Autistic vulnerability to intellectual arrogance

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Introduction

Autistic speakers commonly report feelings of being misunderstood.[1] Where communication is concerned, such misunderstandings manifest when the communicative intentions of an autist—i.e., an autistic person—are misinterpreted by their interlocutor(s). People tend to construe autists as doing things in speech that we do not take ourselves to be doing. While in some cases this can lead to seemingly benign kinds of miscommunication, such as when someone takes what was intended as a genuine assertion or question as a joke, the same basic phenomenon can also lead to harmful accusations—e.g., of being 'rude'[2] or 'weird'[3]. I argue that such misunderstandings, given their frequency, cause serious harm to members of the autistic community, and as such special care should be taken to avoid them.[4]

Framing this problem in terms of the background assumptions that speakers operate on, I propose that the frequency of autists being misunderstood can be explained by a sort of intellectual arrogance often exhibited by allistic (non-autistic) interlocutors. Allistic speakers have a tendency to smuggle certain assumptions into the conversational backdrop because they take these assumptions to simply be matters of 'common sense'. Yet—as far as I am aware—no principled, much less predictive, account has been provided to explain where such assumptions are actually coming from. My suggestion is that the dogmatic way speakers tend to rely on their 'common sense' assumptions in the interpretation of conversational exchanges opens them up to misunderstanding the intentions of others in potentially harmful ways.

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[1] See e.g., Baggs (2007), Fischer (2012, 150), Vivian (2012, 250), Sequenzia (2012, 350), Price (2022, 70, 154, 193-194), Silberman (2015, 106), Yergeau (2018, 143).
[2] See e.g., Herren (2012, 137), Harp (2012, 306), Price (2022, 51, 91).
[3] See e.g., Vivian (2012, 186), Prahlad (2017, 56), Price (2022, 3, 44, 196), Silberman (2015, 352).
[4] In focusing on just autistic *speakers*, it should be noted that the scope of this claim will be limited to members of the autistic community with relatively low support needs—i.e., those autists who are also speakers, and who tend to blend into broader society.

I begin by presenting a simple exchange which I will center on as a paradigm example of the target phenomenon and introducing some key ideas in terms of which I analyze that exchange. In section 2, I entertain two common ways that the autist might be misinterpreted, both of which problematically involve reliance on unshared assumptions. Section 3 considers a path forward which relies on no such assumptions: conversational repair. There, I argue that while repair initiated by the autist is not a viable option, repair initiated by the allistic speaker is not only possible but is in fact the best option for everyone involved. Section 4 explores why conversational repair is not already the default path forward for cases of this sort and highlights why the sort of misunderstanding at issue tends to disproportionately affect autistic speakers. And in section 5, I close with a discussion of how seriously harmful this kind of misunderstanding can be.

1.1 How would you like your tea?

Consider the following exchange—borrowed from Surian (1996)—which I will be using to illustrate the kind of misunderstanding that often occurs between autistic and allistic speakers.[5] Suppose that A is an autistic speaker, and X is allistic.[6]

Tea Exchange

X: How would you like your tea?

A: In a cup.

A's response here probably strikes you as inappropriate, because it is redundant. Most speakers would be quick to decide that A is not making a genuine

[5] Keep in mind that this is only meant as a toy example for illustrative purposes. The phenomenon I characterize here is more commonly seen in much more complex and nuanced conversational contexts.

[6] Some brief notes on terminology: I opt for the term "allistic" as opposed to "neurotypical" in the interest of avoiding slippage into overgeneralization; my focus is on just the division between autistic and non-autistic speakers, and I do not intend to address other varieties of neurodivergence. Additionally, while some authors—E.g., Price (2022, 44)—may choose to capitalize the term "autistic" and variants thereof, evoking notions like the capitalization of "Deaf" to indicate membership in a cultural community, I have decided against this; when I refer to "autists" I mean to encompass the group of individuals who exhibit the associated traits of autism, regardless of their official diagnostic status, self-awareness of such traits, or community membership.

attempt to communicate anything here, assuming instead that A's response should be taken non-literally—e.g., as an attempt to be funny, or even rude. While it may seem obvious that X's question is asking what *additions*—milk, sugar, etc.—A would like in their tea, the pragmatic operations which ground this interpretation are actually far from fully decisive. The inference to this interpretation rests heavily upon certain background assumptions that most speakers tend to take for granted—e.g., that tea is always served in a cup. Such an assumption may seem so basic as to be considered a matter of 'common sense' such that one can assume that any given interlocutor takes it for granted in the same way, but the basis for such assumptions tends to go woefully underexplored. Before any assumptions are smuggled onto the scene, it will be helpful to start with the literal meaning of the question and work forward from there.

Taking the question "how would you like your tea?" literally, the matter of what additions should go in the tea is just one of many potential parameters of the question to be resolved (See Ginzburg 1995). That is, one goal X might have in asking this question could be to resolve the matter of what additions A would like in their tea—prompting the set of candidate responses in (1) below—but this is not the only goal consistent with the question. (2) and (3) below are some other plausible parameters.[7]

1. {with milk, with sugar, with milk and sugar, with neither milk nor sugar}
2. {in a cup, in a mug, in a glass, in a bowl}
3. {hot, warm, cold, iced}

In crafting their response to X's question, A will need to determine which of these parameters X means to target. To provide a complete answer, they would need to address all three, but complete answers are not typically called for in everyday exchanges (Roberts 2012; Carlson 2012).[8] Instead, partial answers to this sort of

[7] This is not meant to be an exhaustive list of the available parameters, just the three most plausible.

[8] Complete answers will only be called for in very specific contexts. For instance, when ordering a drink at a café you would be expected to specify all these parameters and more—e.g., large, iced, with milk, in a to-go cup.

question are generally accepted—either because other parameters are thought to be already resolved, or simply because their resolution is left to be addressed down the line. And deciding what sort of partial answer is appropriate will require A to look beyond the question's literal meaning. For current purposes, this will just mean that they need to assess what presuppositions are operative in the context of the exchange—i.e., what propositions X is taking for granted, and expecting A to take for granted as well in the interpretation of their utterance (Stalnaker 1978).

