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## Diversity and Moral Address

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**DAPHNE BRANDENBURG** 

**ABSTRACT** *This article evaluates communicative approaches to responsibility within the Strawsonian tradition. These approaches consider reactive attitudes to be forms of moral address and consider responsiveness to moral address a condition on responsible agency. The article consists of a critical and a positive part. In the first part, I identify a risk for these theories. They often provide an overly narrow account of how we can communicate with others about perceived moral disregard. I argue that, when read this way, a conversational approach has implausible implications and falls prey to a familiar objection to Strawsonian theory: it would incorporate social injustices inherent to our responsibility practices. In particular, it would affirm ableist attitudes towards autistic individuals, by exempting them as moral agents on the basis of irrelevant criteria. In the second part, I propose an inclusive reading of the communicative approach. This inclusive account steers clear of ableism towards autistic individuals and accommodates diversity. Although it is also derived from our practices and psychologies, it does not incorporate the biases and injustices that are part of those practices, and instead it provides us with a means to criticize them.*

Since Strawson wrote his paper called ‘Freedom and Resentment’, it is a common strategy in the literature to explain morally responsible agency through analyzing how and why we hold one another responsible. The idea is that the attitudes we tend to have in response to morally objectionable behavior, and the constraints on those attitudes, help account for what morally responsible agency is. This strategy is attractive among other things because it is naturalistic and based on psychological responses that are internal to our practices. As such it promises to provide us with a conception of morally responsible agency that does not rely on panicky metaphysics, and one that we have access to in our daily lives. The crux of this strategy is to explain how and why reactive attitudes can only be appropriate responses to a particular class of individuals and why.

Communicative theories of responsibility are inspired by this Strawsonian approach. They hold that a reactive attitude is a type of reason-based address that other responsible members of the moral community can grasp as such. They can be traced back to Watson, who claimed that: ‘The reactive attitudes are incipiently forms of communication, which make sense only on the assumption that the other can comprehend the message’.<sup>1</sup> Also Paul Russell, for example, writes, ‘The responsible agent must be able to feel and understand moral sentiments or reactive attitudes’.<sup>2</sup>

Michael McKenna explicated the communicative approach in his conversational theory of responsibility, and others, such as Coleen McNamara, have elaborated on the theory.<sup>3</sup> Other Strawsonians allude to it when they suggest that exempted people cannot be ‘involved’ or ‘normally related to’ in terms of reactive attitudes.

On communicative accounts, being responsible requires that one can respond to blaming attitudes as a form of moral address. Those who cannot respond to reactive attitudes as a form of moral address fall outside of the community of morally responsible agents, and a person's sensitivity to moral address indicates they are a responsible agent.

One of the main challenges for any type of Strawsonian approach, including the communicative approach, is a version of the Euthyphro dilemma.<sup>4</sup> A Strawsonian should explain whether persons are only responsible because we hold them responsible, or whether we hold them responsible because they are responsible.<sup>5</sup> This worry can be reformulated in a more applied sense – call this ‘the social justice challenge’. The ways in which we hold one another responsible in our actual practices are mediated by classism, racism, sexism, and ableism.<sup>6</sup> Does a Strawsonian theory legitimize classist, racist, sexist, and ableist biases by taking these practices as their starting point? Strawson himself, for example, believed that ‘hopeless schizophrenics’ fall outside of the class of responsible persons. Would a Strawsonian theory uncritically incorporate this tendency to perceive individuals who have been diagnosed with mental disabilities as incapable of responsible agency?

In this article, I ask whether specifically communicative approaches can avoid this challenge. Do these theories, by deriving an account of moral agency from our responsibility practices, also perpetuate injustices internal to those practices? In the next two sections of this article, I discuss how communicative approaches are currently at risk of doing just that because they seem to exclude autistic persons as moral agents on the basis of criteria that are irrelevant to moral agency.

After that, I propose an inclusive interpretation of the communicative approach that can avoid the challenge, accommodate diversity, and provide us with a means to criticize (aspects of) our practices. On this account, features associated with autism may sometimes make for legitimate local excuses, but they do not exempt autistic persons as moral agents.

