect – harsh blame can be cruel, but constantly shrugging everything off can be disrespectful. They do not focus on madness, but I believe this balance is as important to find for madpeople as for others.⁸

Thus, a constructive, loving and respectfully *balanced* view of my past wrongdoings and my responsibility for them should go hand in hand with cultivating self-compassion. This is complicated, because there are no hard and fast principles for determining when I ought to hold myself responsible, and to which extent. But life is complicated, not the least if you struggle with madness. It is better to acknowledge this, than to chase in vain for a principled way to separate morally responsible people from those fit only for an objective attitude and exemption.⁹

⁸ I have been asked if this also applies to the madperson's family and friends – whether they should walk a line between holding responsible too much and too little. I think this is in principle right. I also *think* that getting this balance right is even trickier for others; *possibly*, they should err on the side of caution by following the madperson's lead in what they see themselves as responsible for and to which extent, even if that means excusing them almost all the time. I think it is often *very* difficult to convince someone else that they have more reason, control, and responsibility for what they do than they think they have. But all this is very tentative on my part.

⁹ I leave it open whether criminal justice requires hard and fast principles for separating the responsible from the non-responsible. The topic of this paper is solely morality, not law.

5. Compassionate excuses versus justification: a neurodiversity perspective

Sometimes, attention to the details of my experience might lead me to judge that what I did was *justified* rather than excused.

An excused wrongful action was still wrong, or at least all-things-considered harmful in some way. Excuses merely temper or remove the agent's blameworthiness. A justification, on the other hand, shows that the action was not wrong after all; it might have looked wrong at first glance, but when we know more, we can see that it was not.

McKenna and Kozuch (2016) briefly mention the possibility that mental disorders might justify rather than excuse. However, the idea that many of society's norms are unjustifiably tailored to the interests of neurotypical people and ought to change is familiar from the neurodiversity movement (e.g., Singer 1999; Walker 2012).

It is considered nice and polite to look people squarely in the eye when interacting with them. Someone who always looks down, keep shifting their gaze, and give only short and stunted replies, can be seen as impolite and disrespectful. This interpretation is not wholly unfounded, because said behaviour *might* signal, e.g., that you find the other person boring and therefore try to withdraw from the conversation. But for some autistic or socially anxious people, looking someone in the eye and giving long replies might require intense mental effort. In many situations, eating a crunching biscuit among other people would be considered morally neutral, whereas blasting away on a boom box would be wrong. This reflects how most people react to sounds – biscuits are easy to ignore, a blaring boom box not – but for a person suffering from misophonia, the biscuit crunching might drive them up the walls.

What should we make of this realization? We cannot create a society perfectly adjusted to everyone, because sometimes needs and preferences legitimately clash. Suppose that one person needs to fidget around to be able to focus, whereas another needs absolute peace and quiet. We should *try* to avoid situations where these people must work in the same room. Still, it is unlikely that we can create a society entirely free of these kinds of conflicts – both between groups of neurodivergent people, and between the divergent and typical ones. The best we can do, then, is trying to share the burdens of adjustment as fairly as possible (Gorman 2021).

It has been suggested to me that in a society committed to neurodiversity, it might not be considered wrong to wake someone up in the middle of the night because of one's psychotic

fears.¹⁰ This is an interesting suggestion, but I do not completely endorse it. Sometimes this might be a fair distribution of burdens, but at other times, it might be more damaging for the sane and neurotypical person to have their sleep disrupted, in particular if it happens repeatedly, than for me to ride out my fears in solitude, or with only a hotline operator for support. It all depends on the details. We should not go from demanding endless adjustments from mad and neurodivergent people to demanding the same of the sane and neurotypical, because the latter do not have endless energy and resources either. There will always be room for wrongful but largely excusable mad acts next to the justifiable.

Mad and neurodivergent people are also blamed and made to feel ashamed of behaviours that are not even *prima facie* wrong – behaviours that are harmless, perhaps even beneficial, but strike other people as *weird*.

Perhaps I sooth my demon fears by way of little rituals that seem disturbing to sane people – like stuffing my gloves full of moss, or arranging the furniture in particular ways. Perhaps, when I cannot so easily sooth my worries, I go down on all fours to avoid seeing my reflection replaced by a mimicking demon in mirrors and windows. Other people might think that it is wrong of me to disturb them with such weird behaviour; they might think that they must choose between dismissing me as a hopeless mental case or angrily blame me. Here, it is reasonable to object that it is not *I* that ought to change, it is *they* who ought to become more tolerant. There is nothing wrong with what I do.

Conclusion

When we exempt someone from responsibility, we take up an objective attitude towards them. We see them as victims of their disorders of whom nothing can be demanded, or as causal systems where one thing leads to another and there is nothing to judge. However, I cannot successfully exempt myself from responsibility in this manner. I cannot stably and consistently look upon myself as either a hopeless case or a mere causal system. Self-exemption is unstable.

Fortunately, the problems of self-exemption do not mean that I must harshly blame myself for failing where sane people succeed, and hold myself to impossible standards. Sometimes my mad behaviour is justified – we ought to reject saneist judgments that frame everything weird and unusual as morally wrong. At other times, my behaviour *was* bad or harmful in some way, but I should cut myself some slack by taking my experiences as seriously as they deserve. Rather than taking a step back from my actions and look at what might have caused them, I can

¹⁰ August Gorman, personal correspondence.

delve right into my memories and fully appreciate how much I struggled. By showing myself compassion and understanding, I can mitigate my sense of guilt in a more stable manner, and excuse myself.

I have focused on how to see myself in this paper. However, considering how ethically problematic the objective attitude is when applied to other people, and the fact that we are social creatures who find it hard to go alone against the flow, partial to full excuses based on compassion and understanding also serve as a desirable alternative to exemption when we relate to *other* people who struggle with madness.

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