

Sympathy, Identity, and the Psychology of Psychopathy and Moral Atrocities

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Portrayals of people with psychopathic traits in philosophy, psychology, and popular culture, tend to be painted in black and white, and with a broad brush. “The Psychopath” as so called is pictured as a person displaying a superficial veneer of intelligent charm, despite an inner capacity to perpetrate acts of horrifying violence and cruelty. These acts are so immoral and may seem so inhumane as to be almost unimaginable, prompting us to ask what kind of person could ever do such a thing, and to answer that it could only be a moral monster, a person of essentially evil and depraved character. We draw a clear line between us and them. The Psychopath is set apart from the rest of us by their immorality and inhumanity.

Against this background picture, Andrea Glenn notes at the outset of her refreshingly nuanced paper that most individuals display a mixture of character traits. What does this mean? We attribute character traits based on beliefs, desires, emotions, and actions. Consider, for instance, sympathy – we typically attribute sympathy when a person expresses concern or acts to alleviate another’s suffering, because they believe the other to be harmed in some way, and are moved by feelings of care and compassion.¹ This kind of response to another’s suffering must be relatively reliable to warrant the attribution of a character trait: a single occasion in which it is manifest is not enough. But, at the same time, it need not be wholly reliable. Even sympathetic people sometimes fail to display sympathy when it would be fitting, for all variety of reasons. For example, perhaps they are angry with the person suffering, whether justifiably or not; or perhaps a less positive character trait they also possess, like arrogance or some form of rigidity, gets in the way; or perhaps they are just having a bad day. People have different characters, with different mixtures of positive and negative traits; but, additionally, these traits, whether positive or negative, are never perfectly reliable. No matter how much our character is weighted towards the

¹ Thus understood, sympathy is closely aligned with empathy. The distinction between them is not sharp, but sympathy typically involves *feeling for* another, while empathy involves *feeling with* another. With empathy, the care and compassion felt towards another is usually taken to stem from a grasp of their experience as if from the first-person perspective, allowing the empathizer to identify with the other person, taking up their point of view. With sympathy, it is often taken to result less from identification, and more from a third-person perspective on the other. But the two attitudes are not easy to distinguish, in part because the line between grasping another’s experience from the first-person as opposed to the third-person perspective is not sharp, and in part because both in any case involve an affective response that embodies concern for the other, as a result of this grasp. In what follows, I speak of sympathy, as it is the broader attitude of the two.

positive, there will yet be negative traits within us and occasions when our positive traits fail to manifest themselves.

People with psychopathic traits have characters that lie at the extreme end of the spectrum, strongly weighted away from the positive and towards the negative. But as with any mental disorder that is diagnosed by a collection of polythetic criteria, there is great diversity among people who receive the diagnosis (McMurran and Howard 2009). Different people have different negative traits, and people can have greater or fewer positive traits alongside the negative ones. I have not worked clinically with anyone who has received a diagnosis of psychopathy, but I have worked with people with personality disorder who appeared to lack sympathy, but who with time came to manifest it, exhibiting genuine care and compassion towards others. Of course, this observation does not determine whether the capacity for sympathy was present all along, but, for whatever reason, was not exercised; or whether it was learned and developed through therapy; or whether, perhaps, the truth contains a bit of both.² What it does however suggest is that at least that some people who appear to reliably lack sympathy can come to reliably manifest it, whatever the means by which this change occurs. Part of what is obscured by the black and white caricature of The Psychopath, and made visible by the cautiousness inherent in Glenn's discussion, is the complexity of human character and how it can wax and wane – for bad and for good.

In what follows, I aim to take some tentative steps towards understanding this complexity, by bringing out a striking similarity between Glenn's analysis of the capacity for violence and cruelty in those with psychopathic traits, and Jonathan Glover's analysis of the capacity to perpetrate large-scale moral atrocities in the form of war, massacre, and genocide in his book *Humanity: a Moral History of the 20th Century*. I will conclude by suggesting we should indeed follow Glenn's lead, and reject this black and white caricature of The Psychopath.

