



CULTURE | PSYCHOLOGY

# How to Tell If You're a Jerk

*If you think everyone around you is terrible, the joke may be on you.*

BY ERIC SCHWITZGEBEL

ILLUSTRATION BY JACKIE FERRENTINO

NOVEMBER 16, 2017

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ere's something you probably didn't do this morning: Look in the mirror and ask, *am I a jerk?*

It seems like a reasonable question. There are, presumably, genuine jerks in the world. And many of those jerks, presumably, have a pretty high moral opinion of themselves, or at least a moderate opinion of themselves. They don't think of themselves as jerks, because jerk self-knowledge is hard to come by.

Psychologist Simine Vazire at the University of California, Davis argues that we tend to have good self-knowledge of our own traits when those traits are both evaluatively neutral (in the sense that it's not especially good or bad to have those traits), and straightforwardly observable.

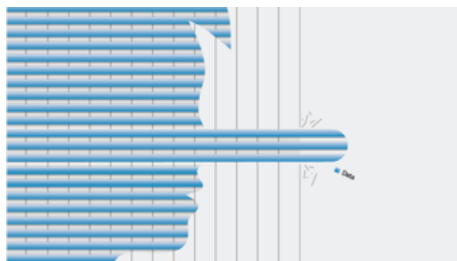


Wikipedia

For example, people tend to know whether they are talkative. It's more or less okay to be talkative and more or less okay to be quiet, and in any case your degree of talkativeness is pretty much out there for everyone to see. Self-ratings of talkativeness tend to correlate fairly well with peer ratings and objective measures. Creativity, on the other hand, is a much more evaluatively loaded trait—who doesn't want to think of themselves as creative?—and much less straightforward to assess. In keeping with Vazire's model, we find poor correlations among self-ratings, peer ratings, and psychologists' attempts at objective measures of creativity.

The question "am I really, truly a self-important jerk?" is highly evaluatively loaded, so you will be highly motivated to reach a favored answer: "No, of course not!" Being a jerk is also not straightforwardly observable, so you will have plenty of room to reinterpret evidence to suit: "Sure, maybe I was a little grumpy with that cashier, but she deserved it for forgetting to put my double shot in a tall cup."

Academically intelligent people, by the way, aren't immune to motivated reasoning. On the contrary, recent research by Dan M. Kahan of Yale University suggests that reflective and educated people might be especially skilled at rationalizing their preexisting beliefs—for example, interpreting complicated evidence about gun control in a manner that fits their political preferences.



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I suspect there is a zero correlation between people's self-opinion about their degree of jerkitude and their true overall degree of jerkitude. Some recalcitrant jerks might recognize that they are so, but others might think themselves quite dandy. Some genuine sweethearts might fully recognize how sweet they are, while others might have far too low an opinion of their own moral character.

There's another obstacle to jerk self-knowledge, too: We don't yet have a good understanding of the essence of jerkitude—not yet, at least. There is no official scientific designation that matches the full range of ordinary application of the term “jerk” to the guy who rudely cuts you off in line, the teacher who casually humiliates the students, and the co-worker who turns every staff meeting into a battle.

### *Jerks see the world through goggles that dim others' humanity.*

The scientifically recognized personality categories closest to “jerk” are the “dark triad” of narcissism, Machiavellianism, and psychopathic personality. Narcissists regard themselves as more important than the people around them, which jerks also implicitly or explicitly do. And yet narcissism is not quite jerkitude, since it also involves a desire to be the center of attention, a desire that jerks don't always have. Machiavellian personalities tend to treat people as tools they can exploit for their own ends, which jerks also do. And yet this too is not quite jerkitude, since Machiavellianism involves self-conscious cynicism, while jerks can often be ignorant of their self-serving tendencies. People with psychopathic personalities are selfish and callous, as is the jerk, but they also incline toward impulsive risk-taking, while jerks can be calculating and risk-averse.