## 1. Communicative Approaches: The Demanding Reading

Few defenders of communicative approaches specify how reactive attitudes can be communicated to others as a way of morally addressing the person. And, although it is clear that the interlocutor should in some way be able to understand the reactive attitude as a form of moral address, and be able to appropriately respond to it, it is not clear what sort of understanding and responsiveness to (which expressions of) reactive attitudes exactly qualify.

This means that the notions of ‘delivering moral address’, ‘understanding moral address’, and ‘giving uptake to moral address’ can be interpreted in more or less demanding manners. In this article, I propose that to morally address someone should refer to the manifold ways in which a person can communicate to another person that they perceived this person to have unduly disregarded the interests and concerns of others. I will propose that this may be done without expressing, or even feeling, any reactive attitudes, especially when these reactive attitudes are narrowly defined as particular neurotypical emotional experiences. Furthermore, I will argue that understanding and giving uptake to moral address can be done in a variety of manners. In order to motivate this account, the article first discusses the serious downsides of the arguably more common, and more demanding, readings of communicative theories.

To illustrate the demanding reading, I will discuss the one author who, to the best of my knowledge, has specified how reactive attitudes exactly morally address their subject and what it takes to understand and respond to them.

David Shoemaker provides a tripartite theory of responsibility. He identifies three different types of responsibility: attributability, answerability, and accountability. To be accountable is to have the agential capacities that allow one to display due moral regard for others' feelings and interests.<sup>7</sup> The accountability prong of his theory is a communicative account. According to Shoemaker, a person's accountability coincides with a capacity to understand and respond to agential anger as a form of moral address.

According to Shoemaker, the reactive attitude, 'agential anger', is the emotion that all neurotypicals experience in response to perceived moral disregard. This emotion expresses a demand for emphatic acknowledgment, and this demand for acknowledgment 'is precisely a demand for a kind of identification, specifically, for emotional empathy, a demand to feel what it was like for us when (dis)regarded'.<sup>8</sup> He furthermore writes that: 'the most immediate aim is to get the offending party, when returning to his own perspective, to have his shared emotions with us transform into guilt for his transgressions'.<sup>9</sup>

To understand and respond to this demand for emphatic acknowledgment, one must be able to recognize agential anger as a demand for emphatic acknowledgment and be able to emphatically identify with this emotional state of agential anger in a way that transforms into guilt feelings for one's own transgression. Shoemaker suspects that these particular communicative abilities are an inclusion criterion for being an accountable person. Persons who are not able to grasp and respond to agential anger are not accountable, or in the very least their accountability is severely mitigated.<sup>10</sup> This follows because on his account the possibility of being successfully held accountable (via agential anger) is considered to coincide with being accountable (the ability to show moral regard).

Shoemaker discusses the case of autism as providing support for the accountability prong of his theory. The case is relevant to his theory because the autism-related difficulty to emphatically identify with agential anger compromises a person's ability to grasp such anger as moral address. Shoemaker tends to refer to autistic individuals in general. It should be noted though, that although a difficulty in mind reading is strongly associated with autism, not every autistic individual necessarily has this difficulty.<sup>11</sup> It is, furthermore, conceivable that individuals who would not be diagnosed with autism can also have this difficulty.

On Shoemaker's account, individuals for whom (neurotypical) mind reading is difficult are suspected to fall outside of the community of accountable agents because they have difficulty in recognizing agential anger as a demand for emphatic acknowledgment and will also fail to have the 'appropriate' emotional response to this demand, that is, an emphatic identification with this feeling that transforms into guilt feelings.<sup>12</sup> He writes that 'because those with high-functioning autism tend to be unable to do either, it would not be appropriate to hold them accountable and consequently they would not be accountable (or at least their accountability would be significantly mitigated)'.<sup>13</sup>