Immoral actions in individuals with psychopathic traits

What explains the perpetration of acts of violence and cruelty by those with psychopathic traits? One common answer is that *they don't understand that such acts are wrong*. In effect, immorality is explained away through ignorance. However, Glenn is appropriately sceptical that people with psychopathic traits have a significant and generalized impairment in the capacity to grasp moral principles or to make moral judgments: she argues that the empirical evidence suggests these traits are intact and that they know right from wrong.³ Of

² A recent study suggests it may well be a bit of both: people with a diagnosis of psychopathy show reduced activation in brain regions plausibly associated with feeling for or with another person, except when they are explicitly instructed to do so, which results in more typical patterns of activation. This suggests the capacity for sympathy is present, but is less spontaneously exercised compared to people who do not have the diagnosis (Meffert et al. 2013).

³ Glenn's scepticism is based on her interpretation of experimental studies; for a review, see Schaich Borg and Sinnott-Armstrong (2013); for complimentary finding based on a set of qualitative interviews with offenders held in Broadmoor, a high security psychiatric hospital in the UK, see Part I of Jonathan Glover's *Alien Landscapes* (2014).

course, that does not mean that their moral thinking is in no way compromised. Given their evident capacity for immorality, clearly it is: we should expect there to be not only some differences, but indeed some impoverishment, in moral thought. Glenn's point is rather that there is limited evidence of a general impairment in moral cognition. In her view, the explanation of the perpetration of acts of violence and cruelty is more likely to depend on a different pair of psychological features.

On the one hand, people with psychopathic traits show a reduced concern for others – in other words, they appear to lack sympathy, broadly conceived.⁴ Glenn cites evidence for reduced emotion-related activation in the ventromedial prefrontal cortex and the amygdala. She suggests this may underlie a shallowness of affective experience which has an impact both on self-directed and other-directed emotions: because people with psychopathic traits are less fearful of harm to themselves, they may not fully appreciate the effects of their harmful actions on others or feel distress at others' distress. They just don't feel much, for themselves or for others.

On the other, Glenn cites evidence that people with psychopathic traits show a reduced sense of moral identity, which has been found to be associated with moral behaviour. Self-identity is of course a complicated construct, on the one hand typically reflecting evidence stemming from a person's past behaviour and the messages they have received from significant others as well as society at large; and on the other conscious acts of self-identification, alongside aspirations, ideals, and a person's hopes for themselves. Self-identity can therefore be both responsive to facts about who one is and how one has been perceived, while also shaping those very facts. A sense of moral identity may therefore motivate moral behaviour both out of a sense *that one is a moral person* and out of a sense *that one cares about being a moral person – that is the kind of person one wants to be*. Given that people with psychopathic traits do not report that moral traits are central to their conception of themselves, Glenn suggests that they may therefore lack this kind of motivation to be moral.

Glenn's emphasis on reduced sympathy and moral identity as central to explaining how people with psychopathic traits are able to perpetrate acts of violence and cruelty is not only empirically founded but also genuinely intuitive. But strikingly, these are also the fundamental psychological features identified by Jonathan Glover as constituting the moral resources which serve to restrain violence and cruelty in us all, and which are eroded in war, massacre, and genocide.

Large-scale moral atrocities

⁴ Many studies speak of empathy rather than sympathy, but the intended difference between them is often not made clear, and the evidence often points to impairments in both as typically understood. For this reason, I continue to speak of sympathy, broadly conceived, for the purposes of this commentary. See fn 1.

Glover's book *Humanity: a Moral History of the 20th Century* documents in painstaking detail some of the large-scale horrors that humans have perpetrated over the course the 20th Century, including what happened during the First World War, in Stalin's Russia, in Nazi Germany, when the atomic bomb was dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, during Mao's Cultural Revolution, when the village of My Lai was massacred by US troops during the Vietnam War, in Phnom Penh under the Khmer Rouge, and, more recently, in Rwanda, Bosnia, and Kosovo. Glover cites evidence that, between 1900 and 1989, war killed 86 million people.⁵

Suppose we ask, of the human species, the same kind of question we are prone to ask of people with psychopathic traits: what kind of species could do these things to each other? Glover's answer is that the capacity for violence and the love of cruelty is a basic part of our nature, which must be restrained – if we are not to commit horrific acts – by a rival but equally basic part of us compromising in large part the capacity for sympathy and moral identity. These are our moral resources, which protect us from the monsters we harbour within (2012, p. 7). But violence and cruelty can be fed, and sympathy and moral identity eroded, by a range of factors. These include, but are not restricted to: personal and group experiences of humiliation, powerlessness, degradation and disrespect; social and political structures which use nationalism and propaganda to foster division between groups and portray other groups as lesser in human and moral status; our propensity to get trapped in cycles of anger and fear which escalate aggression and threaten pride; contexts and cultures which normalize violence and cruelty, sometimes simply through routine familiarity, and which may in addition punish expressions of sympathy or moral identity while striving to cultivate 'hardness'; and illusions of collective responsibility for wrongs perpetrated against us by the enemy side alongside failures to take responsibility for wrongs perpetrated by our side, especially when our own individual part in these wrongs may be small or at a distance.

