Evil and Psychopaths

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Psychopathy postes a paradigmatic dilemma for theories of moral responsibility and evil. How is it possible that a population of individuals who are depicted as completely void of all morally relevant emotions, from empathy to remorse, can be called morally responsible -- and thus evil? I will first examine the sense in which psychopaths lack empathy in order to show that psychopaths are able to draw upon a degree of intellectualized empathy for impersonal moral tasks. Then I will argue that the moral deviance required for evil requires access to one end of the empathetic spectrum.

In a recent article of Scientific American, Kevin Dutton argues for a distinction between impersonal and personal moral dilemmas, calling attention to what he describes as “hot” and “cold” empathy. The project utilizes the work of Harvard psychologist Joshua Greene who analyzed the areas of the brain in use in two typical cases of moral reasoning, in both psychopaths and non-psychopaths. The cases were Philippa Foot's classic utilitarian trolley car dilemma and Judith Jarvis Thomson's adaptation of the fat man trolley dilemma. In the first case, the impending disaster for five individuals can be circumvented at the expense of one but the decision rests on flipping a switch to reroute the car. In the second case, the ratio of 5:1 remains but rather than flipping a switch, one must push a fat man onto the tracks. According to Greene, the difference between these two cases is the difference between impersonal and personal moral decision making, respectively.
The significance of this distinction is the type of empathy involved. Dutton states, "Far from being uniform, empathy … [has] … two distinct varieties: hot and cold" (Dutton: 2). Cold empathy underlies decisions about moral problems that are detached from us in some particular way as the switch detaches us from the individuals involved in the trolley car scenario. Hot empathy is more emotional and underlies decisions that require our personal involvement; we have to use our own hands to push the fat man onto the tracks. The first case involves primarily a utilitarian calculation, requiring the same level of emotional investment as deciding whether five chocolate bars are better than one — it is an impersonal task. In the second case, our natural inclination involves us emotionally as we see the fat man not simply as part of a calculation but as a person we effectively are killing — it becomes a personal moral problem. According to Dutton's summary of Greene’s findings on how these two areas affect the brain, impersonal moral dilemmas involve “the prefrontal cortex and posterior parietal cortex” areas specialized for reasoning and rational thought. The personal moral dilemma, on the other hand, “hammers on the door of the brain’s emotion center, known as the amygdala — the circuit of hot empathy” (Dutton: 3).

Greene’s analysis found that all participants, including psychopaths, confronted the impersonal case much the same way, coming to similar decisions and showing similar neurological activity as they did. It is in the personal case, however, that psychopaths unsurprisingly show their difference, first, by coming just as quickly and easily to the decision to sacrifice the fat man as to flicking the switch and second by showing no neurological activity in the areas of the brain associated with personal moral decision making in others. Dutton states, “Just around the time that the nature of the dilemma crossed the border from impersonal to personal, I
would see your amygdala and related brain circuits … light up…. But in a psychopath, I would see only darkness” (Dutton: 3). This is unsurprising given the way in which psychopaths are often considered to have a decreased sense of emotional investment in others. The emotion center of the brain is disengaged, presenting the shallow emotions and lack of empathy cited by Robert Hare as key psychopathic symptoms (Hare: 34).

Hare’s description of psychopathic tendencies, particularly shallow emotion and lack of empathy, helps to flush out Greene’s findings. Hare likens the psychopath’s investment in others to investment in possession of personal property; he claims that they are “indifferent to the rights and suffering” but can maintain ties to individuals the way you or I maintain ties to our computers and stereos (Hare: 45). Moreover, Hare explains the emotions of psychopaths as “incomplete, shallow, largely cognitive in nature, and without the physiological turmoil or 'coloring'” (Hare: 56). In other words, the psychopath’s relation to the world and, consequently, to moral decision making is disconnected from emotional hotspots, including the ability to relate to others as more than mere objects. This is why the psychopath has no qualms when faced with the decision to push the fat man onto the tracks because the man is not any different to the psychopath than the switch is — the psychopath likely sees the two cases as completely interchangeable, and sees himself as being presented with the same problem twice.

What is interesting for our purposes is that the psychopaths involved in Greene’s analysis came to the same conclusions as others in the impersonal case, with similar brain activity which Greene and Dutton identify as cold empathy. Despite their emotional detachment, psychopaths' ability to reason and make rational decisions to normal people's, particularly in utilitarian tasks which rely
more heavily on impersonal calculation than emotional intuition. While locked out of the sentimental empathy for the fat man that causes hesitation in the personal case, psychopaths nonetheless display a rational understanding that in a decision with a 5:1 ratio, there is a clear and obvious “right” conclusion. The question then becomes not whether they have the capacity to make moral decisions but whether psychopaths can reasonably be said to be motivated to make them.

