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Conscience as the rational deficit of psychopaths

Marijana Vujošević

I develop here a Kantian framework for understanding conscience in order to examine whether moral flaws of psychopaths are traceable to their dysfunctional conscience. When understood as the reflective capacity for moral self-assessment that triggers certain emotional reactions, conscience proves to be a fruitful tool for explaining psychopathic moral incompetence. First, I show how the unrealistic moral self-assessment of psychopaths affects their competence in judging moral issues and in being motivated to act morally. I then highlight how focusing on this specific rational deficit of psychopaths significantly modifies the status of rationalism within the contemporary dispute as to whether psychopathy supports sentimentalism exclusively.

Keywords: Conscience; Moral Self-Assessment; Psychopaths; Rational Deficit

1. Introduction

Psychopaths are commonly portrayed as people without consciences.¹ Even if we weaken this claim by stating that they possess an underdeveloped conscience, we still need to explain whether this impairment affects their competence to judge moral issues and their motivation to act morally, and if so how. To adjudicate whether their moral flaws are traceable to their dysfunctional consciences, we need first to determine what is meant by conscience.

In spite of the common portrayal of psychopaths, most psychologists and philosophers do not find the link between a psychopath's conscience and moral dysfunction worthy of examination. Although Robert Hare entitled his (1993) book "Without Conscience: The Disturbing World of Psychopaths Among Us," he addresses conscience only briefly and does not mention it as one of the diagnostic criteria in his *Psychopathy Checklist—Revised*.² Another leading expert on psychopathy, James Blair, does not pay close attention to conscience in his research either.

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When thinking about the nature of the deficient psychopathic conscience, we find ourselves involved in a current discussion between rationalists and sentimentalists. Although they hardly ever mention conscience, the main point of disagreement between these two groups concerns the underlying causes of psychopathic moral failures. Sentimentalists are at pains to show that the figure of the psychopathic amoralist is evidence in support of their thesis that emotions are necessary or sufficient to make moral judgments. Rationalistically oriented authors point to rational impairments of psychopaths to show that it is not merely an emotional deficit that is responsible for psychopathic immoral behavior; they often pinpoint different rational impairments of psychopaths by invoking Immanuel Kant's moral theory.³

There are at least a few possible reasons why lack of conscience is neither thoroughly addressed, nor listed along with other psychopathic traits. We may think that the latter is due either to the assumption that there is a certain overlap between underdeveloped conscience and, most obviously, absence of guilt, or due to the belief that the psychopath's dysfunctional conscience is the more fundamental deficit that underlies some of the symptoms enumerated above.⁴ Authors might avoid discussing the issue of conscience in relation to psychopaths because it is often deemed too vague, and therefore inappropriate for research purposes.⁵

Drawing on a conception of conscience found in the work of Kant, I develop a theoretical framework to answer the question of what it means to claim that psychopaths have a dysfunctional conscience. According to my account, this means that their reflective capacity for moral self-assessment, which triggers self-evaluative emotions, is significantly impaired. Psychopaths are well known for their unrealistic self-assessment and absence of guilt. I show that this Kantian model for understanding conscience supplies a new rationalist account of psychopaths' moral incompetence.

Section 2 contains an outline of Kant's conception of conscience.⁶ In section 3, I demonstrate that a Kantian account of psychopathic conscience can accommodate important evidence on psychopathy. When conscience is understood as the self-reflective activity that arouses certain emotions, the specific rational deficit unheeded in the current debate between rationalists and sentimentalists becomes fully visible. I identify this deficit in the body of empirical and theoretical literature on psychopathy to show that it offers an explanation of psychopathic moral incompetence.⁷ Psychopaths' underdeveloped capacity for moral self-assessment, which is, in turn, responsible for their lack of proper self-knowledge, can explain both why they do not make genuine moral judgments and why they are morally indifferent.⁸

In the last section, I highlight how addressing this specific rational deficit modifies the status of rationalism within the contemporary dispute as to whether psychopathy supports sentimentalism alone. Paying closer attention to psychopaths' impaired moral self-reflection puts a new tool in the hands of rationalists to defend their position against the objections raised by sentimentalists. A telling example is Shaun Nichols' (2002) criticism: He claims that rationalists fail both to explain what kind of rational capacity underlies the capacity for making the moral/conventional distinction and to determine the cognitive mechanism that psychopaths lack, which is needed for

the correlation between moral judgment and moral motivation. Nichols argues against rationalist attempts to provide these explanations in terms of perspective-taking ability, general rational ability, or the idea that psychopaths just have to be convinced of the claims of morality. By appealing to a Kantian conception of conscience, I reply to Nichols' arguments and demonstrate how rationalists can account for that cognitive mechanism. Additionally, I turn to some other available views to show that the account based on conscience introduces a novel way of defending rationalism.

2. A Kantian Conception of Conscience: Conscience as Moral Self-Appraisal

As a rule, philosophers involved in the debate regarding psychopaths and their amorality do not attach any importance to conscience. For instance, Jesse Prinz discusses instead the feelings of guilt. Some other authors pay closer attention to conscience by considering guilt as its constituent. In their developmental research on conscience, Kochanska and Aksan (2006) take account of three components: moral emotions, moral cognition, and moral conduct. In their view, guilt is the emotional component of conscience; the cognitive component of conscience is understood as a child's understanding of rules and standards of conduct. However, conscience can also be conceived as the emotional consciousness that intuitively provides us with normative moral knowledge, as if it were a kind of felt clue. According to Thagard and Finn, "conscience is a kind of moral intuition" that is both cognitive and emotional (2011, p. 150); it is, as they put it, "the internal sense of moral goodness or badness of one's actual or imagined conduct" (2011, p. 150). They understand conscience as a kind of special moral sense that somehow decides what is a morally right or wrong action.⁹

A Kantian model for understanding conscience is significantly different, and it provides a good basis for a well-elaborated conception of conscience that makes it possible to link up and clarify the key points needed to explain psychopaths' moral flaws. On the Kantian conception, conscience is the capacity of moral self-appraisal that triggers certain emotional responses. It is to be identified neither with a moral sense, nor with certain self-evaluative feelings. Kant holds that we are incapable of knowing through our feelings whether a particular action is morally right or wrong, and he does not identify conscience with guilt or relief. Rather, he describes it as the "inner judge of all free actions" and states that this "internal judge, as a person *having power*, pronounces the sentence of happiness and misery as the moral results of the deed" (MS 6: 438n).¹⁰ Conscience does not lead to the states of being contented or discontented with oneself for being sufficiently prudent or for not being prudent enough to escape the negative consequences of one's action; through moral blaming or acquitting, it links a particular feeling with an action.

Conscience, in Kant's definition, involves two qualifications:

1. The capacity to become conscious of the rightfulness or wrongfulness of all of one's actions.
2. The inner standing of the capacity for judging, as a judge, to give an account of the authorizations of our actions. (NF 18: 579)

Given the *first qualification of conscience* that Kant offers, conscience is a kind of *moral self-awareness*. Since conscience is not to be understood as moral sense, this moral self-awareness cannot be the source of our moral knowledge of right and wrong; rather, it presupposes this knowledge. Without conscience we would then be able to know which actions are right and wrong *in general*, but we would still not be capable of becoming aware that *our own* actions are moral or immoral.

This moral self-awareness of conscience activates in us *moral feelings*, which could be understood as comfort and discomfort. Kant suggests that “any consciousness of obligation depends upon moral feeling to make us aware of the constraint present in the concepts of duty” (MS 6: 399). Moral feeling makes us aware of the constraints required for understanding that we have duties to act in accordance with the moral law. For Kant, conscience and moral feeling are the subjective conditions of moral receptivity which are necessary for being “put under obligation” (MS 6: 399); he turns to them to explain how we compel ourselves to act morally. In his terminology, conscience enables us to set and adopt *morally obligatory ends* that should be distinguished from merely self-seeking ends. The adoption of morally obligatory ends (or duties) and their constraints requires effort. Without conscience or the ability to constrain ourselves to adopt these ends by forming moral maxims, all of us would be amoral egoists: we would not be capable of realizing that moral standards hold for us. We feel the constraints only when we really *apply* the moral law to ourselves, adopting those action principles that ought to govern our choices. Kantian conscience might be understood in terms of our responsiveness to the constraints required by this application. It *makes us responsive* to the constraining power of the moral law or capable of *self-constraint*. The kind of self-control that is at issue here is primarily meant to prevent negative influences of our psychological conditions on our maxim-formation and adoption, such as our selfish interests and passions.

Kant also adds the *second qualification of conscience* to his definition. Conscience is the awareness of rightness or wrongness of actions that is *also a judge*. It is not only that conscience stimulates moral feelings; it also triggers feelings of guilt or relief. When we become aware that one of our actions (either actual or possible) is right or wrong, we are in a *position to judge* whether or not we ought to hold ourselves accountable for the action in question. The judge is the one who is “authorized to impute” (MS 6: 227). Conscience is the ability to impute one’s own free actions to oneself. By way of appraising what lies in their control and what is causally determined for them, agents also judge whether or not they are the authors of their actions. Once agents think they are the ones who intentionally cause changes by their acts, they are in the position to attribute actions to themselves as blameworthy or blameless.

Additionally, Kant claims that conscience is “the moral faculty of judgment, passing judgment upon itself” (R 6: 185). On his view, judging actions happens through maxims, and in the judgments of conscience we not only judge our way of acting, but also our way of judging its rightness or wrongness. By appraising our actions, our conscience also judges whether or not we are, or have been, careful enough in our examination of whether our actions are morally right or wrong, more specifically, whether we have taken into consideration all relevant subjective, psychological

conditions under which our judgment concerning the rightness or wrongness of our action is exercised. These conditions, which arise from the peculiar psychological constitution of each of us, may include passions, habits, prejudices, or interests that influence our judging. It is through this examination that we test the impartiality of our judging—we judge the way we have formed (or are to form) our maxims. It is a kind of *assessment of our maxim-formation*. The underlying idea is that it is still possible to reduce the influence of various psychological conditions of our judging by undertaking careful self-examination. A closer look at the process of the construction and adoption of our maxims might help us realize that we would have let the principle of our action be determined by, for instance, our passion to dominate others and our tendency to please ourselves. It makes us aware of some morally unacceptable incentives for our actions or obstacles that we have to avoid if we are to form morally correct maxims.

We also check the degree of subjective validity of our judgments through the judgments of conscience. We question whether or not we really hold something to be true. From a Kantian perspective, being honest in screening various incentives for our own actions is necessary for acting *morally*, whereas merely accepting and following prescribed rules suffices only for a *legally* correct action (as Kant would label it). Instead of just accepting these rules, we have to become convinced that an action that we plan to undertake is not wrong.

This might be illustrated by Kant's example of an inquisitor "who has to pass judgment upon a so-called heretic" (R 6: 186). If he condemns this person to death, he merely follows the rules of the "historical and phenomenal faith." It is, however, unconscientious to act upon a conviction that "has no other grounds of proof except historical ones" (R 6: 186–187). By passively accepting something that, at that time, would be justified before the civil court, the inquisitor still fails to use his capacity of conscience, that is, to check whether or not his action would be approved before his *inner court*. In other words, the inquisitor does not do everything in his power to consider whether his belief is morally correct. His conscience does not properly approve or disapprove of incentives. Even if his action appears to be in conformity with what would be considered socially acceptable at that time, his motives, and consequently his action, are not strictly speaking moral. Conscience leads us to differently grounded convictions than that of the inquisitor.

It would also be much easier for the inquisitor than for a conscientious person to *shift the blame* to the spiritual authority whose laws he has accepted without any closer examination of the grounds of his own beliefs. Once we apply moral standards to our own case and judge ourselves to be guilty—when we have become aware of the inconsistency between, on the one hand, our action and our insufficient effort to choose to act morally and, on the other hand, moral requirements—we cannot avoid hearing the voice of our inner judge, which in turn affects our self-image. Since changing our self-image for the worse usually elicits pain, we have a kind of motive to act morally in order to eradicate the unpleasant state in which we find ourselves.¹¹

Kant believes that all these tests or instances of self-cognition are needed because of our deep-seated tendency to self-deception. We have to become aware not only of the

rightness or wrongness of our own actions, but also of some psychological conditions that affect our way of judging moral issues. This makes us capable of preventing the negative influence of these conditions on our maxim-formation and ready to accept responsibility for our actions. On his view, conscience is necessary for moral agency, for we reflect upon ourselves and assess our own moral worth through its activities.

3. Psychopaths and Moral Self-Assessment

By reflecting on some findings suggested by current research on psychopathy and discussions found in the literature on moral psychology, I show here that the Kantian theory of conscience is both in line with empirical evidence and helpful for understanding psychopaths' moral incompetence.

3.1. Unrealistic Self-Assessment and Self-Evaluative Feelings

On a Kantian conception of conscience, stating that psychopaths possess dysfunctional consciences does not imply that they have difficulty with having moral intuitions or that their moral sense is impaired. Strictly speaking, neither does this say that they lack feelings of guilt or remorse, although absence of such feelings may be seen as an indication that there is something wrong with their conscience. The claim that their conscience does not function properly rather means that their capacity for *moral self-assessment* is deficient. It also means that the problem psychopaths consistently exhibit in experiencing moral self-evaluative feelings is caused by problems with self-reflection. That is, they tend not to hold themselves accountable for a given action, and they tend to believe that they do not deserve to experience feelings of guilt. As is explained below, the origin of their deficits regarding self-evaluative feelings is their poor self-reflective judging capacity.

Discussion of *unrealistic self-assessment* is commonplace in the literature on psychopaths, albeit not specifically in relation to conscience and its significance for morality. For example, Hare gives an apt illustration to show that psychopaths have "a narcissistic and grossly inflated view of their self-worth and importance":

When another psychopath, in prison for a variety of crimes including robbery, rape and fraud, was asked if he had any weaknesses, he replied, "I don't have any weaknesses, except maybe I am too caring." On a 10-point scale he rated himself "an all-round 10." (1993, p. 38)

Surprisingly, closer attention has not yet been paid to the link between unrealistic self-assessment and problems with experiencing guilt or remorse.¹² In his recent paper, Gary Watson only mentions psychopaths' "grandiose sense of self-worth" to explain that it does not contradict his claim that psychopaths lack self-regard (2013, p. 282). This link has not been seriously considered even by some philosophers who invoke Kant's moral theory to argue against the claim that psychopaths' amorality supports sentimentalism. For instance, [Maibom](#) brings up the difficulties with self-assessment

demonstrated by psychopaths for the sake of her argument that psychopaths face considerable problems with means-end reasoning, but she discusses neither their ability to assess their own moral worth nor the emotional responses induced by this self-appraisal (2005, p. 253). Kennett does not address this link either, even though, while drawing a distinction between the degree of moral competence of psychopaths and that of autistic individuals, she mentions that the latter do seem capable of reflection and introspection regarding their own condition, and that, unlike psychopaths, they display moral feeling, a sense of duty, or conscience (2002, pp. 349–357). She aims to show that psychopaths are constitutively incapable of having moral feelings, but conscience appears to be irrelevant to her argument.

Typically, those who argue against rationalism mention neither self-assessment nor conscience. Prinz argues that guilt is elicited by the action of stealing (2011, p. 215); this happens because we have a disposition to have emotions of blame towards ourselves whenever we steal. Blaming and praising ourselves are therefore determined by the underlying emotional dispositions that cause certain emotional reactions in us. With regard to our self-assessment, then, we are merely passive; guilt does not rest on a straightforward belief that one is guilty, as rationalists would have us think.¹³ Nichols (2002) believes that rationalists fail to account for a rational deficit in psychopaths that is intimately related to their emotional shortcomings.

Even Blair et al. (1995), who conclude that psychopaths have a specific problem with attributing guilt because they attribute guilt to other people less than controls, do not see this problem as closely related to their reflective ability to assess themselves. In Blair's view, guilt and other moral emotions are aroused by the activation of a physiological mechanism. However, Gudjonsson and Roberts (1983) found that psychopaths have a problem with the attribution of guilt to themselves, suggesting that *guilt in psychopaths does not markedly increase with transgression*, as happens in normal subjects.¹⁴ Hence, the problem seems to lie in the very link between a specific situational moral transgression and guilt. What is impaired in psychopaths, then, is the capacity needed to connect unpleasant feelings with some of their own misdeeds (either committed or merely contemplated). As suggested, this capacity is Kantian conscience. Through the activities of conscience we reflect upon ourselves and assess the moral worth of our own actions; by affecting our self-image, its verdicts trigger feelings of guilt or relief. But this does not seem to hold for psychopaths. No matter what they do, the way they see themselves remains the same. In keeping with this, there is evidence to suggest that individuals with a greater degree of psychopathic traits are less likely to base their self-concept on moral traits (Glenn, Koleva, Iyer, Graham, & Ditto, 2010).

The proposed account is also supported by the results of a study of psychopathic personality traits, cognitive dissonance, and attitude change conducted by Murray, Wood, and Lilienfeld (2012). Participants were directly instructed or politely requested to lie to a fellow student that their abacus task performance was fun. The main hypothesis was affirmed: after lying, participants low in psychopathic traits exhibited classic cognitive dissonance effects, whereas participants high in psychopathic traits demonstrated less attitude change. The authors defined cognitive

dissonance as “the tension that arises when one is simultaneously aware of two inconsistent cognitions”; additionally, they explained that “dissonance may occur when we realize that we have, with little justification, acted contrary to our attitudes” (Murray, Wood, & Lilienfeld, 2012, p. 526). To reduce the tension, some participants convinced themselves that the task was enjoyable rather than boring, meaning that they had not really lied to their fellow student. Based on whether this attitude shift occurred or not, it was inferred that participants with high levels of psychopathic traits were less prone to experiencing tension after lying. The authors also argued that high-psychopathy participants experienced little or no guilt after lying and had no pressing need to diffuse or eliminate painful feelings afterwards by convincing themselves to believe something else (Murray, Wood, & Lilienfeld, 2012, p. 533).

To a certain extent, the result of this study supports Kennett’s point that psychopaths are insusceptible to cognitive dissonance (2010, p. 256). She argues that Kant’s conception of moral feeling prefigures and finds its support in the theory of cognitive dissonance. Moral feeling is the feeling of pleasure or displeasure that we acquire merely from being aware that our actions are consistent with or contrary to duty—it is equivalent either to the pleasant experience of consonance or harmony, when we become aware of the consistency among our cognitions, or to the unpleasant experience of dissonance aroused by our awareness of inconsistency (Kennett, 2010, p. 255). Unlike Kennett, the authors of the study just mentioned suggest that the cognitive dissonance might also be conceived as guilt.

