



**PARENTAL LIES AND EMPATHY IN
THE CURIOUS INCIDENT OF THE DOG IN THE NIGHT-TIME
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Christopher Boone, the narrator of Mark Haddon’s bestselling novel *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time*, vocalizes throughout the novel all the ways in which he is unlike what most would consider neurotypical people. For the sake of this criticism, Christopher will be assessed as though he is on the autism spectrum (with his specific personality traits aligned more towards Asperger’s than Autism)— this is not to say that he *is*, but that he *could be*. Christopher’s parents amplify stigmas surrounding mental disabilities by lying to him as a method of control or safeguarding, attempting to manipulate his sense of reality by subverting his interests, and continually making decisions for him. However, despite the fact that his parents perform these disabling tactics, which (unintentionally or not) reinforce stigmas, Christopher himself simultaneously upends stigmas regarding the empathetic capacity of people on the spectrum— even his own (skewed) perception of his emotional depths.

The DSM-IV definition of Asperger's¹, an autism spectrum disorder that affects mental function, specifically notes “severe and sustained impairment in social interaction and the development of restricted, repetitive patterns of behavior” with an additional notation on deficits in “age-appropriate self-help skills, adaptive behavior, and curiosity about the environment in childhood” (2000). Christopher exhibits many of the traits in this clinical definition. Haddon never claims to have written a spectrum-affected character, with the character specifically stating

¹ Asperger’s Disorder (299.80 DSM-IV)

that he is “a mathematician with some behavioural difficulties” rather than a high-functioning disabled person. Furthermore, Haddon himself has spoken on the subject: “Labels say nothing about a person. They say only how the rest of us categorise that person.” With this background information in mind, readers can still draw their own conclusions about why Haddon may have written a book with a central character that echoes so many elements of the DSM-IV definition of autism.

Haddon’s insistence that *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* is not a “textbook for autism” is easily disputed by his own character’s thoughts: “All the facts that you take for granted can be completely wrong” (Haddon, 100). Christopher notes throughout his narrative that he isn’t particularly competent at social interactions. He notes that he “finds people confusing” (16) and that he uses a chart his school teacher drew him to read people’s faces “when I didn't understand what someone was saying” (4). In contrast, the adults around Christopher are portrayed to be competent in most interpersonal interactions or situations, such as Siobhan’s (Christopher’s school teacher) drawing him the chart, or his father’s frequently correcting his behaviors or explaining his version of societal expectations. His father often tries to invalidate Christopher’s distress, particularly in times when he has done something to cause that distress. One such example is when he tells Christopher to leave the murder alone, because “it's a bloody dog, Christopher,” even when his son responds that he thinks “dogs are important, too” (20). The murder of the dog, as the title would suggest, is a major plot point throughout the novel; however, it is also the main window into Christopher’s understanding of affection and empathy. Christopher explicitly expresses his feelings for the dog here, as well as in the immediate introduction of the novel in which explains why he chose to write a book about a dog: “I cared about dogs because they were faithful and honest, and some dogs were cleverer and more interesting than some people” (7).

His father doesn't make the connection that Christopher is truly upset by the death of the dog due to the fact that he himself murdered the dog. Gail Heyman, a psychologist who focuses on social cognition in children and adults, studied the effect of parental lies on children. The behavior pattern Christopher's father exhibits show how "a person may be able to protect another person's feelings, gracefully disengage from an unpleasant interaction, or persuade others to do things they would not otherwise do" (Heyman) through reacting negatively or lying in order to maintain control over the situation, and over another person. One such instance occurs after Christopher's father discovers that he is writing a book, and shouts at him after reading it:

"And Father said, "I love you very much, Christopher. Don't ever forget that. And I know I lose my rag occasionally. I know I get angry. I know I shout. And I know I shouldn't. But I only do it because I worry about you, because I don't want to see you getting into trouble, because I don't want you to get hurt. Do you understand?"

I didn't know whether I understood. So I said, "I don't know." (66)

Christopher's father is disabling him by making an ongoing assumption that the logic behind his actions is in some manner superior to Christopher's interpretation of the actions themselves. His father's assertion of control through fear is damaging for Christopher's ability to process his own emotional response.