What is suggested by the fact that both Glenn and Glover appeal to failures of sympathy and moral identity to explain our capacity for violence and cruelty? A large number of people are fairly directly implicated in the 20th Century atrocities described by Glover, which provide staggering examples of the worst of things that humans do to each other, including the brutal torture, rape, and mass murder of men, women, and children. It is extremely unlikely that all of those implicated are people who should be diagnosed with psychopathy. Indeed, part of the power of Glover's book that it makes clear and compelling the idea that many of those implicated would not have perpetrated these or any similar acts, if they had not found themselves in contexts where they were affected by the kinds of factors identified above that eroded their moral restraints.

⁵ According to Stephen Pinker in *The Better Angels of Our Nature: The Decline in Violence in History and Its Causes*, these numbers may in fact represent progress if indeed killing and other forms of violence have declined since the Enlightenment.

This may give momentary pause, causing us to wonder whether, in truth, any one of us could perpetrate these acts, if we found ourselves in such contexts. Alexander Solzhenitsyn eloquently expresses this thought in *The Gulag Archipelago*: 'If only it were all so simple! If only there were evil people somewhere insidiously committing evil deeds, and it were necessary only to separate them from the rest of us and destroy them. But the line dividing good and evil cuts through the heart of every human beingit is after all only because of the way things worked out that they were the executioners and we weren't' (1974, p. 168). But, although there may be value in asking ourselves how certain we can be that, in similar circumstances, we would not perpetrate these acts, it does not follow from the point that those who did would not have if they not found themselves in these contexts, that any one of us would if we found ourselves in the same or similar contexts. Consider that, even in these contexts, some people retained sympathy and a sense of moral identity and chose to help victims, often at great personal cost.

However, even if many people are not capable of perpetrating such atrocities, Glover's general point does raise some important and related questions about people with psychopathic traits who are. One question is whether the kinds of past and present circumstances in which such people have lived are, like the 20th Century historical contexts Glover explores, likely to contain the kinds of factors he identifies as eroding sympathy and a sense of moral identity. Another is how essential or rigid these traits are – to use Solzhenitsyn's metaphor, could the line dividing good from evil cut through their hearts differently?

Psycho-socio-economic adversity

Although there is a genetic component to all personality disorder (Jang and Vernon 2001), it is also associated with extreme childhood mistreatment, including physical and sexual abuse and emotional cruelty and neglect, alongside a range of other factors such as parental psychopathology and substance misuse, bullying at school, institutional care, poverty, migration, and indeed war itself (Paris 2001). In addition, as Glenn notes, high levels of psychopathic traits in particular are associated with childhood physical neglect, having an uninvolved father, low family income, and criminal offending in the family. Qualitative research based on interviews with men with a history of severe criminal offending and who were detained in the high-security hospital Broadmoor – all of whom had antisocial personality disorder, and some of whom were above the threshold for diagnosis with psychopathy – suggests in addition that they were often victims of violence as well as terrible emotional abuse as children, including extreme forms of degradation and humiliation. Put bluntly, they did not experience care or love when young, but the opposite (Glover 2014). My own, limited, clinical experience confirms this narrative. It is also the case that collective clinical wisdom suggests that offenders with antisocial personality disorder have often been raised in families where the parenting style is strict, rigid, and authoritarian, and where punishments are liberally and inconsistently used – precisely the

opposite to the kinds of parenting styles identified by Glover as predisposing people to retain sympathy and a sense of moral identity (2012, p. 382).

Extreme childhood mistreatment alongside the other factors identified surely represent an obstacle – if not always an insurmountable one – to developing many positive traits, including sympathy for others and a sense of one's own goodness and moral identity. It is worth asking whether, if people with psychopathic traits had grown up in different contexts, they might have fewer such traits and more moral resources to draw on.