If we are to distinguish between feelings of guilt and discomfort aroused only by the awareness that one of our actions is wrong, then the latter would also be triggered by the awareness that we have not done everything that lies within our power to act morally. The Kantian approach to conscience accommodates both versions: by making us aware of the possible inconsistencies between our cognitions, conscience induces moral feeling and guilt. First, as it involves moral self-awareness, conscience is needed to stimulate our moral feelings. Whenever we become aware that our actions are consistent or inconsistent with moral demands, we feel pleasure or displeasure associated with given actions. Second, Kant also believed that conscience makes us feel guilty or relieved through its activity of blaming or acquitting.¹⁵ At this stage, an agent is not only aware of the rightness or wrongness of his or her action, but also comes to know whether or not he or she has acted morally, and whether or not it was in his or her power to act morally.¹⁶ Conscience, as the capacity for becoming conscious of the rightness or wrongness of our own actions, presupposes certain knowledge of right and wrong, leads to self-knowledge, and *makes us aware* of the inconsistencies among these cognitions by comparing the representation of what we ought to do with the representation of what we have done, are to do, or could do. In both cases, the proper functioning of conscience leads to cognitive dissonance. For instance, it does not permit us to shift certain beliefs to avoid feelings of guilt. If psychopaths are not prone to experiencing discomfort and guilt, then it is due to their dysfunctional conscience.

It is through the activities of conscience that the violation of moral norms or compliance with them affects us emotionally and that we are capable of holding

ourselves accountable. The moral incompetence of psychopaths is usually explained in terms of their moral indifference and failure to accept responsibility for their own actions. To elaborate further on these points, I shall now indicate how dysfunction of conscience is connected to psychopathic incompetence in judging moral issues.

3.2. *Incompetence in Judging Moral Issues*

As indicated, Kantian conscience presupposes certain knowledge of right and wrong and its proper functioning enables us to form the belief that an action we plan to undertake in a given real-life situation is morally right. The question whether or not psychopaths have moral knowledge and make genuine moral judgments is widely discussed.

Blair's famous study is used as evidence for the claim that psychopaths lack normative moral knowledge and the ability to pass genuine moral judgments. As [Blair, Mitchell, and Blair](#) summarize the results of empirical studies, when the rules prohibiting the transgression are removed, psychopaths, like other antisocial populations, are "far less likely to make the distinction between moral and conventional transgressions" (2005, p. 59). Such populations are "far less likely than comparison individuals to make reference to the victim of the transgression when justifying why moral transgressions are bad," and healthy individuals "still identify the moral transgression as less rule contingent and less under authority jurisdiction than conventional transgressions" (Blair, Mitchell, & Blair, 2005, p. 58).

Blair (1995) argues that this happens because psychopaths lack a violence inhibition mechanism (VIM); he holds that we inhibit what we are doing in the face of a victim's distress and experience empathy when this mechanism is activated. Since moral transgressions, unlike conventional ones, are taken by the transgressor to involve victims and to be paired with distress cues, understanding them is said to require the activation of VIM. Conventional wrongs are defined as transgressions only by the presence of rules and do not stimulate this activation. Additionally, Blair (1995, p. 5) claims that the activation requires pairings of distress cues with representations formed through role-taking. However, if these representations are trigger stimuli for VIM, then psychopaths' diminished role-taking ability might explain why they lack VIM and empathy.¹⁷

Blair's account can also be challenged on some other grounds, for instance, by questioning the presumption that all moral transgressions generate the sense of victim-related aversion.¹⁸ Importantly, the recent study by Aharoni, Sinnott-Armstrong, and Kiehl (2012) suggests that we do not have sufficient data to infer that psychopaths cannot make the moral/conventional distinction: when they are told that exactly half of the listed acts were pre-rated as morally wrong, they make the distinction just as well as other people. The authors claim therefore that psychopaths do not lack "a distinctively moral knowledge" (Aharoni, Sinnott-Armstrong, & Kiehl, 2012, p. 10).

Nevertheless, the existing way of defining the difference between the moral and the conventional may be questioned. It seems there is no rigid distinction between the

moral and the conventional, because it is often impossible to decide whether or not we should label an action as “moral” or as “conventional.” Even “talking in class,” which is the most commonly used example to explain conventional transgressions, might be seen as moral if, for instance, it is justified by referring to the classmates who wish to learn as much as possible, but are hindered by the one who talks. What is more, it has been claimed that there is no such general distinction at all, and that moral transgressions are not authority-independent (Shoemaker, 2011). The results of the study conducted by Kelly, Stich, Haley, Eng, and Fessler (2007) confirm the latter point: most of the participants did not judge harm transgressions to be authority independent.¹⁹ Since moral rules are generally thought to be independent of the authority of any individual or institution, this calls into question the way in which the difference is usually understood.

But there are also some other empirical findings that speak in favor of the claim that psychopaths know right from wrong. Consider, for example, a study in which Greene’s dilemmas are employed (Cima, Tonnaer, & Hauser, 2010). It suggests that psychopaths’ understanding of right and wrong is not different from normal subjects, i.e., psychopaths also judge impersonal cases as more permissible. Furthermore, psychopaths have even been reported to gain significantly higher scores than non-psychopaths on the Kohlberg scale of moral judgment (Link, Sherer, & Byrne, 1977). There are also studies that partly support the claim that psychopaths do not exhibit abnormalities in their moral reasoning. For instance, psychopaths are found to judge hypothetical moral scenarios just as others do. The difference has emerged specifically for the moral judgments of accidents—psychopaths have only judged actions with neutral intentions and harmful outcomes as less blameworthy (Young, Koenigs, Kruepke, & Newman, 2012). An older study shows that psychopaths’ answers regarding moral dilemmas track those of normal people, but only in a multiple-choice format (Simon, Holzberg, & Unger, 1951). To detect differences in judgment between psychopaths and non-psychopaths, the authors of this study posed the same questions in the multiple-choice and completion test. They concluded that psychopaths judge moral dilemmas differently from non-psychopaths only when no clues are offered to them:

The psychopathic girl has learned social values and is able to recognize them where they are overtly presented (multiple choice test), but where the psychopath is thrown upon her own resources in resolving a conflictual situation (completion test), these learned values are not readily available as guides. (Simon, Holzberg, & Unger, 1951, p. 147)

Taken together, these studies seem to suggest that psychopaths have at least knowledge of what is generally considered to be morally right or wrong and that they tend to judge moral issues similarly to other people, especially when cues are given to them. In other words, if there is any deficit in their moral reasoning, it is not so obvious as one would expect given their immoral behavior. Since the questions posed in almost all the studies are not cast in the first person, it appears that psychopaths are competent to judge which moral obligations other people have after all. While

claiming this, however, we should bear in mind the possibility that psychopaths in these studies sometimes give answers that they find socially desirable or acceptable and sometimes respond as if they were asked what they would do in a particular situation. It could then also be the case that psychopaths encounter unavoidable difficulties only while judging personal moral dilemmas—when the motivating force of recalcitrant inclinations is more evident and influences their way of judging more strongly.