Presuppositions are an incredibly useful tool for utterance interpretation. They allow us to communicate much more concisely than we would otherwise, on the assumption that they are mutually held by all parties in a given exchange. In Tea Exchange, X crafts their utterance with certain presuppositions in mind, intending that A will know what kind of answer is appropriate based on just these presuppositions. For instance, if A sees X putting a kettle on the stove as they ask their question, A can infer that the tea will be served hot, and so recognize that parameter (3) is already resolved. That is, the speakers' joint awareness of the kettle on the stove makes the presupposition *the tea will be served hot* mutual between them (Clark 1996). It might be nice if all presuppositions came from such simple observations as this, but unfortunately this is rarely the case. In actual conversation, presuppositions are more often thought to come simply from a speaker's existing background assumptions (Sperber and Wilson 1986).[9] My focus here will be on those assumptions which seem to be a matter of 'common sense'.

1.2 Unshared assumptions

If the speakers' background assumptions are not aligned in just the right way, misunderstandings are likely to occur. Where the context of the exchange is defective, such that the set of presuppositions that X makes differs from the set of presuppositions that A makes, it becomes more difficult for them to interpret one another accurately (Stalnaker 1978). That is, holding inaccurate assumptions about someone else's background information makes it more likely that you will misinterpret their intentions. In Tea Exchange, let's suppose that A's response of "In a cup," constitutes a genuine attempt to answer X's question; their intention was to

[9] Or previous utterances in the discourse, but this obviously does not apply here.

communicate information about their tea-drinking preferences.[10] This would mean that A has genuinely taken X's goal in asking "How would you like your tea?" to be (at least partially) captured by parameter (2), presumably because their own background assumptions do not include any information which would rule out such an interpretation. Before moving on to see how this response is likely to be misinterpreted, let's take a moment to unpack how A might have reached this assessment.

In order to respond to X's question, A needs to determine which parameter—(1), (2), or (3) —X is trying to get at. For this, they will need to consult their relevant background assumptions to see if any candidate parameters can be ruled out. If these assumptions include a proposition like *tea is always served hot*[11], then A could rule out parameter (3) as already resolved; they don't need to tell X that they want the tea served hot, since tea is *always* served hot. This ruling out, crucially, rests on an assumption that X shares this background assumption. In ruling out (3), A would not only be assuming *tea is always served hot* but also taking for granted that this assumption is mutual—that X assumes it too, and that both understand the other to assume it, and so on (Stalnaker 1978). So long as these assumptions hold, parameter (3) can be ruled out as being already resolved.

Similarly, if A's background assumptions include something like *tea is always served in a cup*, A could rule out parameter (2) as already resolved by the same rationale.[12] And if both of these propositions are in A's background assumptions, they will be able to rule out both (2) and (3), and so opt to respond to (1) based on this process of elimination. In stipulating here that A's response is intended to be a sincere attempt at communication, I am in effect stipulating that the proposition *tea is always served in a cup* is not in A's set of background assumptions. Because of this, while they may be able to rule out parameter (3), they are unable to rule out (1) or (2), and so will judge that an appropriate partial answer to X's question could serve

[10] This assumption of sincerity is, importantly, merely a stipulation. Autistic speakers are, of course, capable of employing other sorts of communicative intentions besides sincerity, that just doesn't happen to be the case here.
[11] Or perhaps slightly weaker: *tea is served hot unless otherwise specified*.
[12] I leave out a case where (1) is ruled out, because it seems less plausible that a specification of additions that go in one's tea would be assumed as a matter of course.

to resolve either of these so far unresolved parameters.[13] In crafting their answer, they may well be left to guess which parameter is more worthwhile to address[14]; and while they could opt to address both, such a complete answer is not usually expected in everyday exchanges. But just because A does not in fact share the background assumption that tea is always served in a cup, this will not prevent X from mistakenly believing that this assumption *is* shared. And this kind of defect in the exchange is what makes it ripe for misunderstandings to occur. With this defect in mind, let's consider how X might react to A's utterance.

2.1 Humor

While I will ultimately argue that the best reaction for X to have here would be to initiate conversational repair by clarifying their question, it also seems that repair strategies are not opted for very frequently in everyday exchanges. Instead, it seems all too common that a speaker in X's position will be inclined to interpret their interlocutor as having an intention other than sincere communication. In Tea Exchange, there are two plausible directions in which such misinterpretation might proceed: X could interpret A as trying to be funny, or as trying to be rude. I will take these options in turn.

Supposing that X takes *tea is always served in a cup* to be a mutual assumption, they will see A's response as *prima facie* irrelevant. The utterance "In a cup" seems to assert something which is already presupposed, and so it contributes no new information to the context (See Sperber and Wilson 1986). So long as X is trying to interpret A as being cooperative overall, X could regard A's irrelevance as only apparent by supposing that they are in some way speaking non-literally, or that their intentions were something other than purely communicative (Grice 1975). Here,

[13] Both (1) and (2) are left open, but one or the other may seem more salient to A for any number of reasons. There may be factors which dictate that one is more appropriate to address than the other, but—as far as A can see—either is fair game.

[14] This might be an educated guess, made of the basis of which parameter seems the most salient to A. The reasons for (2) seeming more salient than (1) need not be transparent, but we might imagine that, for instance, A has sensory sensitivities that dictate a strong preference for cups, as opposed to bowls, mugs, or glasses. Such a preference may be strong enough to make it the case that the vessel tea is served in actually matters more to A than what additions go in it.

based on the perceived redundancy of A's response, X might conclude that their intention was that of evoking humor by stating the obvious.