Another related concept is the concept of the asshole, as explored recently by the philosopher Aaron James of the University of California, Irvine. On James's theory, assholes are people who allow themselves to enjoy special advantages over others out of an

entrenched sense of entitlement. Although this is closely related to jerkitude, again it's not quite the same thing. One can be a jerk through arrogant and insulting behavior even if one helps oneself to no special advantages.

Given the many roadblocks standing in the way, what is a potential jerk interested in self-evaluation to do?



he first step to the solution is to nail down more clearly what it means to be a jerk. I submit that jerkitude should be accepted as a category worthy of scientific study in its own right. The word “jerk” is apt and useful. It captures a very real phenomenon that no other concept in psychology quite does. Jerks are people who culpably fail to appreciate the perspectives of the people around them, treating others as tools to be manipulated or fools to be dealt with, rather than as moral and epistemic peers. To be a jerk is to be ignorant in a certain way—ignorant of the value of others, ignorant of the merit of their ideas and plans, dismissive of their desires and beliefs, unforgiving of their perceived inferiority. The nugget of folk wisdom in calling certain people jerks is to highlight this particular species of deficiency.

Jerks see the world through goggles that dim others' humanity. The server at the restaurant is not a potentially interesting person with a distinctive personality, life story, and set of goals to which you might possibly relate. Instead, he is merely a tool by which to secure a meal or a fool on which you can vent your anger. The people ahead of you at Starbucks are faceless and of no account. Those beneath you in the social hierarchy lack your talents and deserve to get the scut work.

To sharpen our conception of jerkitude, it's helpful also to consider the jerk's opposite: the sweetheart. Maybe you know one or two of these people—habitually alert to the needs and interests of others, solicitous of others' thoughts and preferences, liable in cases of conflict to suspect that the fault might lie with them rather than with the other party. Imagine flipping our jerk goggles inside out, converting them into sweetheart goggles—goggles that make especially vivid the value, interest, importance, and specialness of the people around you.

*The jerk will either dismiss the criticism, counterattack, bloviate, storm off, or smile and sink the knife in deeper.*

Probably no one is pure jerk or pure sweetheart. Several decades of psychological research confirm that, when it comes to big, broad personality traits, pretty much everyone is mixed and complex and subject to a variety of shifting influences. But where specifically are you on the spectrum from jerk to sweetheart, and in what respects, in what situations, toward which people? Maybe nothing is more central to your moral character than your degree of jerkitude. It is your basic moral comportment toward the people around you.

This definition can help us see two obstacles to jerk self-knowledge. One obstacle is this: To the extent one genuinely worries about being a jerk, one's jerkitude momentarily vanishes. If you prickle with fear and shame at your possibly shabby behavior to someone, in that moment, by virtue of that very prickling, you are recognizing the legitimacy of that person's interests and values, seeing that person as an individual with moral claims upon you, rather than as a tool or fool. You have, at least for a moment, taken your jerk goggles off.



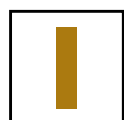
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Thus, ironically, it is often the sweethearts who are most worried that they have been acting like jerks—who approach you later with blushing apologies for their really not-so-terrible behavior. In contrast, nothing is more foreign to the full-on jerk than a blushing apology.

Of course, if you take comfort in this idea and think, “hey, since I’m worried that I might be a jerk, and in fact I’m reading a magazine article on that very subject, then I must not actually be a jerk!” and thus cease to worry, at that very moment your jerkitude potentially reasserts itself.

The other distinctive obstacle to self-knowledge of jerkitude is the jerk’s inability to listen. Plausibly, one of the most important paths to moral self-knowledge is listening, in a genuinely open way, to other people’s moral criticisms of you. The jerk cannot easily do this. Because the jerk tends not to see others as peers worthy of intellectual and moral respect, the jerk rarely accepts criticism constructively. Why take seriously what a fool has to say? Why try to engage with their critical perspective on you? More likely, the jerk will either dismiss the criticism, counterattack, bloviate, storm off, or smile and sink the knife in deeper.

