

PHIL 480: Seminar in the History of Philosophy
Building Moral Character: Neo-Confucianism and Moral Psychology

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[Handout #9]

Robert J. Blair, A Cognitive Developmental Approach to Morality: Investigating the Psychopath

§ Discussion Question:

1. Are psychopaths the result of poor parenting, child abuse, or are they genetic?
2. What are the characteristics of a psychopath?
3. Is psychopathy a character trait?
4. Can psychopaths be modified?

§ Main Goals

1. To show that psychopaths are significantly more likely to fail to make the moral/conventional distinction, and they are significantly less likely to make reference to the welfare of others.
2. To argue that VIM is a prerequisite for the development of morality.

I. Psychopath

1. An early onset of extremely aggressive behaviour that is not tempered by any sense of guilt or empathy with the victim.
2. This disorder can be described in developmental terms.

Blair's theory:

___ Psychopathy is caused by a dysfunction in an innate mechanism, called VIM, which causes us to experience distress cues as aversive and will terminate or avoid behaviors that cause such distress in others.

II. VIM: Violence-inhibition mechanism

VIM = a cognitive mechanism which, when activated by non-verbal communications of distress (i.e., sad facial expression, the sight and sound of tears), initiates a withdrawal response; a schema will be activated predisposing the individual to withdraw from the attack.

e. g. When a child displayed a sad facial expression when resisting another child's attempt to take a possession, the aggressor child usually terminated his/her demands and allowed the original possessor to continue playing "for a relatively long time".

Claim: VIM is a prerequisite for the development of three aspects of "morality":

- (i) the moral emotions (e.g., sympathy, guilt, remorse and empathy),
- (ii) the inhibition of violent action and
- (iii) the moral/conventional distinction.

(i). Moral Emotions

Empathy:

1. Empathy = "an affective response more appropriate to someone else's situation than to one's own" (Hoffman, 1987, p. 48).
2. Empathy is a product of role taking; role taking is to represent another's internal state.
3. Empathy is thus an emotional response to a representation of another's internal state.

Claim:

1. During normal development, individuals will witness other individuals displaying distress cues resulting in the activation of VIM.
2. The activation of VIM results in a withdrawal response which will directly interrupt ongoing behaviour.
3. Perceived distress in others generates an aversive emotional reaction that can be measured as physiological arousal in observers.

(ii). The Inhibition of Violent Action

Claim:

1. The normally developing child will be negatively reinforced by the distress cues every time he engages in any aggressive activity.
2. Over time, the child will be less likely, *ceteris paribus*, to engage in violent actions.

Two proposals:

1. Turiel: An individual who has never experienced pain would not make the moral/conventional distinction. ← However, there is no reason to believe the psychopaths do not experience pain.
2. Blair: VIM is a prerequisite for the development of the moral/conventional distinction

(iii). Moral versus social transgression

___ Moral transgressions: defined by their consequences for the rights and welfare of others. An act is bad if it results in the distress of the victim.

___ Social conventional transgressions: violations of the behavioral uniformities that structure social interactions within social systems. Removal of the rule, by modifying the transgression context, and the transgression should no longer be judged as bad to do.

§ A Developmental Account of Morality

1. VIM causes the development of the moral emotions.
2. There are two alternative accounts of the development of VIM: either as the maturation of a physiological structure or as the result of the experience of certain early socialization events.

§ A Developmental Account of Psychopathic Disorder

1. The absence of VIM is conceptualized as either a consequence of a physiological deficit or the absence of early socialization experiences.
2. The lack of VIM will result in the absence of the moral emotions → no sense of guilt or empathy with the victim → psychopathy
3. A lack of VIM does not of itself motivate an individual to commit aggressive acts. A lack of VIM just means that one source of the interruption of violent action is lost.
4. The development of the psychopath is represented as a consequence of the lack of VIM together with either unspecified cognitive or environmental factors.

Two predictions for this causal developmental theory:

1. Individuals lacking VIM should fail the moral/conventional distinction, and
2. Individuals lacking VIM should fail to internally generate moral justifications.

Study results:

- (1) While the non-psychopaths made the moral/conventional distinction, the psychopaths did not.
- (2) Psychopaths treated conventional transgressions like moral transgressions (as authority independent); and
- (3) Psychopaths were much less likely to justify their items with reference to *victim's welfare*.

Additional Argument from Autism:

1. Children with autism lack the ability to do role taking or have empathy.
2. However, children with autism do make the moral/conventional distinction.
3. Therefore, neither role taking nor empathy can be prerequisites for successful performance on the moral/conventional distinction task.
4. There is no reason to believe that children with autism lack VIM and,
5. Therefore, their demonstration of the moral/conventional distinction is not surprising.