Put another way, X might see the apparent redundancy as constituting a violation of their expectations. X probably expected A to provide an informative response to their question; they expected the information contained in the response would be new to them—i.e., something about A's tea-drinking preferences which was not previously a mutual assumption. If this is right, A's utterance clearly violates X's expectations, since X took it to already be mutually assumed that the tea would be served in a cup. And a violation of expectations like this can be seen as humorous so long as the violation is benign, or harmless, in the relevant context (McGraw and Warren 2010). While there are surely many complex factors that can determine the benignity or malignancy of a violation, it will be helpful to isolate just one factor for illustrative purposes: the power (im)balance between a speaker and their audience. In general, where social power is roughly symmetrical in this relationship, violations are more likely to be benign; and alternatively, where there is a significant imbalance of social power, violations made by the lower-power party are more likely to be malign (Kant and Norman 2019).

If there is no power asymmetry between X and A—e.g., if they are friends, or otherwise peers—then the apparent humorous redundancy in A's utterance is likely to be well received as a joke. Recall, though, that humor was not A's intention. A thought that they were providing an informative response, so by interpreting the response as humorous instead of sincere, X is misinterpreting A's communicative intentions. And while it should be acknowledged that being misunderstood can in itself be harmful, this might seem like a case where the harm is rather minimal. While the autist is being misinterpreted, the misinterpretation seems to paint them in a positive light. After all, being perceived as funny is a good thing, so doesn't it benefit the autist to be seen as funny—rather than, say, stupid, rude, or condescending—even if they weren't trying to be? This sort of reasoning, I think, is what drives a lot of autists to mask or camouflage their autistic traits, and taking on the persona of a jokester or 'class clown' is one way that this can manifest.

It is all too common for autists to learn quite early in life that most people won't like or accept us for who we are.[15] We learn quickly that being ourselves doesn't get us very far—socially or otherwise. Because of this, we tend to pick up behaviors that might be received more favorably by others—i.e., we learn to mask our autism (See Price 2022). And depending on someone's environment, their mask may take on different socially desirable personas. For instance, some may learn that being funny and putting on an act as the 'class clown' makes others laugh, and that when they entertain others, those people will want to keep them around. They gain social acceptance by performing the role of a jokester, endorsing attributions of humor even when humor was not their actual intention. After all, it's better to have people laughing with you than at you, right? That is, we are glad to be perceived as funny in these kinds of situations, welcoming the 'class clown' persona because it is better than the alternatives on offer. But just being the best available alternative doesn't mean that it's not still a bad option.

Regardless of how flattering this kind of perception may be, it is still the result of being misunderstood. While in many cases it will be quite attractive to just lean into this sort of persona, elsewhere even being perceived as funny may come at a cost. Not all autists will want to make a misattribution of humor into reality by adapting their persona to match it. If a 'class-clown' persona does not mesh with the autist's goals, such a misattribution of intentions is bound to cause deeper frustrations down the line.[16] Or if the content of the autist's seemingly redundant utterance was meant to be more significant than how it was interpreted, the autist is essentially not being taken seriously as a conversational participant.[17] It is frustrating to be misunderstood, no matter how good a light the misunderstanding happens to put you in, and the harm done by one's communicative intentions being frustrated in this way only stands to grow if such misunderstanding is a frequent occurrence.

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[15] See e.g., Price (65, 2022).

[16] Imagine, for instance, that A wants to craft a reputation of seriousness among a new peer group and the misattribution of humor stifles this plan.

[17] This problem comes through more plainly where the autist's utterance is a question. For instance, if A asked, "will the tea be served in a cup?" hoping to gain information, but X thinks that this is a rhetorical question, and so merely laughs in response instead of answering A's question.

2.2 Or lack thereof

Another plausible reaction X might have is to think that while A's intention seems to be that of evoking humor, such humor is misplaced. That is, X might not merely misattribute a humorous intent to A, but further judge this humor to be problematic. If, for whatever reason, A's apparent humorous redundancy is judged to be inappropriate—and thus malign—in the context at hand, X will likely take them not as being funny, but instead as being rude. Again, the norms for such appropriateness judgements are messy, so let's focus just on the factor of social power (im)balance. If X and A are not friends, but instead, say, X is A's austere parent, X will probably not take kindly to what they perceive as A's attempt to be funny. Regardless of how sincerely the child intends to provide an informative answer to their parent's question, if the parent misinterprets that intention in this way, they will see the child as being disrespectful and rude.

A misattribution like this of not just humorous intent, but *ill-placed* humorous intent may further prompt one of two sorts of responses. First, if the parent suspects that the child was simply unaware of the norm they violated—that A did not know it would be rude to make a joke in this context—they might see fit to correct this bad behavior by criticizing it, teaching their child not to repeat it in the future. But alternatively, if the parent suspects that the child *was* aware of the norm violation—that A behaved rudely knowing full well that they were doing so—it will seem that a different sort of a reprimand is in order.[18] While both types of response are bound to happen some of the time, I think the latter is more often what happens to the autist—especially beyond the simple confines of a parent-child relationship.[19] And it is in this response of reprimand that the potential harms of misinterpretation are truly brought to light. The misinterpretation that takes place here is essentially the same as that in the previous section, but now there is more at stake. Being misinterpreted as funny can be frustrating, but being misinterpreted as rude is a

[18] I return to this distinction, and why I focus on the latter sort of response, in section 5.

[19] That is, people who are not your parent are probably less likely to respond to apparent rudeness with the benevolent intention of teaching you something. Perhaps this is because it is not generally seen as polite to behave as if one knows better than others when it comes to social norms (Brown and Levinson, 1987). Though this regularity may well admit counterexamples—e.g., when 'knowing better' is plainly a matter of cultural difference rather than a matter of intelligence.

more serious harm; it is bound to not only frustrate the autist, but also damage their reputation, making it harder for them to participate in the social world altogether.

One can be accused of rudeness in any number of situations. For the autist, this will often happen regardless of their best attempts to be polite. In fact, this phenomenon is so characteristic of the autistic experience that the Autism Quotient—a questionnaire designed to test adults of average intelligence for autistic traits—includes the prompt "Other people frequently tell me that what I've said is impolite, even though I think it is polite," (Baron-Cohen et al. 2001). While this sort of misunderstanding is not one that I take to be unique to autistic speakers, it seems clear that autists will be disproportionately susceptible to being misunderstood in this way. Our tendency toward rigid thinking presents a challenge when tasked with deciphering how various social norms are to be applied in different situations, and allistic social cues will be of little help to us, since we often struggle to pick up on them (Cashin and Yorke 2016; Jellema et al. 2009). And, as before, even if such a misinterpretation does not seem like a terribly significant harm to the autist if it is a one-off or otherwise rare occurrence, if this kind of misinterpretation occurs regularly—as in fact seems to be the case—those small harms will add up.

3.1 Unaskable questions

At this point it may seem obvious that where X goes wrong in the above interpretations is in their making assumptions about what A knows or intends. This is, of course, correct, but as I will argue in section 4, this sort of error is often far from obvious in actual conversations. Before delving into why a speaker might opt for one interpretive strategy or another, let's get another option on the table: conversational repair. Conversational repair strategies are used when one conversational participant recognizes or suspects that a misunderstanding, or miscommunication, has occurred (Clark 1996). Focusing again just on the toy example of Tea Exchange, there are two sorts of repair to be considered: 2nd turn repair, and 3rd turn repair. While I will ultimately argue that 3rd turn repair is the preferred route in this scenario, let's consider first 2nd turn repair.

Turn 1 X: How would you like your tea?

Turn 2 A: In a cup.

Taking the exchange as initially presented, you might think that the miscommunication occurs in turn 2, as A formulates a response to X's question and seems to do so inappropriately. Instead of responding as they do based possibly on nothing more than a haphazard guess as to the intentions behind X's question, perhaps they would be better served by initiating a repair strategy at this juncture. When A recognizes that they are unsure of how they ought to respond, instead of guessing whether to address the parameter of vessels or the parameter of additions they could instead ask for clarification from X before attempting to answer. While this option does have a *prima facie* appeal to it, I argue that it actually turns out to be something of a non-starter. That is, the suggestion seems perfectly reasonable in the abstract, but in practical application it is hard to imagine a clarification question construction that is likely to be interpreted as sincere in this context.[20] Consider, for instance, the following candidate constructions:

Specific Repair

Turn 1 X: How would you like your tea?

Turn 2 A: Did you mean what kind of vessel I'd like it in, or what additions I'd like with it?

General Repair

Turn 1 X: How would you like your tea?

Turn 2 A: What do you mean by that?

I take these two sorts of clarifications to be the most readily accessible ways for A to initiate 2nd turn repair, given the analysis above, but I doubt either is likely to be taken seriously as a request for clarification in this conversation. In Specific Repair, A

[20] While I admit that there may be *some* possible ways of constructing a question which avoids the pitfalls of those addressed—and that I am only able to address a small number of candidates here—I also think that, if such a construction does exist, the amount of complex forethought required to find it will simply be more than we can reasonably expect a speaker to engage in during a real-time conversation.

asks for clarification in specific detail about the aspect of the question which is unclear to them. This clarification is meant to be interpreted as a literal disjunction, the resolution of which will help A to properly answer the initial question. However, it seems unlikely that it will be taken as such. Instead, much like the interpretations of the response "In a cup," addressed in section 2, it seems this question is more likely to come across as something of a joke. This is because it is a strange question to ask; it violates X's expectations. And if X still thinks that it is common knowledge between them that tea is always served in a cup, while this request for clarification *might* prompt them to question that assumption, I think it is more likely to strike them as some strange non-literal use of language on A's part. This is because, since X just takes it to be a matter of 'common sense' that tea is always served in a cup, they quite immediately judge the first disjunct to be *obviously* not correct and the second to be *obviously* correct.[21] As such, it seems to X that the answer to A's question is mutually obvious, and so the question doesn't actually require any verbal response—i.e., it's rhetorical. It is the obviousness that X experiences these judgments as having which makes A's actual meaning seem unavailable to them.

Alternatively, in General Repair, A does not target any specific element of the question that they are confused about, but instead asks for clarification about X's utterance on the whole. The trouble with general questions like this, though, is that they are often used to do something other than clarify a previous utterance, as their literal interpretation would have them do. Outside of very particular contexts, the form of general clarification questions has been adapted into a means of challenging or questioning the previous speaker's intentions; since it is typically supposed that the literal answer to such questions is already mutually known, these utterances tend to serve more as conventional vehicles for the suggestion that there is some hidden,

[21] A similar explanation could be applied if we considered the clarification question as including just one or the other disjunct—"Did you mean what kind of a vessel I'd like it in?" or "Did you mean what additions I'd like with it?". The former would read as rhetorical because it seems obvious the answer is no, and the latter because it seems obvious the answer is yes.

potentially nefarious, meaning behind the previous speaker's utterance.[22] And unfortunately, the prevalence of this conventional usage makes it much more difficult—if not impossible—to use the very same form to genuinely request clarification. Unless X has some good reason to rule out the possibility of A's using the question in this conventional way—and it seems they don't[23]—X is likely to take offense at this response, and they are unlikely to actually provide a clarifying answer to A's question.

The inference to this result is similar to that used to interpret the response "In a cup," in that X probably assumes A's intention is non-literal because they just think it's 'common sense' that the question "How would you like your tea?" refers to what additions one would like in their tea. However, here they may not only be falling prey to the general disposition of assuming their own assumptions are shared by others, but also to an unconscious association between a speaker's background assumptions and their overall intelligence. If X thinks it is common sense to just automatically know what this question means, they may feel as though taking the clarification question seriously would reflect their thinking that A is less intelligent than them.[24] In the interest of being polite, they may be inclined to avoid doing anything which might suggest that their interlocutor is stupid, and so may be more willing to imagine A as being rude than as lacking knowledge that they are expected to have. And despite the fact that this implicit notion of intelligence as measured in one's background assumptions seems to miss the mark, it may nevertheless have a strong unconscious influence on X's behavior.