Christopher's experiences and uncertainty can be better understood when compared to statements made by an individual named Tracy Thresher, who spoke at AutCom during a roundtable discussion on empathy in people on autism spectrum: "I may not always show a reaction, but I am feeling, and I may seem uncaring to you, but if you were to ask me, I would type to you that I acknowledge your sadness or whatever feeling is at the core." He may not understand the feelings his father is experiencing, or he may not understand his father's reasoning behind his actions-- whatever the case, even if Christopher himself thinks that he

doesn't understand his *father*, it does not mean that he doesn't understand the emotional spectrum. Moreover, Christopher's father doesn't understand Christopher either. His father is neurotypical, and has expectations for reactions—something that Thresher touches on in her comment—and since his son doesn't respond in the same way, he assumes that Christopher isn't feeling anything at all.

Christopher's father has a habit of putting things in what he presumes to be plain speech, to ensure he avoids metaphors that Christopher thinks “should be called a lie” (16); even if he doesn't realize he's doing it. Uta Frith, a development psychologist who pioneered research on Asperger's Syndrome in the UK, has said that research indicates autistic people do not possess “harmony between affect and intellect” (Frith). Christopher's father seems to prey on ideology such as this with his dismissal of Christopher's investigation, and the motives for it. His father's interrogation of Christopher, which occurs after his father reads Christopher's book that was left on the kitchen table, asking his son “How stupid are you?” (62) rather than discussing the reasons he is writing the book. By calling Christopher stupid, his father underscores that he likely falls into this ideological camp, as he implies that Christopher's intelligence is in some way indicated by his inability to recognize affect. Vivienne Muller, a Cultural Studies professor from Queensland University of Technology, studied disability theory in relation to this novel. Muller argues that the statement by Christopher's father is an example of how “the text destabilizes the disability/ability binary,” (4) with Christopher's father having to call into question intelligence purely due to Christopher not filling a performative role to appease what his father sees as typical or appropriate emotional parameters. Throughout the novel, Christopher's parents follow patterns like this, trying to rationalize their choices when they are “portrayed as 'disabled' by emotions... or handicapped by the frustrations of raising a disabled child and the limitations of suburban life” (Muller). Amanda Baggs, another speaker at the AutCom

roundtable discussion, would tell Christopher's father a verbatim recitation from her statements during the Self-Advocate Roundtable: "How about just understanding that it is rare for someone to be able to easily empathize with someone vastly different than they are?" Assuming that Christopher cannot comprehend the emotional range of other people is not entirely far-fetched if it is grounded in a *universal assumption* that no one can entirely put themselves in the place of another person, especially if their experiences and psyches are differing.

Although Christopher's mother is absent for a majority of the novel, Christopher's first encounter with her face-to-face in two years is one that illustrates another example of his parents as a disabling force to him.

And Mother put her arms around me and said, "Christopher, Christopher, Christopher." And I pushed her away because she was grabbing me and I didn't like it, and I pushed really hard and I fell over. And Mr. Shears said, "What the hell is going on?" And Mother said, "I'm so sorry, Christopher. I forgot." (134)

Christopher is fifteen years old at the time he is writing the novel, meaning that his mother lived with him for thirteen years before her affair with Mr. Shears. The letters that Christopher discovered from her in his father's room were written nearly every day for the entire two-year time frame-- it seems unlikely that she would just "forget" about her son's disdain of physical contact. Although a hug may be grounding or comforting for a neurotypical person, it is unnerving for Christopher, and his mother grabbing at him and trying to keep contact is just as disabling as the moment that his father asks if he is stupid. Christopher's mother and father are insensitive to his boundaries, or Behavioral Problems as he says, which includes "not liking being touched" even though his parents used to argue about it when they were together (34). His mother's hugging him is playing with fire, as she has always known about this and other personality traits of Christopher's, rendering her apology as a person in an elevated position

nearly meaningless. In this case, her transgression is ineffective due to her power as a neurotypical person over Christopher (Zheng). Chinese researcher Xue Zheng's research on the effectiveness of transgressor apologies and forgiveness between high-power people and low-power victims. His father takes a similar approach towards an attempted apology, telling Christopher: "It is bloody hard telling the truth all the time. Sometimes it's impossible. And I want you to know that I'm trying, I really am" (87). Christopher states that he does not tell, or like, lies—his parents' method of repairing wrongs is another form of lying to him, as they do not make genuine efforts to change their behavior patterns or understand how he sees the actions.