The psychopath’s ability to make rational moral decisions through cold empathy is one thing but their motivation to do so is another. What reasons can a psychopath give for choosing to make moral decisions if they are not emotionally invested in the well-being of others? The response, “Because it is right.” or “Because it is good.” falls short for the psychopath because, the argument is, they are unable to appreciate rightness or goodness adequately because of their emotional detachment from these values. There is no reason for the psychopath to do anything about the trolley car situation in either case because they lack respect for the intrinsic value of the lives of the individuals involved, be they five people or one. The psychopath would feel motivated, Hare implies, only if at least one occupant to be of egocentric worth to them in some other way, either as their possession or representing some instrumental use. But in Greene’s experiment, none of these conditions was present to inform the psychopath’s decision. To make sense of why this group came to the same conclusion as others in the impersonal case, it is reasonable to argue that the choice of saving five was simply the result of the psychopathic participants wishing to “pass” the test or impress their tester. This aligns with Hare’s depiction of a glib, superficial and grandiose attention-seeker looking to establish himself as superior and successful (Hare: 35).
This has a serious implication for the moral responsibility of psychopaths. If it is the case that Greene’s psychopathic participants gave “correct” answers for the trolley car decision based on the understanding that saving five is what is expected or deemed “right,” then it stands to reason that psychopaths are able to understand, albeit in a maladjusted way, basic moral rules. Despite their lack of internal personal motivation and emotional investment, they perceive “right” and “wrong” through the lens of accepted and desired conceptions of morality. When asked why he choose to save five, the psychopath may not truthfully answer, “Because it’s right.” relying on an internal feeling of respect for the intrinsic value of life as you or I would but he can answer, “Because it’s right.” based on a rational perception of a set of moral opinions individuals are expected to have, including that less death is better. This would be largely similar to the way we perceive legal rules that we may not agree with or fully understand. Despite our internal judgment or lack thereof, we are able to understand that these laws do exist — and consequently that we are responsible for disobedience. Psychopaths may not agree with or understand morality but they can be perceive its norms as evidenced by their capacity for cold empathy.

One consequence that must be faced if motivation and decision making occur as we have argued is that psychopaths do face a legitimate hurdle in more complex and intricate moral problems. As Greene has shown, the psychopath is quick to chuck the fat man to his doom on the tracks without so much as a neurological flicker, and this inability to access hot empathy can lead to serious complications in some of the more fastidious moral cases. Particularly if faced with competing prima facie duties, psychopaths' reliance on external determination of rightness leaves them with little to no resources for independent determination of the right course of
action. When they have to choose either to help a friend move or to help their seriously injured grandmother, psychopaths might assume that keeping their promise is the right thing to do as instructed by the moral rule-book and when criticized for abandoning an elderly woman in pain, they may shrug in legitimate confusion about the negative criticism. I take it that an intelligent and perceptive individual can gather the more complex details of morality, including which moral duties supersede others, and piece them together into a guide for making rational decisions. While such a process may strike one as highly implausible, much of ethical theory strives toward this exact goal.

What the above consequence does not impact is whether or not psychopaths can fairly be considered evil. While complex moral dilemmas may evade the psychopath’s capacities, the decisions he makes that we might judge 'evil' are rarely if ever of this kind. Evil is commonly attributed to those who consistently commit gross immoralities and the most horrendous acts, disobeying the obvious and clearly outlined moral rules easily perceivable by the psychopath. The intentional affliction of serious harm without any morally relevant justification may not faze the psychopath emotionally but they are more than capable of a rational understanding that such an act is considered morally wrong. For this reason the psychopath can be held morally responsible if they choose to act against the rule; I may feel wholly justified in buying illegal cigarettes because I’m a broke student and it saves me a significant amount of money, but this justification does not excuse me from the law I know is in place. Similarly with psychopaths, their justification does not excuse them from a moral law they are aware of and thus they are as capable of evil as any other person.
I am claiming that emotional investment is not required for moral responsibility in all cases. Dutton’s description of Greene’s findings shows empirical evidence that not all moral decision making includes capacity for emotional reactions and that both psychopaths and mentally healthy individuals utilize cold empathy instead of emotion in some cases. This challenges the idea that psychopaths are not morally responsible because of their emotional detachment. Extending this, I argue that moral decisions that would qualify one as evil can be correctly assessed by cold empathy, even if atypically, thus supporting the view that psychopaths can do evil.

Works cited:
