The Morality and Sociality of Psychopaths

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Abstract

This paper is a compilation of research about the difference between psychopaths and normal human beings. It shows that psychopaths are moral beings, whether or not their actions are immoral according to society. The emotional deficit and altruistic incompetence of psychopaths and sociopaths is described and illustrated by such examples as John Wayne Gacy, Jr., ‘EZR’, and Ted Bundy. The cause of this emotional deficit is theorized to be present at birth or caused by traumatic childhood experiences.

Three sources were utilized in the research for this paper. Two argue that psychopaths are amoral and the third does not consider the topic. This paper uses the data and reasoning from the three sources to suggest that psychopaths are indeed moral beings. With this in mind, a short suggestion about the response of Christians to this truth is made.

Keywords: psychopaths, amoral, moral motivation, emotional deficit
If a man were to abduct a young boy from his parents, rape the boy, and then strangle the boy to death, would the man be amoral? Many theories on the morality of mankind suggest that humans are born with an innate sense of right and wrong. But are these theories supported by the empirical examples of immoral acts committed by humans who do not seem to have a sense of right and wrong? Jonah Lehrer and Shaun Nichols argue, controversially, that morality is a trait common to mankind, but the decision to respond to moral mandates varies between from person to person. It can be exemplified that although humans may commit immoral, empathetically ignorant acts, but they cannot be amoral beings.

In his book, *How We Decide*, Jonah Lehrer (2009) tells the story of the serial killer John Wayne Gacy, Jr. Gacy is one of the most notorious serial killers in recent American history. During the 1970’s, he killed thirty-three boys and buried them in various places around his property: under his garage, in his backyard, and even in the crawlspace underneath his kitchen. By use of money, Gacy would persuade young men into having sexual intercourse with him. If the boys didn’t pay, raised the price, or threatened to tell someone, Gacy would simply strangle them to death. The common response to this situation is horror and disgust. How could someone continue to rape and murder young men without being morally bothered by the deed? Some might suggest that Gacy had no sense of morals. Others say this is a cause and effect relation to a traumatic experience of his childhood. Neither excuse is rational according to the two theories of the nature of morality: innate morality or cultural morality.

If one were to assume that people are born with an innate set of morals, neither of these excuses explains why serial killers can commit atrocities. Gacy must have a sense
of morals if he was born with them, and he would still maintain his morals through a traumatic experience. If one assumed a belief that morals are artifices taught by society, then Gacy would still have a sense of morality implemented by culture. There must be some other cause for Gacy’s unremorseful actions. In his article, *How Psychopaths Threaten Moral Rationalism: Is It Irrational to Be Amoral?*, Shaun Nichols explains the difference between psychopaths and normal, functioning people:

> The fact that the most celebrated class of amoralists have a defective capacity for moral judgment provides some support to the claim that moral judgment is closely linked with motivation. For we know that psychopaths aren’t motivated by moral prohibitions the way normal people are. But one then needs to ask what the cognitive mechanisms are that produce this correlation between moral judgment and moral motivation, and what cognitive mechanisms are disrupted in psychopathy. (Nichols, 2002, p. 295)

What, then, is the “cognitive mechanism” by which normal humans are morally motivated?

In search of the “cognitive mechanism” that drives morality, one can turn to Andrei Zavaliy’s article *On Rational Amoralists* (2012) about the rationality and immorality of psycho- and socio-paths. He begins by comprehensively defining irrationality and the multiplicity of its manifestations. He gives two possible forms of irrationality as the cause of psychopathy and then explains why both claims are illegitimate. The two forms are ‘self-defeating irrationality’ and ‘irrationality due to ignorance’. He culminates to say that neither form of irrationality is characteristic of psycho-/socio-pathological tendencies. He defers, then, to say that psychopaths must not have a cognitive impairment so much as a corrupted emotional response system.
Zavaliy writes: “…I find the argument of a number of researchers, which explains these apparent cognitive shortcomings by reference to the underlying emotional deficit due to impairments in the paralymbic system of the brain, quite convincing. […] If that is the case, then the resultant cognitive impairment, as manifested in some aspects of moral reasoning, cannot be among the fundamental causes of amoral behavior” (Zavaliy 371). Zavaliy comes to the conclusion that psychopaths maintain the ability to rationalize and perform most cognitive activities to the same degree as normal humans. It is the ‘emotional deficit’ that separates the morality of psychopaths from normal agents. Without this cognitive mechanism, psychopaths do not have the moral motivation of normal human beings. Psychopaths lack this emotional motivation to concede to moral impulses. The biggest example of this emotional deficit is an inability to empathize. Psychopaths are altruistically incompetent. Friends and family are not kin; rather, they are assets. Psychopaths, in their hedonistic rationality, see all social interactions as a way to gain pleasure.

Zavaliy demonstrates his argument with a case study of a patient who underwent brain surgery for the removal of a tumor near the frontal cortex. This patient (for reference: EZR) went through a major personality and relational change. “It might be objected that EZR’s failure to make acceptable moral judgments is precisely the cognitive failure we are trying to detect. This goes in line with the well-documented difficulty, exhibited by adult psychopathic individuals, when making distinctions between moral and merely conventional transgressions” (p. 370). Amidst all of EZR’s relational and moral changes, psychiatrists determined that his deduction, induction, speech, and language remained unchanged and relatively exceptional. EZR was still a rational being.
In his book, *How We Decide*, Jonah Lehrer (2009) comes to the same conclusion as Zavaliy: psychopaths have an emotional deficit that disallows them to make decisions based on empathetic emotions toward others.

