AUTISM, EMPATHY AND MORAL AGENCY

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Psychopaths have long been of interest to moral philosophers, since a careful examination of their peculiar deficiencies may reveal what features are normally critical to the development of moral agency. What underlies the psychopath’s amoralism? A common and plausible answer to this question is that the psychopath lacks empathy. Lack of empathy is also claimed to be a critical impairment in autism, yet it is not at all clear that autistic individuals share the psychopath’s amoralism. How is empathy characterized in the literature, and how crucial is empathy, so described, to moral understanding and agency? I argue that an examination of moral thinking in high-functioning autistic people supports a Kantian rather than a Humean account of moral agency.

I. INTRODUCTION

I shall begin this exploration of the role of empathy in moral reasoning and moral agency by talking not about autism, but about psychopathy. Psychopaths have long been of interest to moral philosophers, since a careful examination of their peculiar deficiencies may reveal what features are normally critical to moral agency, and so may help to shed light on the long-standing debate between Kantians and Humeans on the respective roles of reason and sympathy in moral deliberation and action. What underlies the psychopath’s amoralism? I think that one common and very plausible answer to this question lands us in trouble when we consider the case of autism, since people with autism are often handicapped in just the way pinpointed by the explanation; but there is no case for supposing that autistic individuals share the psychopath’s fundamental indifference to moral considerations, though, as I shall show, they may lack moral competence in various respects.

II. EMPATHY AND PSYCHOPATHY

When I talk about psychopathy here I am not talking about the psychopath of popular imagination – the embodiment of evil, who cunningly and actively pursues evil, and may derive particular satisfaction from murder and
Psychopaths, as they were defined in psychiatric literature (the category has been replaced by ‘anti-social personality disorder’, no doubt because the term ‘psychopath’ has been culturally appropriated to serve a different purpose), and as they exist around us, are not usually active and purposeful pursuers of the bad. Their criminality is more often of the petty variety. Their behaviour is characterized by impulsivity and irresponsibility; they are habitual liars, are indifferent to the rights of others, and display lack of remorse for wrongdoing. When they do something wrong, they do not really see what the fuss is about, and may engage in rationalizations and blame-shifting.¹

Many discussions of psychopathy in both the philosophical and psychological literature see lack of empathy as the critical defect which is at the root of the psychopath’s amoralism. Most of these discussions fail to provide any detailed characterization of empathy, but their assumption appears to be that empathy involves, or is underwritten by, a capacity to enter sympathetically into the concerns and feelings of others.

Carl Elliott, in a discussion of psychopathy and moral responsibility, points out that the psychopath has a very shallow emotional life, and claims that ‘it should be uncontroversial to say that a person with little capacity to feel emotional attachments will be blind to a part of life which for most of us attaches very closely to our moral commitments’.² The psychopath is for the most part unable to think in terms of the interests of others or to regard those interests as reason-giving. ‘His conception of others appears incomplete; other people are less “real”. The psychopath seems ... unable to see things through the eyes of others and thus unable to see why the interests of others matter’ (Elliott, p. 210). Perhaps it is as a consequence of this that he lacks, as Jeffrie Murphy puts it, ‘moral feeling or a moral sense, what Kant also called respect for duty, and what we all ordinarily call a conscience’.³ The psychopath is a moral outsider with a psychology radically different from our own.

Gwen Adshead also focuses on the emotional life of the psychopath, arguing that the capacity to form the other-regarding beliefs which are central to recognizable moral thought may rest on the disposition to experience certain emotions in response to others.⁴ Psychopaths lack the affective capacity involved in recognizing and being moved by another’s distress, and


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this may be the result of failed early attachment. Adshead claims that 80 per cent of psychopaths detained in a maximum security hospital have histories of childhood deprivation, abuse and disorder. (These figures need to be treated with caution. Most people with anti-social personality disorder live in the community. And Adshead does not give figures on early childhood deprivation for the general prison population.) She says (p. 280) ‘The key issue may be the relationship of attachment experience to the development of mind, and in particular the capacity to think about others as being similar to oneself.... failure of attachment results in inability to conceptualize others and respond to them.’ Adshead’s view on the moral importance of early attachment is worth keeping in mind.

Common to these explanations of psychopathic moral indifference is the thought that if we do not have an adequate pathway to other people’s minds we shall be unable to think in terms of their interests, or to understand why their interests matter. The ability to think in this way seems fundamental to the development of moral agency, so a defect here is a very grave moral disability. John Deigh suggests that psychopaths, being at least minimally socialized, possess knowledge of conventional moral standards, but fail to acquire the more sophisticated knowledge ‘that comes from understanding the reasons for the conventions and the ideals that give them meaning’.5 But the knowledge required for mature moral agency cannot be simply a more sophisticated understanding of the conventions, since one can imagine an intelligent psychopath who could give the reasons why other people take certain actions to be wrong, and list the ideals which the conventions serve, much as an anthropologist might, but who still fails to be moved by moral concerns. Explanations of moral indifference, such as Deigh’s, which focus on failures of empathy are pointing to a different kind of understanding as essential to morality, and suggesting a different heuristic as essential for attaining that understanding. I shall look more closely at what this involves.