Before moving on, more has to be said about these purported empathy deficits of autistic persons. Indeed, sometimes persons are not attuned to the emotional states of others; they struggle to correctly interpret the feeling behind observed behavior and to correctly read certain emotional signals. There is often a related difficulty to feel, or mirror, what this other person is feeling and to respond to the person in a

manner that their emotional states are typically thought to call for. This cluster of difficulties is commonly referred to as a mind-reading deficit,<sup>14</sup> and it is considered especially common among autistic people.<sup>15</sup>

But there are good reasons to doubt that these difficulties amount to a deficit.<sup>16</sup> Recent studies suggest that there may be a ‘double empathy problem’: although autistic persons have trouble grasping the mental states of neurotypicals, neurotypicals also have trouble reading the mental states of autistic people.<sup>17</sup> So mind-reading difficulties may be explained by the fact that persons have different minds and, correspondingly, will find it easier to empathize with minds more like their own. This leads to difficulties in communication and interpretation, and the burden of those problems is often on the smaller community of autistic individuals, even if arguably it should not be.

Furthermore, as Fletcher-Watson and Bird have pointed out, a more general affinity with the feelings of others is a component of empathy that is both the most important and most difficult to measure.<sup>18</sup> The fact that it is harder for autistic persons to tune into the emotional states of neurotypical others does not mean they cannot feel affinity with others. I agree with Yergeau and Huebner that we should ‘mind theory of mind’ and its ironically unemphatic and dehumanizing historical origins.<sup>19</sup>

These findings cast doubt on Shoemaker’s presentation of autistic individuals as incapable of empathy. But it remains true that autistic persons and other individuals may struggle to recognize and tune into the neurotypical feelings of anger that Shoemaker describes and would struggle to respond to them in the way that Shoemaker believes these emotions call for. So, on his account, they lack an ability for communication that he takes to be central to accountability.

But to do justice to the scholarship discussed above, I will stick to a more neutral notion of divergent mind reading to describe these difficulties, thereby acknowledging that neurotypicals may face similar difficulties in empathizing with, and responding to, the mental states of minds that differ from their own. It should also be noted that I do not take this divergence to foreclose the ability to feel affinity with others. I will refer to the type of neurotypical anger of recognition, understanding, and responsiveness that is central to Shoemaker’s theory of mainstream mind reading.

On Shoemaker’s demanding reading, divergent mind reading suggests diminished accountability. Would other Strawsonians endorse (elements of) a demanding reading of a communicative approach? McKenna’s theory has been understood in a demanding way.<sup>20</sup> But besides Shoemaker, most proponents of communicative accounts, including McKenna, leave questions about the ways in which moral address can or should be delivered, understood, and responded to largely unaddressed.<sup>21</sup>

That being said, Strawsonians do allude to a demanding reading when they postulate particular emotional experiences like resentment and indignation as a form of moral address without specifying other possible forms of feeling and expressing fault-finding attitudes. They also tend to focus on descriptions of the emotional impact (most notably guilt) that such an address should have on others when they grasp it. The suggestion of a demanding interpretation is furthermore reinforced by the common usage in the literature of neurotypical emotional exchanges as paradigm examples of responsibility conversations. In the next section, I argue this demanding reading of the conversational account is subject to the social justice challenge.

## 2. A Demanding Reading and the Social Justice Challenge

One initial worry about demanding communicative accounts is that the connection between an ability to respond to moral address and a person's accountability is implausible. The capacities that render a person accountable are the capacities to have moral regard for others, which in turn depend on a capacity to respond to the interests and concerns of others.<sup>22</sup> Also on McKenna's conversational account, and most other communicative accounts, moral agency is said to consist of the capacity to display regard for others.<sup>23</sup> At the same time, on communicative approaches a person's responsible agency consists in their capacity to respond to moral address, and this ability to respond to moral address on a demanding reading is an ability to tune in to and respond to neurotypical agential anger.