Other moral vices are not recalcitrant to self-knowledge in these ways. Dishonesty, for example, does not block one’s ears to accusations of dishonesty. Greediness does not particularly interfere with the ability to think that one might have been greedy. But it’s the nature of jerks to stop their own ears.



If the essence of jerkitude is a failure to appreciate the perspectives of others around you, this suggests what might be a non-obvious path to self-knowledge: looking not at yourself but at other people. Instead of gazing into the mirror,

turn away from the mirror and notice the colors in which the world seems to be painted. Are you surrounded by fools and non-entities, by people with bad taste and silly desires, by boring people undeserving of your attention, by people who can be understood quickly by applying a broad and negative brush—creeps, stuck-up snobs, bubbleheaded party kids, smug assholes, and, indeed, jerks?

If this is how the world regularly looks to you, then I have bad news. Likely, *you* are the jerk. This is not how the world looks to most people, and it is not how the world actually is. You have a distorted vision. You are not seeing the individuality and potential of the people around you.

## *Maybe nothing is more central to your moral character than your degree of jerkitude.*

I've painted this jerk-goggled vision in extreme colors, but aspects of it are, I suspect, familiar to all of us except the most hopelessly sweet sweethearts (who, actually, have their own problems, since they are too easily swept up into the desires and opinions of others). We all have our jerkish moments.

But how often are you lost in jerkitude? If we are all part jerk and part sweetheart, where are you on this spectrum? You can try, in retrospect, to recall how frequently you find yourself behind jerk goggles. But unfortunately this isn't the sort of judgment people are very good at. Memory is selective—we tend to recall a few highly salient cases, or ones that confirm our prior opinions or show us in the best light (or, among anxiously self-critical people, the worst light). I see two more scientific approaches, if you really want to achieve an accurate perception of your jerkitude.

One is to adapt the experience-sampling methods pioneered by psychologists Russell T. Hurlburt of the University of Nevada, Las Vegas, and Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, now at Claremont Graduate University. Set a random beeper or some other arbitrary external trigger and, when the alarm sounds, notice how you've been thinking of things. You might not be very good at self-assessment and perhaps you will be prone to rationalizing self-flattery, but at least over time you'll collect a representative sample.

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A second approach is to attempt something like mindfulness—a concept from Asian meditative traditions. Recently, psychologist Erika N. Carlson at the University of Toronto has suggested mindfulness training as a path to self-knowledge of the most difficult-to-know personality traits, those that (like jerkitude) are high in evaluativeness and low in observability or salience. The essence of mindfulness is to attend as non-judgmentally as possible to one's stream of experience. Carlson's suggestion is that by more habitually attending to our experiences as they pass, we can acquire a broader and more representative evidence base by which to assess our personalities.

Although empirical mindfulness research is in its infancy, there is some evidence of a relationship between mindfulness and self-knowledge. For example, Amber S. Emanuel and colleagues at Kent State University found that participants who reported being observantly mindful of their mental states more accurately predicted their emotional reactions to a United States presidential election. Christina L. M. Hill and John A. Updegraff, also both then at Kent State, found that greater self-reported mindfulness was correlated with a tendency to better differentiate among subtly different positive and negative emotions during experience sampling.

I don't know how realistic it is to expect many people to do experience-sampling or mindfulness training in any serious way, with an eye to improving self-knowledge of their moral character, nor how successful such training would ultimately be. Let me conclude, then, with a more modest suggestion: Think about this article sometime later today, sometime when you are surrounded by other people—maybe in the lunch line, or at a department meeting, or at a party, or in a crowded plaza. Notice the people around you. Are they fools and tools, or do they sparkle with interesting individuality? Notice, in other words, if you are wearing your jerk goggles.

We all look through jerk goggles sometimes. But we are not stuck with this vision of the world. Merely by reflecting on it a bit, we can, I think—most of us, at least momentarily—see what is deficient in that vision.

And that is the way to take those jerk goggles off.