Anti-essentialism about negative character traits

The majority of persistent criminal offenders not only desist from crime over time but also employ what Shadd Maruna calls a 'redemption script' in his book *Making Good: How Ex-Convicts Reform and Rebuild their Lives*. Redemption scripts are personal narratives that help ex-offenders to make sense of their experience as a person who was once a criminal, but who has now left that behind them. They tend to posit a core self who was led astray by various forces and influences outside of the person's control: the offender eventually returns to their rightful path, partially because they had within them a 'good self' all along, partially through their own hard work, and partially through changed life circumstances and the help of others who believe in them. Redemption scripts contrast with the 'condemnation scripts' more typical of those who do not desist, which tend to portray a self who is bad in its core, thereby precluding the possibility of the offender believing that they are the kind of person who not only is but could be morally good.

How essential or rigid is a lack of sympathy or sense of moral identity within those with psychopathic traits? The honest answer to this question is that we do not at present begin to know, even putting aside the fact noted above that there is likely to be great diversity within this group of people. Glenn discusses various promising treatment possibilities, noting in particular the success of a treatment programme for incarcerated delinquent youth with psychopathic traits that uses relatively immediate, highly responsive positive reinforcement for good behaviour, as opposed to negative reinforcement for bad behaviour (Caldwell 2013). Although it is important to be clear that the mechanisms for change are not known and so the following is purely speculative, perhaps part of the success of this programme rests not only in incentivizing good behaviour, but also in thereby enabling the youth to see themselves as people capable of being good. The programme may offer a supportive environment for the development of a sense of moral identity, distinctly unlike the typical childhood environment of men with antisocial personality disorder described above.

As noted above, I have witnessed the emergence of sympathy in therapeutic contexts, when it had not been evident before. Sympathy tends to be naturally positively reinforced, through the response it engenders towards the sympathizer in others. This may be particularly true in therapy groups, which deliberately aim to promote prosocial behaviour.

But more broadly, when even a single instance of moral behaviour, whatever its cause or motivation, is recognized and reinforced, it offers a chink of light for the development of a sense of moral identity. For, it shows that the person is capable of moral action, at least in certain contexts, and so can develop and grow this capacity, securing and extending its scope – especially if they are adequately supported to do so.

The caricature of The Psychopath

Whatever we ultimately discover about the neurobiological underpinnings of psychopathy, the caricature of The Psychopath typically serves a rhetorical and emotional function. It serves to draw a line between people with psychopathic traits and the rest of us, ostracizing and dehumanising them, while failing to acknowledge the capacity for violence and cruelty that can become unleashed in many people, given the presence of certain triggering factors. It is also a condemnation script if ever there was one. In so far as it paints a picture of a person whose character is fixed as essentially evil and deviant, it precludes anyone who holds this view of a person – including the person themselves – from believing in and working towards the possibility of character change, shifting the balance of positive and negative traits. Of course, we may not ultimately succeed in developing interventions that reduce levels of psychopathic traits in many of those who display them. But we do not at present have empirical evidence or a priori reason to believe that in general this is never possible; and so we cannot know, of any particular individual, that their character is immutably immoral. There is therefore reason to reject the caricature of The Psychopath and the attitudes it typically engenders in us, and to distinguish between immoral actions and immoral characters. *Condemnation of actions* that cause terrible harm and the demand for responsibility and accountability of perpetrators may often be appropriate. But these can proceed apart from an additional *condemnation of character* as essentially evil and irredeemable, alongside associated practices of ostracization, stigmatization, and affective blame (Pickard 2011, 2014; Lacey and Pickard 2013, 2015).

Glenn's article models this aspiration, by painting our current empirical understanding of psychopathy, and what it suggests with respect to responsibility and treatment, with a resolutely grey palette. Rather than ask how anyone can do such terrible, unimaginable, inhuman things, perhaps we should pause, take a long hard look at human nature, and ask instead how it is possible to restrain the capacity for violence and cruelty that pervades our species. Glenn's pairing of sympathy and a sense of moral identity may well be key, both within clinical populations and in the population at large. If that is right, then rather than caricature and condemn people with psychopathic traits, we should aim to develop clinical as well as social and political interventions and structures that promote and protect these invaluable resources in us all.⁶

⁶ I would like to thank Walter Sinnott-Armstrong for extremely helpful comments.

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