But one cannot posit the capacity to display regard for another person's interests as constitutive of morally responsible agency and also claim that morally responsible agency requires mainstream mind reading if these two capacities do not coincide. Jeanette Kennett has pointed out that autistic individuals, unlike most psychopaths, can resist their impulses and desires in the light of rules of conduct that are in the interest of others and the community. Greta Thunberg's commitment to combating climate change for the sake of current and future generations makes for a prominent illustration of this point.<sup>24</sup>

A difficulty in recognizing the emotional states of neurotypicals, according to Kennett, only complicates discerning what the interests of others are; it does not amount to an inability to understand and be moved by other people's interests as worthy of consideration and respect.<sup>25</sup> If this is true, a demanding reading of the conversational approach is implausible.

Imagine, for example, that Albert, who is autistic, agrees to meet Polly for an early morning walk but sleeps in without any good excuse for doing so. Let us furthermore assume that Albert, like most persons, has learned that one should not be late for appointments and is able to arrive on time. This suggests that Albert did not pay due regard to this norm. However, if Polly is angered by Albert's disregard for her interests when he arrives 20 minutes late, he is unlikely to recognize this emotion as a demand for acknowledgment and to emotionally tune in to what it is like for her to be in this emotional state.

On a demanding reading, Albert's inability to empathically identify with Polly's anger indicates that Albert is, in some important way, not a fully accountable person. But Albert may still be correctly perceived to have been disregarding of Polly's interests because he can grasp and comply with moral norms regarding punctuality and appointment keeping. But this means he would be accountable on Shoemaker's account. It follows that emphatic identification with anger is an implausible inclusion criterion for accountability.

But Shoemaker provides a response to this objection. According to Shoemaker, the recognition of another person's anger qua moral anger is a necessary resource for the development of an ability to abide by norms qua moral norms rather than for merely prudential reasons. Shoemaker admits that he has no conclusive evidence for his claim, but he insists it is dubitable that one can come to recognize and abide by moral norms for moral reasons in any other way.<sup>26</sup> He thinks the seemingly moral conduct of autistic individuals is explained by their passion for order and their need to abide by the rules they have been taught, rather than by a desire to do the right thing and to take others' interests as reason giving.<sup>27</sup> That is to say, they do not abide by norms qua moral norms, i.e. for moral reasons.

To clarify, he would suggest that Albert from our example may be able to understand he should not be late because people will yell at him or do something similarly unpleasant if he arrives late, but he does not also understand why people will make all this noise and how it is disrespectful of other people's interests to be tardy because he does not grasp neurotypical reactive attitudes as moral address.

Deborah Barnbaum similarly believes that autistic people's seemingly moral judgments are in fact based on imitation or 'mere' rule following.<sup>28</sup> Anna Stenning notes how these arguments, if generalized, would imply that Greta Thunberg is combating climate change, not because she takes the interests of young people and future generations to be reason giving, but instead because she is parroting adults, or is following rules for the sake of rules or something along those lines.<sup>29</sup> But strong evidence contrary to Shoemaker and Barnbaum's position can be found in the life writings of autistic individuals like Greta Thunberg, Temple Grandin, Sean Barron, and others.<sup>30</sup> For example, two of the rules Temple Grandin considers to be central to friendship are 'Friends are genuinely concerned about each other's feelings and thoughts' and 'Friends help each other out in times of need'.<sup>31</sup> Despite the fact that Grandin has trouble attuning to subtle expressions of a friend's feelings and thoughts, she here declares she cares about them and will help a friend out in times of need. Similarly, Sean Barron discusses he had a hard time registering what was an act of sincere kindness towards him and what was not and how he learned to cope with these difficulties. He clearly grasps the concept of kindness and cares about mutual kindness. He has, for example, found insincere acts of kindness towards him hurtful and has 'felt wonderful' when responding to a request for help from a friend.<sup>32</sup>

These and other self-reports from autistic individuals whose mind reading is divergent provide evidence of them being able to display due regard for the interests of others despite finding it difficult to read their particular emotional states. Although Grandin may fail to recognize a neurotypical friend's distress, it does not mean that she cannot grasp how a friend's distress provides her with moral reason for action: when Grandin via other means would realize that a friend is distressed, she would be genuinely concerned and offer help. Divergent mind reading can in some contexts compromise access to an instantiation of moral considerations when one is relating to neurotypicals. But there is no evidence this also compromises the ability to grasp and be moved by these moral considerations full stop. And, in the light of the double empathy problem, it should be noted that mainstream mind reading can equally compromise access to an instantiation of moral reasons when one is relating to neuroatypicals.