The proposed Kantian conception of conscience helps us realize which aspect of psychopaths' general rational judging capacity is deficient and why they are said not to make genuine moral judgments: they know what moral standards are and seem to be capable of applying them correctly when judging other people's actions, but because of their deficient reflective capacity for moral self-appraisal, they still face insoluble problems when it comes to applying moral standards to their own case.

This explanation is perfectly in line with [Cleckley's](#) clinical observations: "the psychopath characteristically demonstrates unimpaired (sometimes excellent) judgment in appraising theoretical situations"; "so long as the test is verbal or otherwise abstract, so long as he is not a direct participant" a psychopath "shows that he knows his way about"; "he can offer wise decisions not only for others in life situations, but also for himself as long as he is asked what he would do (or should do, or is going to do)" (1976, p. 346). The results of Trevethan and Walker's (1989) study of hypothetical and real-life reasoning are in keeping with this picture. They found that there are significant group differences between psychopathic and non-psychopathic youths when it comes to *real-life* moral reasoning: when discussing dilemmas from their personal experience, psychopaths are much more oriented to their egoistic concerns.

If viewed from a Kantian angle, judging what is the morally right thing to do in a given situation happens through maxims, and conscience plays an important role in this process. Psychopaths' dysfunctional conscience might then be said to prevent them from adopting moral maxims, so that they can form just those maxims which, in Kant's terminology, can lead only to "legal" actions.²⁰ Put differently, because of their unrealistic moral self-assessment, psychopaths are not capable of giving themselves moral principles that ought to guide their choices. For this reason, they do not set and adopt moral ends.

As explained, Kantian conscience is meant to approve or disapprove motives and monitor the process of establishing maxims. By appraising our actions, it also judges the way we have formed (or are to form) our maxims. The claim is then that psychopaths cannot adopt moral principles because their conscience does not make them aware of the obstacles that stand in the way of forming these principles. Their conscience does not or does not properly monitor their way of adopting principles.

Psychopaths are indeed generally described as people who do not reflect on themselves much, and even when they do, their moral self-assessment is not normatively appropriate. Their underdeveloped capacity for moral self-assessment is responsible for their lack of proper self-knowledge. Without any careful moral reflection upon themselves—their psychological conditions, their actions, and their way of judging them—they fail to form morally correct principles of their actions. Moreover, it seems that psychopaths cannot play the role of a *competent moral judge*: they do not appropriately evaluate their psychological conditions (interests, affects,

and the like), seeing everything only in light of their egoistic concerns. Accordingly, they adopt just those principles that are based on their selfish interests and desires.

Psychopaths seem to fail to constrain themselves to form moral principles. To act morally, at least in a Kantian framework, we have to be able to prescribe to ourselves principles for deciding what is morally permissible, and this calls for the exercise of the power of autonomous self-regulation, in the sense that we have to work out what we ought to do by constraining our way of thinking. However, since they lack self-control in the sense of preventing the negative impact of some psychological conditions on the formation of their principles, psychopaths do not exercise this power. Consequently, in their eyes, something is either completely independent of any authority, which for them means free, or it is imposed by external authorities, and is therefore unfree.

Moreover, it may be that psychopaths are incapable of considering themselves to be under any obligation—that they cannot realize that they have duties. Since their dysfunctional conscience does not stimulate moral feelings, psychopaths do not become aware of the constraints required to understand that they have obligations. Their conscience does not make them responsive to the constraining power of morality, and they do not *feel* constrained by the demands of consistency. Every time we realize that one of our actions would be inconsistent with moral demands, we feel a kind of displeasure, and this tells us that we ought to set our ends differently, even when it is against our self-seeking interests. This holds only for setting and adopting *moral ends*. We can set morally obligatory ends (or duties) only by accepting this constraining power of reason. Lack of proper moral self-awareness—that is, appropriate awareness of the rightness or wrongness of their own actions—makes psychopaths incapable of constraining themselves to adopt moral ends or incapable of deciding to act in accordance with moral demands. The only ends they see and aim to achieve are purely self-interested ends. These ends might be prudential, but not moral. They seem to be unable to adopt the perspective of someone who acts from other reasons than mere self-interest—the perspective of the judge who appraises his own character and actions from a moral point of view. They seem to know what is considered to be morally right or wrong, and they might apply this knowledge while judging other people's moral dilemmas and perhaps their own moral dilemmas, but only in hypothetical situations.

Kant's theory of conscience provides an additional explanation of how psychopaths' impoverished self-reflective judging capacity precludes them from making genuine moral judgments. Through judgments of conscience, we check the degree of the subjective validity of our judgments and question whether or not we really hold something to be true. Similar to Kant's inquisitor, psychopaths do not really check whether an action would be approved before their "inner court." They seem to lack *personal moral convictions*, and their conscience does not lead them to a firm belief about the moral wrongness of an action they plan to perform in a given real-life situation.

The difference between Kant's inquisitor and psychopaths is that the latter seem to be incapable of becoming conscientious; they fail to acquire the self-knowledge needed for the proper application of moral standards to themselves. Severely compromised

consciences prevent psychopaths from realizing and accepting that moral standards hold for them. From their egocentric point of view, it seems to be perfectly acceptable for them to do what other people dare not. Because their conscience is dysfunctional, psychopaths seem to be merely capable of undertaking actions that only appear moral, but they are never internally driven to act morally. In Kantian terms, their actions might be legally correct actions, but not morally correct ones.

3.3. *Insensitivity to Moral Considerations*

Psychopathy comes to our attention primarily as a display of a stunning insensitivity to moral considerations. There are different explanations of why psychopaths remain unmoved by moral demands and concerns. While assuming that the cognitive and motivational levels are dissociable, some authors argue that it is only because of their affective deficits that psychopaths are not motivated to comply with their moral judgments. For example, [Murphy](#) states that even though psychopaths “know, in some sense, what it means to wrong people, to act immorally, this kind of judgment has for them no motivational component at all” (1972, p. 286). He clarifies this further by stating that psychopaths feel no guilt or remorse when they have engaged in harmful conduct. [Roskies](#) (2008, p. 202) claims that psychopaths are cognizant of what is morally right and wrong, but are still unmotivated to act morally.

This externalist approach to moral motivation may be challenged on several grounds. It has been argued that psychopaths are not motivated to act morally because they do not even make genuine moral judgments. The underlying causes of this psychopathic inability are sought either exclusively in affective deficits or also in their rational impairments. Prinz’s account challenges this explanatory model of moral motivation by arguing that it is not possible to form a moral judgment without being motivated to act morally; since moral judgments are emotionally based, they are intrinsically motivating. Kennett, on the other hand, argues that it is not primarily due to their emotional impairments that psychopaths cannot make genuine moral judgments, but also to their poor rational capacities.