While these misinterpretations of A's attempt at 2nd turn repair are, of course, not guaranteed, their likelihood gives A reason to avoid this strategy. Since it is unlikely that A's attempt at asking for clarification will be interpreted as sincere, their

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[22] I admit this is where Tea Exchange as a toy example may have outlived its usefulness. The inclination to take clarification questions as condescending seems much more prevalent in, for instance, cases of insinuation. There, asking an insinuating speaker "What do you mean by that?" may be taken as a challenge, since—on the assumption that their insinuated meaning is obvious, and so the clarification question is not asked genuinely—it calls the insinuating speaker's bluff, forcing them to either deny the insinuated content, or go on-record with it (See Camp 2018).

[23] You might think that knowledge of A's being autistic could count as such a reason. I address this possibility in section 5.

[24] In other words, they have an unconscious tendency to maintain their interlocutor's positive face (See Goffman 1959).

repair attempt will not seem likely to give them the result they want, and so they could reasonably judge that it is not worth making. It seems, then, that they will be better off guessing at which parameter of the question to address; after all, if they guess right there will be no problem at all, and if they guess wrong the consequences seem roughly on par with those of asking for clarification first. So, A is left right back where they started. Thankfully, there is one more path forward to be considered.

3.2 Opting against efficiency

The final path that this interaction might proceed along, which I endorse as the best option, is 3rd turn conversational repair. This strategy involves the initial question-asker, X, recognizing in A's response that some miscommunication has occurred, and initiating repair in its aftermath (Clark 1996). This path avoids the potentially harmful consequences of making too many assumptions about one's interlocutor, but it also requires that X stray from those assumptions that they may be accustomed to treating as common sense. If X can recognize that the apparent redundancy of the response "In a cup," is not necessarily something that A did on purpose, but instead is willing to entertain the possibility that it is instead the result of a defective context, they might see fit to simply clarify their question as follows:

Turn 1 X: How would you like your tea?
Turn 2 A: In a cup.
Turn 3 X: I meant what *additions* would you like *in the tea*?

This route may well result in no negative repercussions whatsoever. So, it is clearly preferable to the others. And given this stark contrast, it may be initially hard to see why it is not already the default strategy in instances of miscommunication such as this one. Why would anyone opt for a conversational move that is more likely to do unwarranted harm to their interlocutor? While the more harmful routes are, of course, not *always* the ones taken, it is nevertheless all too common that they are chosen over the more benign option. This is, in part, due to the fact that making assumptions about others is incredibly efficient.

In much of pragmatic theory, it is taken for granted that efficiency in communication is to be valued above all else. When we are presented with an utterance to be processed, we will by default operate on the assumption that the utterance's content is worth our while to process—e.g., that we gain enough information from it (Sperber and Wilson 1986). The more information one can acquire for less cognitive effort, the better. It is not difficult to see why this kind of process would be attractive, nor to imagine why we have continued to communicate according to it.[25] However, there seems also to be a lot of potential for things to go wrong if we are too quick to form judgments about an utterance's informativity.

In order to maintain an assumption of informativity, a great many other assumptions must also be operating in the cognitive background. And this is, of course, not a bad thing. Speakers rely on assumptions in their exchanges all the time. If there weren't certain things that we could take for granted about our interlocutors—that they speak English, that they are cooperative, etc.—we would never get anything done. To communicate with anything even resembling efficiency, we need to be able to establish a starting point for what other speakers can be expected to know so that we might craft our utterances accordingly. How exactly this starting point is crafted, though, is far from clear. A lot of the content for this baseline context will come from inductive inferences we make about our interlocutors based on, say, cultural communities we presume them to belong to, or common experiences we presume them to share with us (Clark 1996). But even before these kinds of addressee-specific assumptions, there seems to be some more basic ones that speakers rely on just in virtue of their addressee being in some basic way *like them*. If this basic assumption is too robust, though, it risks unreasonably excluding interlocutors who are different from you in ways that may not be immediately obvious—e.g., of a different neurotype.

There are certain things that you probably assume any given person you talk to will know; these are facts that you might consider to be matters of 'common sense' in that you just tend to assume that everybody knows them. Such assumptions are incredibly useful in the reasoning you employ to process the

[25] In fact, the evolutionary stability of this practice has been detailed by, among others, Rubio-Fernandez (2023).

utterances of others and in the crafting of your own utterances. The more information that you can correctly assume to be mutual between you and an interlocutor, the more efficient your exchange is likely to be. But relying on assumptions of shared belief too dogmatically can cause problems in conversation if what seems like 'common sense' to you is not judged as such by others. In aiming at communicative efficiency, it is easy to become unreflective about the knowledge we take for granted as being common.

This is what happens when X reasons that A is being non-literal in Tea Exchange; X takes for granted that A knows that *tea is always served in a cup* as a matter of common sense, and so infers that their intentions must be something besides informativity. They do not stop to question what grounds this reasoning, and in failing to do so they are led astray from A's actual intentions. My aim here is to challenge the role that such automatic assumptions play in our everyday reasoning. While they are useful, they are also defeasible, and this defeasibility is something that tends to get overlooked in the interest of efficiency. If you are willing and able to stray a bit from this interest of efficiency, opting instead to ensure your meaning is clear, you may be able to avoid the needless cruelty that can come from misunderstandings.

4.1 Uncommon sense

If the case entertained thus far strikes you as unintuitive, I implore you to consider a slight variation on this example. Here, suppose that X is British, and A is American.

Tea Exchange (UK)

X: I'm making tea; what can I get you?

A: English breakfast.