Shoemaker cites Victoria McGeer when he discusses how the inability to recognize agential anger as moral address compromises responsiveness to moral considerations. But Victoria McGeer in fact highlights how autistic individuals may compensate for this difficulty. Drawing on lived experience, she observes that a number of autistic people can come to genuinely register and care about the interests of other people, but they do so via an affective profile that is different from the affective profile that underpins (a large part of) moral agency in neurotypicals.<sup>33</sup>

Note also that even for neurotypicals recognizing and respecting other people's interests it is not always based on their empathic identification with these people. For example, paying one's taxes or donating money to charity need not be based on empathic identification with the lived experience of the poor and destitute. It may instead be based on an acknowledgment that everyone ought to pay their fair share in contributing to public goods or ought to make a commitment to distributive justice.<sup>34</sup> It would be quite a conceptual

stretch to deny that one is not taking the interests of others to heart in these cases, i.e. to deny that one's choices are based on moral considerations.

A demanding communicative approach is now also subject to the social justice challenge because, as it stands, it would imply that individuals whose mind reading is divergent are not morally responsible or in the very least not accountable on the basis of morally irrelevant features.<sup>35</sup> It should at least be morally questionable that the way neurotypicals engage in moral conversation is 'the right' way to do so. The fact that this is how 'we' do it is not in itself an argument in favor of it, because one thereby conflates a difference with a deficit. The mere fact that one feels and communicates about moral transgressions in a different manner is then taken to indicate that there is a deficit in moral agency. This is ableist towards autistic individuals because it considers their responsible agency to be impaired on the basis of morally arbitrary factors. The demanding account would be similarly discriminatory of other individuals who tend to communicate and grasp moral messages in atypical ways.

Agential anger may not be as typical, universal, and natural as Shoemaker suggests.<sup>36</sup> The approach may therefore exclude other individuals who have grown up in contexts where the above-described 'neurotypical' emotional exchanges are not the norm. It remains to be seen whether this approach would steer clear of incorporating other forms of discrimination because the ways in which one is taught to feel, express, and respond to anger are likely to be informed by stereotyped expectations and structures of oppression.

McKenna's theory and a number of other communicative theories would be equally implausible and ableist on a demanding reading of them. And currently, they are vulnerable to this reading because they are under-described and illustrate their theories by means of prototypical emotional exchanges. So, for those theories, it becomes important to take a stand in the matter. But to reject the communicative approaches entirely would be throwing out the baby with the bathwater. I propose that in order to avoid the social justice challenge, communicative accounts explicitly endorse a more inclusive approach.

### 3. An Inclusive Reading of the Conversational Approach

A fault-finding attitude may be felt, expressed, and understood in manifold manners.<sup>37</sup> Think of all the possible ways in which a person can express to another person that they perceived this person to have unduly disregarded the interests and concerns of others. They need not be, and should not be, limited to expressions of reactive attitudes like moral anger, resentment, or indignation.<sup>38</sup> Hanna Pickard, for example, discusses how clinicians can and should hold their patients responsible without expressing negative sentiments towards them.<sup>39</sup> Together with Pickard and Fricker, I would also claim that one can morally address a person without feeling any reactive attitudes, especially when these reactive attitudes are narrowly defined as particular neurotypical emotional experiences.<sup>40</sup>