Available accounts ignore the impairment of the capacity for moral self-reflection, its close connection to certain emotional reactions, and its role in motivating us to act morally. However, as we have seen, it may also be the case that this specific rational deficit is the reason why psychopaths fail to make genuine moral judgments, and why they do not care about acting morally and being moral. Their conscience does not lead them to some sort of affective conviction about the wrongness or rightness of the action in question; they lack personal moral convictions that would move them to act morally. Psychopaths’ consciences do not make them capable of constraining themselves to adopt moral ends or capable of deciding to act morally.

As will become clear in the next section, it is also due to their impoverished moral self-awareness and their inadequate way of judging their own moral worth that psychopaths do not blame themselves for their transgressions and do not feel guilt. They do not experience the unpleasant, pressing need to change their ways of thinking and acting, for their immoral behavior hardly has an influence on their self-concept.

As [Cleckley](#) radically concludes on the basis of his clinical experience, psychopaths exhibit a specific loss of insight, “not only a deficiency but apparently a total absence of self-appraisal as a real and moving experience” (1976, p. 351).

As if the whole moral dimension is not approachable to psychopaths, highly intelligent or not, they fail to be moved by moral concerns because they cannot constrain themselves to adopt moral ends, see themselves as moral, and experience moral self-evaluative feelings. They cannot translate their knowledge of what is considered to be right and wrong into moral principles that are to govern their choices. Making use of the Kantian account of conscience to account for psychopathic moral incompetence shows that even arguing that psychopaths can tell right from wrong does not have to mean that they are unmotivated to act morally just because of their emotional shortcomings.

3.4. *Failure to Accept Responsibility*

Given that psychopaths do not really apply moral standards to their own case, it is also unsurprising that they are said to have anomalous concepts of guilt and always excuse themselves by appealing to circumstances or other people.

To illustrate the lack of guilt in psychopaths, Hare cites what serial killer Ted Bundy said in regard to guilt:

It's this mechanism we use to control people. It's an illusion. It's a kind of social mechanism—and it is *very* unhealthy. It does terrible things with our bodies. And there are much better ways to control our behavior than that rather extraordinary use of guilt. (1993, p. 41)

Another psychopath who stabbed someone who allegedly had provoked him by looking at him from across the bar gave the following answer when asked whether he believed that he did anything wrong: “If someone shows me disrespect, they deserve what they get” (Baron-Cohen, 2011, p. 69). Before saying this he had explained that people have treated him bad and that he does not “take it from no one no more” (Baron-Cohen, 2011, p. 69). He insisted that he was not guilty and said “Of course I’m not sorry” (Baron-Cohen, 2011, p. 69). He probably did not feel guilty because his action was in accordance with the guiding principle that led him to his decision on how to act in that situation. On the proposed account, one of the reasons why his principle is not moral is because it is determined by his passion for revenge. His conscience does not warn him that something is morally impermissible. Usually, when we become aware of the inconsistency between, on the one hand, our action and our insufficient effort to choose to act morally and, on the other, moral requirements, we cannot avoid hearing the voice of our inner judge that affects our self-image and triggers feelings of guilt. However, this does not seem to happen to him, because his conscience does not make him aware of these inconsistencies.

Failure to accept responsibility for their own actions is a central characteristic of the diagnostic portrait of psychopaths. From a Kantian perspective on conscience, this

failure is also a direct consequence of a psychopathic dysfunctional conscience, for it is through this self-reflective capacity that we impute our acts and their consequences to ourselves. To be conscientious means to analyze oneself closely and to be ready to attribute an action to oneself—psychopathic individuals do not analyze their psychological conditions carefully and do not possess the self-knowledge needed for attributing a free action to themselves.

Psychopaths are indeed generally described as people who do not engage much in self-reflection and who shift the blame for their own immoral deeds to someone or something else. Hare notes that psychopaths have “a remarkable ability to rationalize their behavior and to shrug off personal responsibility” (1993, p. 42). According to the proposed theory of conscience, this extraordinary ability of psychopaths is an outcome of their underdeveloped conscience. Because we tend to deceive ourselves and to judge others more harshly than ourselves, we do need a judge who attempts to be just and who does not let the advocate of self-love win without a convincing defense. Since this inner judge in psychopaths does not carry out its work properly, they allegedly have an outstanding ability to rationalize.

In the terminology used by Bandura et al. (1996), psychopaths do not disengage self-sanctions by applying different mechanisms, since, because of their poor internal control or dysfunctional conscience, they rarely or never fully experience such sanctions. For instance, when they lie, psychopaths do not feel uncomfortable and guilty about it. Accordingly, they do not see any need to rationalize their immoral behavior. For psychopaths, silencing their conscience is not a difficult task. Even when, as they usually do, they blame their victim, or disregard or misinterpret the consequences of their actions, they do not seem to do so because they need to make excuses for themselves in the same way as other people. As the results of the previously described study suggest, participants high in psychopathic traits experience little or no guilt after lying and have no need to eliminate such feelings by convincing themselves to believe something else.

To conclude, psychopathic moral incompetence lies in the psychopaths’ inability to apply moral standards to their own case and, in this way, to adopt moral ends. They do not make genuine first-person moral judgments in real-life situations. Furthermore, their diminished self-reflective capacity or their unrealistic moral self-assessment is also the reason why they remain unmoved by moral concerns. This capacity is required for proper self-cognition. Without it, psychopaths cannot adopt moral principles and apply moral standards to personal real-life dilemmas, correctly judge whether they are responsible for their actions, or fully experience certain self-evaluative emotions. This is why their knowledge of what is considered to be right and wrong never feeds back to change their behavior.

If it is understood as the specific reflective capacity for carrying out moral self-appraisal, conscience proves to be a fruitful explanatory tool for the link between emotional and rational deficits in psychopaths. Moreover, it offers an opportunity to account for the mutual relation between some of the key symptoms of psychopathy, such as grandiose sense of self-worth, blame shifting, absence of feelings of guilt and remorse, egocentricity, deceitfulness, pathological lying, and poor behavioral control that leads to antisocial behavior.