I take the following to be plausible parameters of the question "what can I get you?" that X might be looking to resolve here:

1. {milk, sugar, milk and sugar, neither milk nor sugar}

2. {English breakfast, earl grey, chamomile, green, chai}
3. {tea, coffee, water}

Starting with (3), let's suppose that X's initial remark of "I'm making tea" at least narrows the focus of the question "what can I get you?" to the realm of beverages. If that initial remark can also be taken to establish a presupposition something like *X will get A tea*, then the parameter in (3) can be ruled out as already resolved. And if, additionally, A understands "tea" as shorthand for English Breakfast tea—as I am told is common in the UK—then the parameter addressed by (2) can be ruled out as well. So far, this case should strike you as much the same as the original Tea Exchange.[26] Where the cases diverge is in consideration of what warrants the assumed mutuality of the background information used to rule out (2). In the original Tea Exchange, that warrant came from 'common sense'; the fact that tea is always served in a cup was just supposed to be something that everybody knows. With regard to Tea Exchange (UK), however, it is not clear that this same source of justification will hold up.

Based on their cultural backgrounds, X will be familiar with "tea" being shorthand for English breakfast tea, but A will not. To X, the assumption may seem like a matter of common sense; they may or may not be aware that this commonality is merely regional, depending on how much exposure they've had to speakers who do not share it. If X is not particularly aware of and sensitive to the limitations on this assumption's commonality—or perhaps merely unreflective in the moment regarding such limitations—they might well find A's response of "English Breakfast" to be rather strange. If X is already assuming that the tea served would be English breakfast tea and had assumed that A already knew this as well, A's response will likely prompt some confusion.

Following the previous analysis, we can imagine that X's reasoning about the response might follow one of two paths. The first would, as before, result in their thinking that A's response was intentionally redundant; A was trying to be funny by stating the obvious, and various consequences may follow from this line of thinking.

[26] Again, leave out the case where (1) is ruled out for the reasons mentioned before.

Alternatively, X might recognize the response as indicating a defect in the context and be prompted to attempt to repair it. They might follow up with something like:

X: I meant what can I get you to go *with* your English breakfast tea?

In this version it seems like repair is the most natural route to take. But what makes this the case here and not for the original Tea Exchange? The answer, I think, will lie in how implicitly committed X is to the background assumption that their processing of A's utterance relies on. In the original case, the assumption (and assumed mutuality) of *tea is always served in a cup* is treated as a matter of common sense, and so X is unlikely to even consider abandoning it in their processing. In Tea Exchange (UK), though, the assumption *"tea" is shorthand for English breakfast tea* is one that X is perhaps more willing to abandon, or at least more prepared to think is not shared by their audience. In fact, the apparent strangeness of A's response seems likely to make salient the cultural division between the two parties, reminding X that Americans drink other sorts of tea besides English breakfast. And while I imagine some explanation could be given regarding the nature of cultural common sense as opposed to general common sense, I am not aware of any account that reliably predicts such a distinction.

This is why I take it that repair ought to be the natural strategy in the original Tea Exchange as well. Insofar as it is not already the default—and I hope to have shown that it is not—this seems to be because speakers are more willing to misinterpret their interlocutors than they are to reflect upon their own implicit background assumptions. This tendency, as I explore in the next section, can be seen as an instantiation of intellectual arrogance.

4.2 Allistic arrogance

X's inclination to misconstrue A's intentions here is grounded in an overreliance on what is assumed to be common sense. It is not just that the common-sensical assumptions are applied too broadly, but rather that X's confidence in the truth *and mutuality* of these assumptions is actually much stronger than is warranted. To see this, it will be helpful to consider where common

sense presuppositions seem to come from in the first place. While there are many sources that such information *could* come from, my focus here will be on just one sort: inductive generalizations.

I take it that many propositions that get treated as common sense assumptions have their grounding in empirical evidence. We see things, recognize patterns, and on that basis come to form more complex beliefs about how the world works. In other words, we generalize. But this process is an inductive one, and as such the generalizations we draw from it will never be entirely certain. This does not mean that such generalizations are not valuable or that they are not essential to our practical lives. What it means is that they are defeasible; the patterns and regularities we recognize in the world may lead us to form generalized assumptions that may be incredibly probable, but just because we have yet to see a counterexample does not mean there is none.

Consider the common-sensical assumption in Tea Exchange: *tea is always served in a cup*. Let's say that you have seen tea served roughly 100 times in your life, and every time the serving vessel has been something you would readily classify as a cup. Perhaps the first ten times seeing this were enough for you to form the generalization *tea is always served in a cup*. The more times this regularity was confirmed, the more confident you became in that generalization (and its common-sensical nature). The tricky thing about this generalization, though, is that it is phrased in absolute terms when in fact all that the inductive process warrants is a probable formulation; your empirical evidence tells you that tea is *often*—or even *very often*—served in a cup, but it lacks the power to inform you about whether this is *always* the case. It can also tell you that *many* or even *most* people you meet will share this assumption, but it cannot support the claim that *all* do. Upon active and explicit reflection, this inconsistency is easy to recognize and admit. The problem is that we do not tend to actively reflect on our background assumptions unless they are explicitly challenged. In everyday life, the interest of efficiency leads us to be unreflective; it is easier to treat admittedly defeasible generalizations as full-fledged absolute generalizations.

Falling prey to this kind of ease and favoring it over careful and reflective attention to detail, while in some cases innocent and in fact incredibly useful,

elsewhere can lead one into intellectual arrogance—e.g., a failure to recognize the limitations of one's own knowledge (Whitcomb et al. 2017). Forgetting that certain common-sensical assumptions are actually defeasible and relying on them in your reasoning as if they are not seems to be a clear instance of just such a failure. In taking for granted not just the truth but also the commonality of their assumption, X is engaging in intellectual arrogance.[27] In particular, they are failing to consider the possibility that A's experience of the world, and hence the set of background assumptions that they hold, might be different from their own. And while some differences of experience will be easy to recognize—e.g., because they can be inferred from someone's visible characteristics—others will be much less apparent; the more someone appears to be similar to you, the easier it is to assume that their experience is identical to yours. And since differences in neurotype are invisible, this means that cross-neurotype communication will be especially ripe for the exhibition of intellectual arrogance. Successful communication between allistic and autistic parties will tend to require a high degree of humility with regard to one's background assumptions, even if this means the conversation will not be maximally efficient.