That being said, some type of negative charge is implied by moral address.<sup>41</sup> If one co-worker enthusiastically tells another co-worker that they overheard him shouting abuse at his secretary, this does not count as moral address. When one conveys to another person that one considers this person to have transgressed a moral norm, the person must in some way regard this transgression as negative. But importantly people can be (negatively) affected by perceived moral norm transgressions in different ways.<sup>42</sup> They can be angry,



annoyed, disappointed, concerned, or simply irked. And there is also a variety of ways of expressing such negative affective states. In so far as these expressions (aim to) convey to another person that this person was perceived to have transgressed a moral norm, they are all forms of morally addressing this person. Richman and Bidshahri have pointed out how Strawsonian accounts that posit neurotypical understandings of reactive attitudes cannot accommodate neurodiversity because ‘we cannot accept differences in how people respond to transgressive actions as equally valid’.<sup>43</sup>

As I argued in this article, similar worries arise when it comes to providing an account of responsiveness to moral address. To avoid them, responsiveness to moral address should refer to an ability to understand that another person is in some way negatively affected by a perceived disregard of interests and concerns, and ability to in some way care about and give uptake to this message. There are different ways in which one may come to grasp and give uptake to another person’s fault-finding attitude. On Shoemaker’s demanding approach, comprehending another person’s moral anger as communicating perceived moral disregard requires a non-inferential and felt recognition of this emotion as moral address. But comprehension of someone’s mental state may simply amount to the ability to explain and predict this mental state.<sup>44</sup> There are other types of cognitive procedures that can, on many occasions, allow one to grasp the mental states of other people in this sense. Association, inference, and stereotypes are a few examples of alternative tools that can allow one to explain and predict that another person is in a particular emotional state in a particular context.<sup>45</sup>

So, there are a number of different ways in which a fault-finding attitude could be grasped by the addressee in addition to mainstream mind reading of a particular emotional state. It is worth pointing out here that a number of philosophers and cognitive scientists would argue neurotypicals make as much use of alternative tools for picking up on mental states as they make use of emotional empathy.<sup>46</sup>

On an inclusive reading of this approach, if a person can in some way grasp and care that another person has some negative moral attitude in response to their behavior, the person is someone who can be appropriately morally addressed. This then helpfully indicates that the person is a responsible person and a participant in a community which organizes itself around moral reasons and norms. This provides us with a means to determine if someone is a responsible participant that does not rely on panicky metaphysics or on other criteria for responsibility that are rather difficult to measure or attribute.

The reader may by now wonder how Strawsonian the inclusive communicative account really is. I take it to be in line not only with Miranda Fricker<sup>47</sup> who distances herself from the Strawsonian tradition but also with interpretations of Strawson that remove the focus on reactive attitudes, like, for example, David Beglin.<sup>48</sup> I do not believe reactive attitudes are or should be central to determining who has moral agency and who does not, but I maintain that one should look at the communicative and forward-looking value of holding one another responsible in order to establish capacity criteria for responsibility. This last point is inspired by Strawson, but there seems to be wide disagreement about which features exactly render an account Strawsonian. I have no stake in calling this account Strawsonian.

Before I move on to discuss the further advantages of this inclusive conversational approach, it should be noted that this approach only tells us which persons can be blameworthy or praiseworthy because we can relate to them as responsible members of a community that organizes itself around moral norms. It does not explain who is blameworthy, for what, and why so.<sup>49</sup>

There is an important difference between correctly perceiving a person to have transgressed a moral norm and aptly addressing this person as a moral interlocutor. The person is appropriately addressed in so far as this person can grasp and respond to this address. Hence address can be apt, even when this person was incorrectly perceived to have disregarded the concerns and interests of others.

Strawson himself understood that sometimes people might incorrectly appraise a person as displaying moral disregard. The addressed person may respond to this mistaken appraisal by pleading innocence and/or providing a legitimate excuse or justification for her conduct. Strawson writes that:

The offering of such pleas by the agent and their acceptance by the sufferer is something in no way opposed to, or outside the context of, ordinary interpersonal relationships and the manifestation of ordinary reactive attitudes. Since things go wrong and situations are complicated, it is an essential and integral element in the transactions which are the life of these relationships.<sup>50</sup>

Responding to incorrect appraisals of moral regard or disregard is an integral part of moral engagement given the complexity of situations and the difficulties involved in perceiving the moral import of others' actions in those situations. Often, we cannot be completely certain about the accuracy of our moral appraisals.