Christopher's altered perspective on the world around him, from his astute logical observations to his non-normative emotional responses, is emphasized by Haddon early on. For example, the novel places the reader at a disadvantage from the first page, emphasizing the difference in knowledge between reader and narrator with '2' being the first chapter number. This oddity would seem small, but it is built upon by a (then unnamed) narrator giving a very factual account of a dog who has been gruesomely murdered. The detached nature of the narrative dialogue isn't what a reader would expect:

I decided that the dog was probably killed with the fork because I could not see any other wounds in the dog and I do not think you would stick a garden fork into a dog after it had died for some other reason, like cancer, for example, or a road accident.

But I could not be certain about this. (1)

Haddon's depiction of Christopher's narration style shows, at this moment, that this isn't a traditional mystery. In fact, Christopher's uncertainty here is an impressive foreshadowing to another aspect of his character-- his love for Sherlock Holmes: "I like Sherlock Holmes and I think that if I were a proper detective he is the kind of detective I would be. He is very intelligent and he solves the mystery and he says 'The world is full of obvious things which nobody by any

chance ever observes.’ But he notices them, like I do” (56). Throughout the novel, Christopher cements his observation qualities. He himself seems to think that they only encompass surface observations, such as counting objects or knowing patterns (such as with how he counts cars), but it is arguable that he has more observations about the emotions of others and even his own emotions than he realizes.

Christopher’s sharp observation skills open up his world far beyond the realm of his logical expectations, as those observations include the emotional responses of the people around him. With a high intelligence level that allows him to excel in logic and math, Christopher makes his own connections from what he does understand to what he doesn’t. He says that “feelings are just having a picture on the screen in your head of what is going to happen tomorrow or next year” (53), which is simply his way of categorizing things. How people connect feelings, or these pictures in their heads, in a logical way is ‘emotional intelligence,’ which can be defined as “a set of competencies in areas related to emotion including optimism, self-awareness, self-esteem, and self-actualization” (Montgomery). Christopher displays at least some capacity for every area described in the trait emotional intelligence categories that Montgomery identifies, even though he doesn’t identify himself as emotionally or interpersonally intelligent. We live in a society where people ask what they would do in a certain situation, or what they could do to help someone. It is rare for people to delve deeper and ask “What would someone who experiences and expresses emotion quite differently from me do?”, which is exactly what Phil Schwarz argues about the ability of autistic spectrum individuals to feel empathy. Although he is not on the spectrum himself, Schwarz has a child who is, and is Vice President of the Asperger’s Association of New England. “Theory of mind” is a psychological belief that encompasses “ascribing various mental states to oneself or others and involves representing and responding to the state of the target individual(s)”; in addition, “the response itself can be “simply” affective

(i.e., it does not require actual helping behavior)” (Krahn & Fenton). Autistic people have generally been regarded as lacking the markers for neurotypical mental functionality, which leads to conclusions of lacking theory of mind. This would imply that they have no ability to feel empathy. Schwarz is challenging those assumptions, going as far as to say: “I think most people with ASD feel emotional empathy and care about the welfare of others very deeply” (qtd. in Szalavitz). Individuals on the autism spectrum can still possess theory of mind, just in a more limited state than neurotypical individuals operate, which dispels a complete lack of empathy (Hirvelä). Rather than applying that theory to Christopher, as it assumes he has a complete lack of empathy just because he is non-neurotypical, social psychologist Mark Davis suggests that empathy is more than immediate emotional responses, as it is a multidimensional construct with both cognitive and affective aspects that make up the composition. Christopher’s father embodies what Schwarz calls “Normal Joe” after he finds Christopher reading his mother’s letters (coincidentally realizing she is not dead, as his father has told him) by asking Normal Joe type questions: “Then Father came back into the room again and said, "How are you feeling? Can I get you anything?" I didn't say anything. I carried on looking at my knees” (87). Here, Christopher operates in the limited state that theory of mind suggests, but Hirvelä’s study data acknowledges that empathic concern can exist without actual response or vocalized understanding. Christopher is internally processing, rather than verbally responding to his father (or outwardly responding at all). A lack of verbalization does not mean that he isn’t having an emotion-based response, akin to Thresher’s example of being able to type out emotions rather than speak them.