*Eric Schwitzgebel is a professor of philosophy at University of California at Riverside and author of Perplexities of Consciousness and (with R.T. Hurlburt) Describing Inner Experience? Proponent Meets Skeptic. He blogs at The Splintered Mind.*

*This article was originally published in our “Learning” issue in September, 2016.*

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**jansand** • 2 days ago

This is more in the nature of an attempt at linguistic definition than a psychological classification. The term jerk seems to be a contraction of the epithet jerk off, which has sexual connotations and is basically a term of disdain equivalent to the British worker. Since definitions

of the epithet jerk-off which has sexual connotations and is basically a term of disdain equivalent to the British wanker, since definitions are generally derived from usage by a dictionary it's difficult to nail down precisely. My own preference is to use slightly more precise adjectives such as stupid, callous, ignorant, domineering, etc.

2 ^ | v · Reply · Share ›



**Pincher Martin** → jansand · 19 hours ago

*"My own preference is to use slightly more precise adjectives such as stupid, callous, ignorant, domineering, etc."*

Those aren't more precise definitions, unless you do what early psychologists once did, and tie some of those terms (imbecile, moron, idiot, etc.) to a specific range found in IQ tests.

1 ^ | v · Reply · Share ›



**jansand** → Pincher Martin · 19 hours ago

Sorry, "jerk" is a nonspecific generality and a troublesome individual who is ignorant is not necessarily stupid or domineering. It has nothing to do with IQ.

1 ^ | v · Reply · Share ›



**Kai Middleton** · 4 days ago

This seems to be the key discovery of the article: "Are you surrounded by fools and non-entities, by people with bad taste and silly desires, by boring people undeserving of your attention, by people who can be understood quickly by applying a broad and negative brush—creeps, stuck-up snobs, bubbleheaded party kids, smug assholes, and, indeed, jerks? If this is how the world regularly looks to you, then I have bad news. Likely, you are the jerk. This is not how the world looks to most people, and it is not how the world actually is. You have a distorted vision. You are not seeing the individuality and potential of the people around you." ... and yet ... and yet, are not the big majority of these people somehow oblivious to the undeniable destruction of the natural world that they are significantly contributing to? How many times have we believed in their potential only to see our hopes dashed?

2 ^ | v · Reply · Share ›



**ApathyNihilism** → Kai Middleton · 2 days ago

My thinking also...Humanity creates, but even more it seems, humanity destroys: endless wars, destruction of other species and the environment.

But I must include myself in this "destructive" category then also, to err on the side of caution and to avoid the possibility of self-serving bias. That is: Am I doing all I can for the environment, the suffering of others, etc.?

1 ^ | v · Reply · Share ›



**Everett** · 5 days ago

"Jerks are people who culpably fail to appreciate the perspectives of the people around them..." So when you have two perspectives that inherently don't overlap who is the jerk? For instance: climate change is happening versus climate change is not happening. Or : Allowing homosexual couples to have legally binding and publicly recognized marriages is good for society versus doing so destroys the fabric of society. If one group cannot appreciate the others' views are they by definition jerks?

I suspect I am a jerk because I believe the constraints of our culture and society are motivating almost all of us to behave in ways that seem foolish. For instance we are utterly failing at almost every level of society to preserve the functioning ecosystems that allow our species any kind of comfort.

I can cognitively understand why having more stuff (car, iPhone, TV, computer, electronics, clothes, pieces of decorative plastic, etc) might be what someone wants (status, security, entertainment) but I think that the trade off always puts those people into the category of "humans with dimmed humanity". People's desire for plastic and electronic crap is going to ultimately end us as a species, not to mention millions of other life forms.

So that make me a jerk, right?

2 ^ | v · Reply · Share ›



**David Lyons** → Everett · 3 hours ago

How did being a jerk turn into a thesis on global warming

??

^ | v · Reply · Share ›



This comment is awaiting moderation. Show comment.