Cross-neurotype communication difficulties have been well documented (See Milton, Gurbuz, and López 2022; Crompton et al. 2020). In part, I expect such difficulties can be explained by the fact that allistic speakers are more prone to arrogantly rely on inductive generalizations than autists are. Allistic people are inclined to rely heavily on cognitive processes that have proven "reliable," though not infallibly so, because such reliance tends to aid in the maximization of communicative efficiency (Westra and Nagel 2021).[28] They are more likely to operate on the assumption that their perspective on the world is shared and that their experiences are universal, because the vast majority of their encounters with others seem to confirm that this is in fact the case. Maintaining such assumptions makes it

[27] We might also understand X's assumption that their own beliefs are mutual here as an instantiation of the double empathy problem. In supposing that A holds the same background assumptions that they hold themself, X might be said to be failing to adequately mindread (See Milton, Gurbuz, and López 2022).

[28] This claim is not made about allistic people *explicitly*, of course, but I take it that the target phenomenon of work on human cognition is *allistic* human cognition unless otherwise specified.

natural for them to presume they know what others intend instead of wasting time asking for clarification. This is what happens when A is misinterpreted as being funny or rude.

Alternatively, autists are more prone to rigid thinking (Cashin and Yorke 2016), making us less likely to form absolute generalizations on the basis of limited evidence.[29] We are not just less likely to rely on such generalizations, but may even be less likely to form them in the first place. It also seems that autists will be more likely to opt for conversational repair when it appears that a communication breakdown has occurred, despite its being inefficient, because we are more concerned with getting the meaning right than with maximizing efficiency.[30] This could be because we are all too familiar with the experience of being misinterpreted, and so we want to avoid perpetuating such a harm against others. It could also be due to our being more acutely aware—because we are surrounded by people who do not share many of our life experiences—that our assumptions may not be universal (Williams, Wharton, and Jagoe 2021).

These neurotype-related dispositions lead allistics and autists to tend towards different intellectual practices. In the interest of maximizing efficiency, allistic speakers tend to be more intellectually arrogant; they tend to assume their background assumptions are universal and so rely on them quite dogmatically and unreflectively. In the interest of minimizing miscommunication, autists tend more towards intellectual humility; we don't take as much for granted when we engage with others, because we are more aware about the limits of our background information. This mismatch of dispositions seems to be what makes cross-neurotype conversations so ripe for miscommunication. Because allistic speakers are more arrogant, they are quick to assume that they know what their interlocutor intends and deem requests for repair or clarification to be a waste of valuable time. An increase in intellectual humility here would call for less importance being placed on efficiency as a communicative virtue. The prioritization of efficiency, though, is deeply

[29] In some cases, this might mean a preference for relying on probabilistic claims rather than absolute generalizations, in others it may be that the autist does not group prior experiences together on the basis of apparent similarity in the same way that allistics do.

[30] Note that this disposition seems only present in autists who are to a certain degree self-aware; it may not apply to, e.g., undiagnosed autists, or autists who are not aware that they are autistic.

and evolutionarily ingrained (Heintz and Scott-Phillips 2023). To see further why it is worthwhile to loosen our collective grip on this conversational virtue, I conclude with a discussion of the harms that persistent misinterpretation can inflict on autistic speakers.

5.1 Response to wrongdoing

I have mentioned already some of the potential harms done to autistic speakers when they are misunderstood. Misinterpretation is a harm in itself, but this harm is magnified when the intention attributed is a reprehensible one—e.g., one of being rude. I mentioned only briefly the notion of criticism in section 2, but it is at this point worth teasing apart criticism from its stronger counterpart: blame. When the autist is accused of rudeness, it is not obvious whether this accusation is meant as a mere criticism or further as a placement of blame on the individual. A mere criticism would be aimed only at the objectionable behavior itself—that A said something rude—but an act of blaming would aim more pointedly at the agent responsible for this behavior (Simion 2021). The line between criticism and blame is often drawn with respect to all-things-considered judgements; blame can be avoided with an appropriate justification or excuse for one's actions, but criticism cannot. We might consider, then, the following as the conditions which must be met for blame to be apt. Blameworthiness will require that all three of these conditions be met, while liability to criticism will only require the first.

1. Veracity Condition: An agent Y can be blamed for an action φ, when:
    a. Y did φ, and
    b. φ is morally objectionable
2. Freedom Condition: An agent Y can be blamed for an action φ only if Y's act of φ-ing was a free action (i.e., not taken under duress, or other exculpating condition).
3. Epistemic Condition: An agent Y can be blamed for an action φ only if:
    a. Y φ-ed with knowledge that they were φ-ing, and knowledge that φ-ing was morally objectionable, or

b. At the time of φ-ing, Y was culpably ignorant of at least one of the facts in (a).[31]

With this in mind, my suggestion is that in Tea Exchange A is neither blameworthy nor criticism-liable for their allegedly rude utterance of "In a cup." This is because I take it that Veracity Condition (b) is not met; A has done nothing wrong. Based on the mutual assumptions that were in fact operative in the conversational context—i.e., not just those that either interlocutor understood to be mutual, but only those which were in fact mutual—A's utterance was a felicitous one. The only reason that the utterance seemed infelicitous is that X was mistaken about which assumptions were mutual, and A cannot be faulted for this mistake. The offense that X takes at A's utterance is entirely manufactured by X themself; if X had not hastily jumped to conclusions about A's background assumptions, they would have realized that there was nothing to take offense at. The assessment that A did something wrong—even if blamelessly—comes from a place of intellectual arrogance where one is expected to follow conventions which they may never have been taught. And since, as far as I am aware, there exists no principled manner in which one is to learn which assumptions are conventionally taken to be 'common sense' in a given domain, it hardly seems fair to expect A to hold any such assumptions apropos of nothing.