It could be that divergent mind readers should at times be excused from abiding by certain specific socio-moral expectations for reasons that would not apply to neurotypical people.<sup>51</sup> For example, they may be more regularly excused on the basis of being ignorant of a person's nonverbal dissent or for not realizing that something was hurtful to another person. Although there are compensatory strategies for accessing these experiences of other individuals, the effort that is involved in employing compensatory means to access other people's experiences is much higher than the effort needed by neurotypicals for empathic identification with someone else's feelings and perspectives.<sup>52</sup> And a person will not always be able to rely on these compensatory skills in situations where a quick and effortless response is required.

It should also be considered that not every person will have the (same level of) opportunity to acquire compensatory strategies early in life. In addition, consideration should be given to the fact that an autistic person will take longer to acquire compensatory skills and may therefore still be engaged in these learning processes when neurotypicals are already able to abide by certain norms.<sup>53</sup>

That being said, care should be taken not to excuse any autistic individual too easily, precisely because there are compensatory strategies available. And there is a flip side to this. There are contexts where neurotypical emotional experiences and responses would distract one from 'doing what is right'. I do not mean to imply here that this always amounts to a full-blown excuse, but it serves to show that diversity allows for different types of moral skills and expertise.

The comedian Hanna Gadsby believes that her autism allows her to see how to exist without having to look out to the world.<sup>54</sup> And Greta Thunberg states in her memoir:

I have Asperger's, and to me, almost everything is black or white. I think in many ways that we autistic are the normal ones and the rest of the people are pretty strange. They keep saying that climate change is an existential threat and the most important issue of all. And yet they just carry on as before.<sup>55</sup>

Stenning discusses how these comments illustrate that autism may in fact allow for a particular kind of moral expertise and clarity because one's behavior is less determined by social norms, esteem, and recognition from others.<sup>56</sup> She adds that the capacity to tune into other people may in fact hinder certain kinds of moral behavior like a concern for future generations or other species.<sup>57</sup>

I do not have the space to elaborate on this here, but on the proposed inclusive conversational account, responsibility conversations would in fact be of aid in establishing moral expectations and excuses that are fair towards all members of a diverse community in the light of their differences.

#### 4. Advantages of the Inclusive Conversational Account

I argued in Section 3 that a demanding conversational approach is vulnerable to this challenge because it excludes autistic persons as moral agents on the basis of (in)abilities that are irrelevant to moral agency. An inclusive conversational approach is immune to this criticism. On this account, moral address refers to any way in which others can verbally communicate their perceived disregard of a moral norm to a person. A person is responsive to moral address when there is some form of communication that enables them to grasp that the other person was in some way negatively affected by perceived moral disregard, care about this, and can respond to such moral address by offering pleas, justification, or apology.

To illustrate, if Polly were to intelligibly explain to autistic Albert that she does not appreciate him being late for their appointment, Albert would, *ceteris paribus*, be able to understand that Polly is negatively affected by a perceived transgression of a moral norm, and he can connect this to the moral considerations that speak in favor of keeping promises and being on time for appointments. In response to Polly, he can do more than 'just' prudentially avoid this behavior in the future so as to make sure Polly will not yell at him. He can understand that she perceives what he did to be disregarding of her interests and can negatively evaluate his own behavior in agreement with her because he can care about the interests and concerns of others in, for example, the way that McGeer suggests or that Sinclair and Grandin describe.<sup>58</sup> None of these skills regarding moral interaction and conversation are excluded by Albert's inability to pick up on and tune into Polly's anger.<sup>59</sup>