**Singloon** → Glebatron · 4 days ago

Can't agree more. As a engineer my default response if anything goes wrong I assume it's my fault, and I work backwards. And I'm always ready to accept new ideas and methodologies even if it seems abstract, because you never know if you find it's a gold mine.

2 ^ | v · Reply · Share ›



**Kai Middleton** → Everett • 4 days ago

Hah. I posted almost exactly the same reply as yours, Everett, only to read down the page a little and see your thoughts on this. It's a tough world out there.

^ | v • Reply • Share ›

**Singloon** → Everett • 4 days ago

You take the perspective empathise and then make up your mind/opinion. I've been in scenarios where people miss the first part. It's just the fundamental concept of showing respect to each other :)

^ | v • Reply • Share ›

**WC** → Everett • 4 days ago

IMO, it only makes you a jerk if you constantly try to make people feel bad about it, or try to legislate other people's actions.

Because while you may be correct that they're doing wrong, it might be the only thing that's making their miserable lives tolerable... Which makes stopping them wrong, too.

Plenty of people are jerks while being completely right, and plenty of people are nice while being very, very wrong. It's how they handle the situation that matters, not their stance on it.

^ | v • Reply • Share ›

**Pincher Martin** • a day ago

Imagine a grown man with the title of professor writing down to the level of your average high schooler. We're all somewhere on the spectrum between full jerk and full sweetheart? Is that right, darling? Is that what you believe decades of psychological research has shown?

This article is filled with vague and juvenile generalizations tentatively put forward and backed up with lazy psychological research that can't be replicated because the hypotheses in them are too vague to disprove. I don't know if the author of this piece is a jerk, but he's certainly not worth reading and does nothing to demonstrate the "mindfulness" and "self-knowledge" that he - however tentatively - counsels for others.

1 ^ | v • Reply • Share ›

**Granite Sentry** → Pincher Martin • 20 hours ago

I think we found one.

1 ^ | v • Reply • Share ›

**Pincher Martin** → Granite Sentry • 19 hours ago

*"I think we found one."*

Good for you. Everybody should be able to claim they found something in their life.

^ | v • Reply • Share ›

**MJ** → Pincher Martin • 6 hours ago

Oh my

^ | v • Reply • Share ›

**David Lyons** → Pincher Martin • 3 hours ago

Probably so... Jerk!.. Ha!

^ | v • Reply • Share ›

**MJ** • 6 hours ago

Does anyone else see this as ironic? Jerk definition: "To be a jerk is to be ignorant in a certain way—ignorant of the value of others, ignorant of the merit of their ideas and plans, dismissive of their desires and beliefs, unforgiving of their perceived inferiority." And then mindfulness, something billions of people practice every day is described as a, "...CONCEPT from Asian meditative traditions."

Dear scientific community – take a look at yourself. You might just be a jerk. Actually, I really appreciate this article and thoroughly enjoyed reading. Agree wholeheartedly with its observations. I'm an observer and have written a book myself, here's a quote, "In an attempt to fathom what we do not understand, we need to categorize and label. Yet, by their very definitions, these perimeters, categories, and labels are limiting, they help keep our worlds small, contained, and comprehensible."

^ | v • Reply • Share ›

**Daniel Paukert** • 6 hours ago

How to tell if a person is a jerk or machiavellian or narcissistic or sociopathic or psychopathic etc.?

I find questions like these miss the point for a single reason: The human race as a whole is by no means honest with itself, discerning, just,

when it comes to recognizing exceptional accomplishment. The entire history of the human race is tragedy after tragedy when we examine the lives of geniuses, all the unhappy childhoods, all the wasted time in educational systems, all the uphill battles as adults to achievement.

And it would be simply vanity for society today to declare that it has any system worth speaking of in place to recognize the most exceptional people in youth and has training in place for them to realize their abilities. In short, it would be vain to say we today have anything like an improvement of recognition of exceptional ability over the past. Which of course means for society to go on a big harangue about what exactly a jerk or narcissist, etc. is is a vast prematurity, because who knows how much of the historical hatred against exceptional accomplishment is being slotted into these categories? In fact have geniuses not often been called evil, depraved, subversive, mentally ill, etc.?