A dysfunctional conscience underwrites these symptoms and lies at the root of psychopathic amorality. This is not to say that the defective emotional experience of psychopaths can be reduced to their lack of the self-evaluative emotions that conscience triggers. Furthermore, stating this does not exclude the possibility that the very development of this capacity in psychopaths is in turn hindered by their narrow attention span, extraordinary impulsivity, or exclusive focus on the present. In all likelihood, these factors also influence their way of adopting principles and setting ends, but they are still not severe enough to be pinpointed as the specific rational impairments of psychopaths.

4. The Specific Rational Deficit of Psychopaths and Its Implications for the Rationalism-Sentimentalism Debate

The application of the Kantian theory of conscience brings a new perspective to the debate on whether evidence from psychopathy can be used to support sentimentalism over rationalism. It focuses attention to the disregarded rational deficit that is intimately related to self-evaluative emotions and raises the question of how available accounts of psychopathic moral incompetence appear in this new light.

First, the implementation shows that both sentimentalism and rationalism can be said to have their respective “explanatory fruits” (Prinz, 2006, p. 36). As we have seen, rationalism can also explain why “moral” judgments of psychopaths lack moral motivational force. Instead of claiming that psychopaths fail to form, as Prinz (2006, p. 36) puts it, “beliefs about obligations” (such as “I ought to prevent or avoid that action”) simply because they lack negative emotions, rationalists could argue that psychopaths are incapable of considering themselves to be under any obligation because of their incompetent moral self-assessment. Their conscience does not make them feel obligated, and it does not lead them to the affective convictions that they ought to avoid certain acts. This is why psychopaths do not experience certain self-evaluative emotions, do not react emotionally to the violation of moral norms, and are not motivated to act in a way that would help them eradicate these unpleasant states. In addition, from this new empirically supported standpoint, Prinz’s explanation of psychopaths’ poor ability to draw the moral/conventional distinction appears problematic. By arguing that moral transgressions make us feel bad only because we have underlying emotional dispositions, he seems to exclude the possibility that the self-reflective judging capacity can trigger certain self-evaluative feelings. Furthermore, given the recent criticism of the moral/conventional distinction and research on psychopaths’ poor ability to draw this distinction, it is even questionable whether either rationalists or sentimentalists should place a great deal of weight on the results of Blair’s study, especially without taking into account other studies concerning psychopaths’ ways of judging moral issues.

In Nichols’ view, rationalism fails not only to explain what kind of rational capacity underlies the capacity for distinguishing between moral and conventional wrongs, but also to account for “the cognitive mechanisms” that are both “disrupted” in psychopathy and required to produce “the correlation between moral judgment and moral motivation” (2002, p. 295). He holds that rationalists have to find the rational

deficit in psychopaths that explains their deficit in moral judgment that is not present in people who are capable of drawing the moral/conventional distinction.

To demonstrate how seriously psychopaths threaten rationalism, Nichols discards available rationalist attempts to account for this rational deficit. For him, it lies neither in perspective-taking abilities, nor in their general rational abilities. First, he argues that psychopaths have perspective-taking abilities, for otherwise they would not be so successful at manipulating others. Second, to say that psychopaths suffer from some general deficit in rationality requires an adequate characterization of this deficit as well as an explanation of how it is responsible for their incompetent moral judgment. According to Nichols, no such accounts have been offered so far. Nichols also mentions one more rationalist option as “particularly unpromising”—the idea that psychopaths “haven’t been exposed to the right reasoning patterns” and that they “just need to be convinced, presumably by argument, of the claims of morality” (2002, p. 295). He promptly rejects this option by referring to Hare’s point that no program for treating psychopathic individuals has yet proved to be effective. Nichols states that at bottom, the psychopathic defective capacity for moral judgment derives “rather from a deficit to an affective system” (2002, p. 301). As he holds that there is no difference between the rational capacities of psychopaths and normal people, he finds the difference in affective responses to harm in others crucial for explaining psychopaths’ difficulties with the moral/conventional task.

Nevertheless, the account given in the previous section jeopardizes Nichols’ accusations against rationalism. As suggested, psychopaths’ lack of moral convictions that would move them to act morally is not only or primarily caused by their affective deficits. Furthermore, a rationalist may also contend that psychopaths are merely incapable of adopting a moral perspective—that they cannot put themselves in the position of judges who reflect upon themselves and realistically evaluate their own moral worth. Rather, rationalists can claim that psychopaths exhibit *a specific rational deficit* located in their reflective capacity for self-assessment that arouses self-evaluative emotions. Conscience seems to be a kind of cognitive mechanism that Nichols overlooks or declares impossible to find. Hence, even if we set aside the recent criticism of the moral/conventional distinction, the claim that there is no difference in the rational capacities of psychopaths should not be used as the starting point for an explanation of why psychopaths are said to perform poorly on moral/conventional tasks.

Some rationalistically oriented accounts also appear in a different light. Take, for example, Maibom’s proposal that psychopaths have a general rational deficit. By arguing that the practical reason of psychopaths is impaired, Maibom points to evidence of a number of “cognitive shortcomings” in psychopathic individuals, such as their “perceptual shortcomings in the *recognition* of certain emotions of others’ faces and voices,” “a grossly inflated view of their abilities,” and attention deficits (2005, p. 242). By linking these shortcomings to O’Neill’s (1998) interpretation of Kant’s moral theory, Maibom comes to the conclusion that “psychopaths experience principled difficulties willing the necessary and sufficient means to their ends,” “making available such means,” and “making sure that all the various intentions adopted either as means or ends are consistent with each other” (2005, p. 242).

As Maibom puts it, “psychopaths do not have conceptual deficits, but more general problems with consistency” (2005, p. 246). According to her, the problem for psychopaths seems to lie in their impaired means-end reasoning rather than in knowing what their duty is or in setting and adopting moral ends.

This approach might be challenged either by pointing out psychopaths’ outstanding manipulative skills or by accentuating the existence of white-collar psychopaths. Psychopaths may be good at manipulating people and achieving their own ends, but even if we accept as true that all psychopaths suffer an impairment of means-end reasoning, this rational deficit does not seem to be the cornerstone of their amorality. It does not explain why they do not care about morality. Moreover, if we draw a distinction between moral and prudential ends, then it could be claimed that psychopaths cannot adopt moral ends. At least within a Kantian picture of conscience, the instrumental and prudential aspect of reason is not sufficient for moral agency. Finally, instead of a general rational deficit, psychopaths’ poor self-reflective judging capacity might be responsible for their moral flaws.