More generally the inclusive approach can accommodate diversity and difference where the demanding approach would struggle to do so. Note, for example, how individuals with intellectual disability may be able to grasp a moral message when delivered with visual aids, where they would be unable to grasp this same message if it was written down in complex language or delivered to them in a fast-paced scenario. On this account, the fact that they can grasp and care about this moral message in some form means they are part of the community of responsible persons who organize themselves in the light of moral norms. Similarly, some individuals may, due to childhood trauma and anxiety, understand expressions of anger to be a rejection or a threat, and nothing more than that. On my account this does not exempt them as moral agents. Additionally, different subcultures may have their own particular ways of expressing and understanding moral address. On my account that does not – merely in virtue of these differences – suggest that some of

those subcultures are unable to display moral regard. Hence the inclusive reading does not perpetuate ableism towards autistic individuals and is particularly well equipped to accommodate diversity.

As it stands, the ways in which we hold others to norms often exclude divergent mind readers or at best require them to go the extra mile to establish successful communication. This account suggests that we should instead reconsider mainstream responsibility exchanges and be more attentive to the different ways in which we can and should morally address one another if we want such address to be intelligible and constructive.

The inclusive conversational approach considers some type of communicative competence to be a criterion for morally responsible agency and thereby provides a criterion that is derived from our practices and psychologies but can, at the same time, be critical of those practices. As discussed at the start of this article, an important challenge to Strawsonian approaches broadly speaking is that they perpetuate the injustices that are central to our responsibility practices because they derive a conceptualization of morally responsible agency from those practices.

For example, using the appraisal that is central to reactive attitudes as a criterion for delineating the class of responsible agents may result in an unfair classification of the community of responsible agents. People can and do refrain from holding certain individuals responsible because they consider them incompetent for the wrong reasons, e.g. their moral responses to others are ableist, racist, or sexist. Because those who hold others responsible are often biased, it is problematic to use these practices of holding responsible as a yardstick for conceptualizing responsible agency.

This conversational account instead locates the inclusion criterion for responsible agency at the receiving end of responsibility practices. More specifically, being a responsible person is explained by a person's capacity to respond to (some form of) being morally addressed. Because of this, the theory can explain how a person can be responsible even when they are not considered or held responsible by others. People are responsible individuals to the extent that they can grasp and care about fault-finding attitudes as a form of reason-based moral address. This account 'gets at' the criteria for responsible agency in a way that is firmly rooted in our practices and avoids panicky metaphysics or the postulation of capacities that we cannot easily conceive of and rely on.

According to Todd, the problem for a number of Strawsonian theories is that if small children were to be held responsible, they would be responsible.<sup>60</sup> On the proposed account, instead, small children would be responsible if they can be successfully held responsible, and they could be held responsible if they were able to respond to fault-finding attitudes as a form of reason-based moral address. On this account, the class of individuals who are considered responsible should be extended if it currently excludes persons who can respond to moral address.

To summarize, the inclusive conversational account conceptualizes morally responsible agency in a way that is derived from our practices and psychologies, yet it does not incorporate the biases that are part of those practices and psychologies but instead provides us with a means to criticize them. The inclusive conversational account can and would criticize our responsibility practices when they exclude individuals who can respond to moral address or when they include individuals who cannot (yet) respond to moral address at all.

## 5. Conclusion

In this article, I evaluated communicative accounts of responsibility. I argued demanding readings of these accounts are implausible and ableist towards autistic individuals and possibly discriminate against others who would communicate about moral transgressions in atypical ways. In order to avoid these issues, I proposed an inclusive communicative approach. On this reading of communicative theories, responsiveness to moral address means the person can in some way grasp some communication of perceived moral disregard, care about this, and offer some plea, apology, or justification in response. This makes for a criterion for morally responsible agency that is derived from our practices and psychologies but does not incorporate the biases and injustices inherent in these practices. As such, the inclusive communicative account can accommodate diversity and criticize the status quo.

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## NOTES

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- 51 Jefferson and Sifferd, "Ecological Accounts of Moral Agency and the Importance of Moral Audience."
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- 59 This reading would provide McKenna with a response to Stout's criticism.
- 60 Todd op. cit.