The potential damage of parents who continually lie, as Christopher’s father now has for two years, is staggering in terms of parent-child relationships. Though he is fifteen, Christopher is still his father’s child. Heyman notes that: “Dilemmas regarding the acceptability of lying can

take on particular moral significance when they involve parents and their children. This significance derives from a range of factors, including... the special obligations parents have to promote their children's wellbeing [sic]" (qtd. in Bok). The deeper problem with Christopher's father's continually lying to his son for two years (of lying), or perhaps even longer, is that his father is operating under the guise of power assertion as benefit. That is to say that his father is using "power assertion to elicit attention" (Gunnoe) as he screams at Christopher for writing the book (after he reads it without Christopher's consent), throwing away said book, and getting in a physical altercation with his son in order to cement that he is somehow right. His father is directly neglecting the recommendation regarding power assertion, as a parent should not "arouse undue anger or fear" and "can be cushioned... allowing the child some partial gratification or closure" in order to achieve healthy relationships (Gunnoe).

Despite Christopher's father's less-than-desirable parenting style and his (assumed) place on the spectrum, Haddon shows that Christopher is not actually lacking in empathy at all. His empathy isn't focused on human emotions, nor are his affections-- instead, they are directed at animals. Christopher's attention and affection towards animals shows that it is very likely that he has a present, positive theory of mind. The first instance we have of Christopher's ability to ascribe affective responses, as Krahn and Fenton define theory of mind as, is upon finding Mrs. Shear's dog, Wellington.

I pulled the fork out of the dog and lifted him into my arms and hugged him. He was leaking blood from the fork holes. I like dogs. You always know what a dog is thinking. It has four moods. Happy, sad, cross and concentrating. Also, dogs are faithful and they do not tell lies because they cannot talk. (6)

Christopher exhibits an affection and attachment to the dog, dead or not, and dogs in general. He doesn't vocalize frequent affections for other people this way, particularly since he does not like

physical interactions. The connection he feels to his neighbor's dog is a lead-in for his great affection for his rat, Toby. One of Christopher's greatest dreams is to be an astronaut, and while reflecting on this, he notes that: "I would like it if I could take Toby with me into space, and that might be allowed because they sometimes do take animals into space for experiments, so if I could think of a good experiment you could do with a rat that didn't hurt the rat, I could make them let me take Toby" (41). Despite not spending much time thinking about the needs of other people (as he doesn't understand them), Christopher does spend a considerable amount of time thinking about Toby and his needs, such as always carrying food pellets for him or ensuring his safety when he takes the subway to London. He even goes as far as to ignore his mother's attempts at affection in favor of Toby: "And I was lying on the ground and Mother held up her right hand and spread her fingers out in a fan so that I could touch her fingers, but then I saw that Toby had escaped out of my pockets so I had to catch him" (134). The supporting evidence would suggest that Christopher is not lacking of theory of mind, nor empathy, but simply does not understand how to relate to people (even his father) who have contrasting emotional experiences or ranges from his own.

Mark Haddon's portrayal of Christopher, whether or not he set out to do so in the conception of a character, is one that subverts ableist assumptions about emotional capabilities of individuals on the autism spectrum. *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time* critiques interpersonal interactions and expectations, offering alternative interpretations and responses from the view point of a Christopher, a character that is not a neurotypical individual. The effects of parental lies are made clear by Christopher's actions and reactions. His parents' misunderstanding of what having a child with is not neurotypical, as well as their assumptions for what would be "best" for him, lead to undue suffering for their son. If their observations of Christopher could have been even half as sharp as Christopher's are of the world around him,

perhaps his parents could have seen their son differently. Christopher's empathy and compassion for animals show that he is not lacking in emotional responses entirely, which his father could have taken notice of if he had not lied to him and subsequently manipulated information for his own situational gains. His mother lies to herself as much as she does to her own son, ignoring clear signs of distress and irregularity where they do not fit her narrative for her child. As a character that may be on the autism spectrum, Christopher shows truth through fiction, subverting expectations that are placed upon him (even his own) as he uncovers the truth behind the parental lies he's faced.

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