On most psychological tests, psychopaths appear perfectly normal. The working memory isn’t impaired, they use language normally, and they don’t have reduced attention spans. In fact, several studies have found that psychopaths have above-average IQs and reasoning abilities. Their logic is impeccable. But this intact intelligence conceals a devastating disorder: psychopaths are dangerous because they have damaged emotional brains. (p. 169)

Lehrer argues that psychopaths lack emotional consequence because of damage to the emotional brain. Without the emotions influencing morally compromising decisions, one cannot feel regret, empathy, or any emotion that might discourage a normal person from acting immorally. Zavaliy (2012) quotes the serial killer Ted Bundy’s evaluation of his own logic:

’Then I learned that all moral judgments are ‘value judgements,’ that all value judgments are subjective, and that none can be proved to be either ‘right’ or ‘wrong.’ […] Believe it or not but I figured out for myself that if the rationality of one value judgment was zero, multiplying it by millions would not make it one whit more rational. Nor is there any ‘reason’ to obey the law for anyone, like myself, who has the boldness and daring- the strength of character- to throw off its shackles. […] I discovered that to become truly free, truly unfettered, I had to become truly uninhibited. And I quickly discovered that the greatest obstacle to my freedom, the greatest block and limitation to it, consists in the unsupportable ‘value judgment’ that I was bound to respect the rights of others. I asked myself, who were these ‘others’? Why is it more wrong to kill a human animal than any other animal, a pig or a sheep or a steer? Is your life more to you than a hog’s life to a hog? Why should I be willing to sacrifice my pleasure more for the one than for the other? Surely, you would not, in this age of scientific enlightenment, declare that God or nature has marked some pleasures as ‘moral’ or ‘good’ and others as ‘immoral’ or ‘bad’? In any case, let me assure you, my dear lady, that there is absolutely no comparison between the pleasure I might take in eating ham and the pleasure I anticipate
in raping and murdering you. That is the honest conclusion to which my education has led me—after the most conscientious examination of my spontaneous and uninhibited self.’
(p. 372)

Assuming that Bundy is telling the truth rather than a constructed excuse, a different reality than Zavaliy, Lehrer, and Nichols suppose has been proclaimed: psychopaths are moral beings. Bundy states that moral judgments become value judgments to the agent who feels no emotional consequence for ‘immoral’ acts. However, the principle feature of Bundy’s confession is his realization of an authentic morality within his mind, regardless of its annulled state. This validates two important truths: psychopaths have morals, and all humans are innately moral beings.

Knowing this, the rationality of the psychopath can be re-evaluated. Zavaliy suggests that psychopaths may not always be completely rational agents. The pursuit of personal gain does not dictate a certain means by which to obtain the end. For example, there may have been different methods for Bundy to obtain pleasure that might have been more socially acceptable. If this were the truth, his decision to murder and rape would be irrational. The means would be obtained at the cost of his societal safety. The threat of jail or execution would make the pursuit of pleasure by way of crime irrational. However, one cannot be sure that there was a way of better obtaining his goal of pleasure. If there were a manner to determine this, it would be acceptable to accuse Bundy with a responsibility for immoral actions in the face of his irrationality.

The last intermediate in the proof that all humans are moral is the identification of the cause of psychopathological rationale. Lehrer (2009) describes the anatomical reason for the absence of emotion. “The main problem seems to be a broken amygdala, a brain area responsible for the propagating aversive emotions such as fear and anxiety” (p. 171).
The amygdala can be broken or damaged in two ways. Humans can be born with a lack of emotional stimulus. This can be seen in varying levels with all people; some people have less moral motivation than others.

The second way that the functionality of the amygdala is reduced is via traumatic social interactions during the development of the brain. John Wayne Gacy, Jr. was sexually exploited as a child. This is most likely a reason for his psychopathic tendencies, and demonstrates the full effect that social relations have on the development of the brain. Harmful interaction can, in turn, lead to improper social interaction. In the case of Gacy, the traumatic experience took away his ability to empathize with others. His mind was free to make immoral decisions.

The different manifestations of the absence of moral motivation are classified differently. For example, some people are diagnosed as sociopaths because they lack the ability to recognize conventional social transgressions. This deficit makes sociopaths antisocial and empathetically ignorant. However, sociopaths differ from psychopaths in their ability to moralize other situations. Sociopaths tend to struggle with social interaction and development. The total vacancy of all moral motivation is classified as psychopathy. As you can see, pathological diagnosis criterion is based upon the varying degrees of the lack of moral motivation.

Although Lehrer, Zavaliy, and Nichols all argue that psycho- and socio-paths are amoral beings, their research and the testimony of Ted Bundy prove the morality of all humans. Regardless of the moral motivation of an individual, a certain understanding of what is good and bad in this world exists from the time that the brain first begins to develop. The Creator of all minds, in His ultimate omniscience, dictated through a man
that “…all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God…” (Romans 3:23, NIV) There is no exception for the man without a moral prohibition. All have sinned and commit immoral deeds, whether they are rationally justified or not. The task of Christians is to accept the truth that all humans are created as moral, emotional, and rational beings. Christians must respond to people with empathy and consider the welfare of others before themselves. By cultivating a culture of altruism, psychopathic tendencies will become less common and morality will be preserved.
References