I don't trust society worth a darn to explain to me exactly what a jerk is or really any other characteristic of the human until the big problem of exactly what genius is, "characteristic of exceptional accomplishment" is examined. Only if you have a measure of the height can you proportion all that is lower. To fix what is low without first measurement of height is to perhaps confuse the height with the low and vice-versa. And it certainly says nothing in society's favor that it prefers to describe negative characteristic after characteristic without ever arriving at a definite grasp of exceptional ability and elevation of such to rightful place in society.

^ | v • Reply • Share >



**David Lyons** → Daniel Paukert • 2 hours ago

A multitude of rhetoric Daniel.. Keep up the 'good' work.. Perhaps you will come 'full circle' to the original point..

^ | v • Reply • Share >



**Ted Schrey Montreal** • a day ago

I suspect 'jerkitude' applies only to personal opinions or viewpoints, not to knowledge and experience. That implies quite a large area of similarity. Please do not respond; I know I've got this right.

^ | v • Reply • Share >



**Granite Sentry** • a day ago

I always wondered about the people who named the Steve Martin movie, "The Jerk." The Navin R. Johnson character was really just clueless, harmless and kind-hearted, more of a "sweetheart," by the standards of this article. Always seemed to me the people who consider that kind of person a "jerk" are in fact "jerks" themselves. But hey, Hollywood, right?

^ | v • Reply • Share >



**Denis-Vincent** • a day ago

Do you realize that this same article was first published on SEPTEMBER 15, 2016 and is still available at this address <http://nautil.us/issue/40/l...>

^ | v • Reply • Share >



**Thomas Ball** • 2 days ago

What I'd like to see is a machine learning algorithm predicting jerks, trolls, rednecks, a\*\*holes, etc.

^ | v • Reply • Share >



**ApathyNihilism** • 2 days ago

What if I think most people are "fools and tools"...and include myself in that category?

I assume I am still a jerk, but a rather egalitarian one.

However: What if, furthermore, I am actually right, that we are all indeed "fools and tools", that the human race is overall rather unpleasant, if not morally bankrupt? We could look over human history, and assess human ethics and morality from its treatment of others (including "weaker" tribes, nations, and groups, including other species).

Am I still a jerk if this view of humanity is accurate? Or just honestly facing reality, or as they say in the vernacular, "keeping it real"? (I could do so politely and diplomatically, of course.)

Pure speculation, of course.

^ | v • Reply • Share >



**stevez** → ApathyNihilism • 2 days ago

I think our shortcomings as humans is what makes us beautiful. It makes life unpredictable and worth living. I really enjoyed this article. As well as your comment.Thank you for sharing.

^ | v • Reply • Share >



**Esse** • 4 days ago

So, is the author of this article a Jerk or an Asshole for using words which I had to look up the definition of in order to properly understanding this article?

^ | v • Reply • Share >

^ | v • Reply • Share >



**LowRezSkyline** → Esse • 4 days ago

Perhaps you are the jerk for assuming your lack of knowledge is the authors fault.

I find when I blame others for my shortcomings I'm most definitely incorrect in my thinking and probably need to go have an apple or something...

3 ^ | v • Reply • Share >



**ApathyNihilism** → Esse • 2 days ago

Isn't the author doing you a favor by motivating you to expand your vocabulary, thereby increasing your possible use and even enjoyment of language?

2 ^ | v • Reply • Share >



**stevez** → Esse • 2 days ago

I found the article very easy to read. There is nothing wrong with looking up the definition of a word. Hell I do it every day.

^ | v • Reply • Share >

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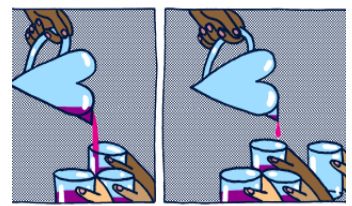
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