5.2 The "autism excuse"

While I hope my argument thus far has provided compelling evidence for the assessment that A has done nothing wrong, I would like to acknowledge—and ultimately dismiss—what I expect might seem like a compelling alternative to this assessment. If you are unconvinced that A's utterance should not be classified as rude behavior, I expect that you take the Veracity condition to be met in full. But given this, you might nevertheless be sympathetic to my depiction of A as autistic, and so be inclined to say that though their *behavior* was objectionable, they cannot be held fully responsible for it. That is, you think that A's utterance may be criticizable, but that they are not blameworthy for it.

[31] Conditions extracted and paraphrased from Mckenna (2013) and Simion (2021).

I expect your reason for allowing this concession would be that you take A to fall short of meeting the Epistemic Condition. Though A knew what they were saying, they did not know that saying it was objectionable. And to explain why they were ignorant of the fact that this behavior was objectionable, you might then claim that A's being autistic constitutes a non-culpable excuse for their ignorance. In engaging in such reasoning, you treat the autist in much the same way that you might treat a young child, or others typically classified as being mentally incapacitated; you take A's autism to be a factor which limits the extent to which they can be held morally responsible (See Strawson 2008). On this ground you would conclude that they are not blameworthy for the wrongdoing, and you would probably think that you are offering me a great boon in making this concession. Unfortunately, I do not see it this way

I hold that A did nothing wrong, not merely that they are not blameworthy for their wrongdoing, precisely because A is an agent capable of being blamed. If the autist had in fact done anything wrong, they would be an apt target for blame. This is because, of course, autists are capable of being rude; we are capable of doing wrong and ought to be held to account for it when we do (See Shields 2021). To treat us as if we are not is to strip us of our agency. Instead of carving out exceptions for autistic speakers and thus alienating us from the larger moral community, the moral landscape ought to be such that common autistic behaviors do not rise to salience as objectionable in the first place.[32]

And further, the suggestion that autists are subject to different moral standards than others is a strange one, given that someone's status as autistic or allistic is generally an invisible characteristic. If autists are held to different standards, it would seem that in order for my actions to be evaluated properly I would have a duty to disclose the fact that I am autistic in any given interaction I might find myself in. This, I hope, strikes you as an uncomfortable result. I do not owe anyone a disclosure of my neurotype in order to garner proper respect or understanding from

[32] I acknowledge that this is a much larger claim than can be fully addressed here, but it is one which I hope to defend in future work.

them.[33] Rather, perhaps the fact that you often cannot know the neurotype of your interlocutor should give you reason to behave with more compassion and humility across the board, not just in those special cases where you carve out exceptions.

Based on this analysis, any accusations of rudeness made against an autist who was making their best efforts to be polite ought to be seen as misplaced and therefore empty of moral significance. This emptiness, though, can often be hard to discern from genuine moral censure. When the autist is accused of being rude, the difference between this accusation constituting a mere criticism and its constituting an act of blaming will be imperceptible. If X issues the accusation on the assumption that A is not an appropriate target for blame, their intention may be to merely criticize. And merely criticizing one's behavior is not usually thought to do any harm to them (Simion 2021). But how is A to discern whether the act is one of criticizing or blaming? Presumably, A takes themself to be a full moral agent; they understand themself to be capable of doing wrong, just like anyone else, and know that they are an apt target for blame.[34] Of course, this does not mean that they want to be blamed. But when someone calls attention to the fact that they have behaved badly, the autist will probably come to see themself as blameworthy for having done so. And on this ground, despite the fact the X might intend only to criticize, this criticism will be interpreted as blame. In a sense, even if X is not blaming A, A is blaming themself.

The central issue here is that autistic speakers are disproportionately likely to have their communicative intentions misinterpreted. The matter of blame only serves to draw out the potential consequences of this. It is harmful to be misunderstood in the first place, but that harm is further crystallized when the misunderstanding translates into the moral realm. Being blamed when one is not actually blameworthy is harmful, even if it's just a one-off occurrence (McKenna 2013). It's especially harmful, though, when it happens time and time again.[35] When one is constantly the target of this sort of undeserved blame, as the autist tends to be, it

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[33] A duty for disclosure would also be problematic insofar as not everyone who exhibits autistic traits is aware that they are autistic, so those who are undiagnosed would have nothing to disclose and thus be inadvertently subject to the wrong standards of assessment.

[34] Autists are frequently told, after all, to stop using our autism as an "excuse" for acting badly. See Sarrett (2016).

[35] See Fricker (2007) for another example of this sort of identity-targeted injustice which builds up over the course of one's life.

becomes difficult to recognize the blame as undeserved. The regularity of this blame can make one think that they might in fact be blameworthy after all. To be put in this position, I hold, constitutes a serious harm towards autistic speakers. We are told so frequently that we are weird or rude that we start to believe it. And though these accusations may in actual fact be empty, it is hard to maintain that this is the case when they seem to permeate every aspect of our lives.

Conclusion

To be clear, my claim has at no point been that employing assumptions in discourse interpretation is bad, or that you shouldn't do it. My suggestion is rather that it is worth keeping in mind that your background assumptions, even if they are seemingly a matter of 'common sense', are defeasible, and that your experiences may not be as universal as you like to think they are. When you exhibit intellectual arrogance by implicitly treating your *prima facie* assumptions about others and what they can be expected to know as knowledge, you risk making egocentric errors with harmful consequences in your interactions with others. And while it may fly in the face of communicative efficiency, you ought to consider that your idea of 'common sense' may not be so common after all before jumping to conclusions about what others are up to.

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