Making use of Kant’s theory of conscience to account for the case of psychopathy offers a new alternative for defending the status of rationalism in the current debate. It shows that psychopathic moral incompetence is also compatible with rationalism, but not by pointing alone to impairments that impact the rational moral ability of psychopaths, such as their narrow attention span. Even though this alternative approach is in line with both Kennett’s insistence that certain rational capacities are essential for morality and her point that even Kant’s rationalist theory makes room for the affective, applying Kantian theory of conscience to the case of psychopathy also suggests that we may take a step further in defending rationalism—the step of specifying the rational deficit that elicits certain emotional reactions that are crucial for moral agency.

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Notes

- [1] The current edition of the American Psychiatric Association’s *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* has psychopathy as an optional specifier of the diagnosis of *antisocial personality disorder*.
- [2] *The Hare Psychopathy Checklist—Revised* involves the key symptoms of psychopathy, such as lack of empathy and guilt or remorse, egocentricity, grandiose sense of self-worth, shallow affect, pathological lying, poor behavioral control, irresponsibility and failure to accept responsibility for one’s own actions, as well as early behavioral (Hare, 1991) problems and adult antisocial behavior. Moreover, psychopaths are also said to be impulsive, glib, superficial, deceitful, manipulative, and prone to boredom.

- [3] For example, to show that psychopaths suffer certain rational deficits, Kennett (2002, 2010) appeals to Kant's conception of moral feeling, whereas Maibom (2005) turns to the universalization procedure and its link with instrumental reasoning.
- [4] The title of Hare's book might be taken to suggest that conscience underwrites some of the key symptoms of psychopathy and that it should not be one of the items on the list. I follow this line of argument by explaining that psychopathic conscience is dysfunctional—that psychopaths cannot play the role of a competent moral judge. Sometimes, Hare also appears to ascribe a similar status to empathy, but this seems to be problematic. If empathy is understood merely as a product of role-taking and as “an emotional reaction to a representation of the distressed internal state of another,” as Blair (1995, p. 4) does, then the cornerstone of psychopaths' amorality should rather be sought in their incapacity for role-taking. Even if we define empathy to include a cognitive and an affective element (and set aside all possible objections to this broader definition), this way of defining it does not inevitably lead to the conclusion that empathy is necessary for morality. Consider, for instance, Baron-Cohen's definition of empathy as “our ability to identify what someone else is thinking or feeling and to respond to their thoughts and feelings with an appropriate emotion” (2012, p. 18), and his claim that it is possible to develop “a moral code and a moral conscience” without empathy (as people with Asperger syndrome can do; 2012, p. 99).
- [5] Conscience is usually neglected in the contemporary literature on philosophy and moral psychology: it is either dismissed as a part of theological tradition, mentioned in passing with regard to children's moral development, or identified with moral sense.
- [6] A more detailed reading of Kant's passages on conscience can be found in Vujošević (2014).
- [7] Additionally, I show how focusing on this deficit helps pinpoint the link between morally relevant rational and affective shortcomings of psychopaths. This opens up the opportunity to account for the mutual relation between some of the key symptoms of psychopathy.
- [8] By moral judgments I mean here just the judgments a person makes about his or her own actions in real-life situations.
- [9] Without going deeper into the discussion regarding psychopathic immorality, Thagard and Finn (2011, p. 158) only say that psychopaths stand out in lacking the moral intuition that they should be concerned about the suffering of others. Such a felt clue is then something that somehow happens to us, but it does not seem to happen to psychopaths.
- [10] Translations are taken from the *Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant* edited by Paul Guyer and Allen Wood. References to Kant's works are given using the Academy edition pagination and the following abbreviation scheme:

MS: *Metaphysics of Morals*

R: *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*

NF: *Notes and Fragments*

- [11] Pain moves us to action, whereas conscience participates in the process of moral motivation without itself being the moral motive. Interpreting Kantian conscience as a morally motivating feeling and stating that we act morally just to avoid painful feelings would be inconsistent with Kant's moral theory. On my reading, conscience causes certain painful feelings that motivate us to act morally; in this way, it helps us fulfill our duties.
- [12] Philippi and Koenigs (2014) is the only study I found investigating the possibility that diminished self-reflection in psychopaths may explain their lack of guilt and empathy. The authors of this study on the neuropsychology of self-reflection add that further work is necessary, since there are very few studies that directly examine the relationship between self-reflection and social or affective features of psychopathy.
- [13] Drawing on this view, we might infer that psychopaths simply lack the disposition to have emotions of blame towards themselves. According to Prinz (2006, p. 32), psychopaths cannot acquire remorse or guilt because they are deficient in negative emotions, especially

fear. It is plausible that this deficit might partly be the reason why some individuals face problems with experiencing guilt. However, I find it important to point out that there is another factor that more directly influences the feelings of guilt, namely, self-reflection. This does not exclude the possibility that problems with the anticipation of fear have a negative impact on the development of conscience (understood as the capacity for moral self-appraisal).

- [14] This study shows that the guilt ratings of so-called secondary psychopaths are higher, and that they have a poor self-image when compared to other people. Obviously, the results of the study are not in keeping with the predominant view that psychopaths lack guilt. As the authors of this study suggested, this inconsistency might be explained away by suggesting that the less favorable self-concept and persistent feelings of guilt attributed to these participants might either reflect their being depressed, or be an effect of the constant disapproval that their behavior creates. It is then only due to depression or to the pressure from others that they have a poor self-concept. Anyway, this point suggests that there is something wrong with the way they judge themselves and hold themselves responsible—they mold their self-image only on the basis of how they think other people see them. If we set aside the possible objection that the distinction between primary and secondary psychopaths is not well established, all this might be taken to support my point that the main cause of psychopaths' moral incompetence should be sought in their poor moral self-assessment.
- [15] My focus in this paper is on the personal responsibility of psychopaths: whether they hold themselves responsible for their actions and not primarily whether we ought to hold them responsible. For a valuable discussion on whether we are to hold psychopaths responsible for their deeds, see, for example, Duff (2010).
- [16] The latter also includes the awareness of whether or not agents have done their best to form moral maxims.
- [17] Compare note 4.
- [18] See also Prinz (2011, p. 217).
- [19] The authors find it problematic that, even in the case of psychopaths, all evidence for the claim that moral transgressions are harmful merely comes from the sort of transgressions that would be familiar to young children. This is why they used a much wider range of harm transgressions in their internet study. In the scenarios offered, most of the participants did not judge harm transgressions to be authority independent.
- [20] I have in mind Kant's "impure" and "evil" maxims: in the first case the moral law is not sufficient motive, and in the second it is subordinated to the immoral incentives (R 6: 29–30).

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