III. SIMULATION AND EMPATHY

In discussing the nature of sympathy, Hume notes that

The minds of all men are similar in their feelings and operations, nor can any one be actuated by any affection, of which all others are not, in some degree, susceptible. As in strings equally wound up, the motion of one communicates itself to the rest; so all the affections readily pass from one person to another.... When I see the effects of passion in the voice and gesture of any person, my mind immediately passes from these effects to their causes, and forms such a lively idea of the passion, as is presently

converted into the passion itself. In like manner, when I perceive the causes of any emotion, my mind is convey’d to the effects, and is actuated with a like emotion.

... 'tis after this manner we enter so deep into the opinions and affections of others, whenever we discover them.6

The evidence from research into early child development is that this mirroring process described by Hume begins in earliest infancy with babies responding differentially to faces expressing different emotions.7 They copy their mothers’ expressions, and this imitation seems to work from the outside in so as to produce the emotion itself. It seems that they ‘catch’ the emotions of their mothers. A little later we find the development of joint attention behaviour, involving the use of gestures and eye contact to share an experience.8 Young children have a tendency to look back and forth between a person and an interesting object, apparently checking the other’s responses and modulating their own responses in the light of the other’s. For example, in one study mothers were asked to show responses of disgust to a particular toy. Their infants were selective in reaction, interpreting their mother’s expression as about that particular toy, which they thereafter avoided. However, they showed no change in overall mood, and happily played with other non-target toys.9

It seems that one learns about and develops one’s own mental states in concert with others. The ability to read and respond to others’ mental states, particularly their emotional states, begins very early. In the light of the research on joint attention as well as other work on the development of social cognition, it seems at least plausible that failed early attachment would have, as suggested by Adshead, a significant effect on the development of the capacity for empathy.

Robert Gordon, in ‘Sympathy, Simulation and the Impartial Spectator’, argues along Humean lines that mirroring or simulation of another’s mental states through the exercise of imagination is the way we typically get information about those states, which we then use in predicting and explaining the behaviour of others. Alvin Goldman agrees that ‘the standard, or at least a very common, strategy for making third-personal mental ascriptions, is the so-called simulation or empathetic approach’.10 These claims appear

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to have gained some recent support from neuroscience, which has identified a class of neurons, dubbed ‘mirror neurons’, which fire both when agents perform a certain task and when they watch someone else perform the same task. Experimenters have also found neurons which fire both in response to one’s own finger being pricked and to the sight of other people’s fingers being pricked. The speculation is that the mirror neurons may explain communication between primates, since they provide the basis for a common understanding about what is going on in the absence of language. So far, so good; but how do we get from the availability of this form of communication and understanding to moral distinctions and moral motivation?

Gordon does not think that we inevitably convert the different emotions we mirror into ‘a like passion’. Rather we learn to run these simulations off line, segregated from our own mental states. He suggests that the default model of simulation is one that uses our own potential responses to predict and interpret self and others. We can predict, for example, that another will put up his umbrella or get in out of the rain, because this is what we predict that we ourselves would do. Sometimes this will not work, however, since other people do not always respond to a situation as we ourselves would. We must then step into the shoes of the other, and simulate not merely our own mental states in the different circumstances that the other faces, but his different mental states in the circumstances he faces.

This process sounds of course like Hare’s description of (what Mackie terms) third-stage universalizability. We must imagine ourselves in the other person’s shoes with his beliefs, desires, interests and values, and treat these equally with our own when deciding what to do. Hare assumes that we cannot keep these simulations off line – we shall inevitably catch the desires we simulate. Gordon does not go this far: he thinks that there must be a mechanism that segregates simulated emotions from our own. Similarly the simulated decision-making process we undertake in trying to figure out what someone else will do ‘must be decoupled from the mechanisms that ordinarily translate decision making and intention formation into action’ (Gordon, p. 739). Nevertheless emotional contagion or seepage can take place; as a result of simulation we experience real, if second-hand, emotion. This second-hand emotion produced by emotional contagion thus becomes ‘a voting member of one’s own motivational system’ (p. 738). Gordon argues that ‘our transformational representations of other people will have a tendency to go on line’ (p. 739).

12 Gordon, p. 738. Recent work by Luciano Fadiga reported in New Scientist suggests that most of the time a strong spinal-cord inhibition prevents you from involving your own motor neurons in activity which you are merely observing.
If Gordon and other philosophers, psychologists and scientists are right about the way simulation works, it seems there is empirical support for a Humean account of sympathy as the basis for morality. Emotional contagion is the way in which other people’s concerns become reasons for us. Without the capacity to simulate, to catch moods, and to find our responses changed in the light of the responses of others, perhaps we lack the very basis for moral concern, and so we shall fail to become moral agents.

I think that empathy, construed as this imaginative process of simulation with its resulting emotional contagion and reciprocal awareness, is important to us as moral agents, but I am not sure how essential it is to moral agency. It is important to moral agents, because it provides a rich source of information which moral agents need if they are to act well and wisely towards other people, and which it may be very difficult to obtain by other means. The interactions and relationships it makes possible are also a rich source of value that most of us would be unwilling to do without. But though it ordinarily plays a role in moral development and motivation, I rather doubt if it is the only way in which we can and do arrive at moral concerns and moral distinctions. An incapacity in this area cannot be the complete explanation of the psychopath’s moral failings, since another group of people, autistic people, who even more conspicuously lack empathy as I have so far described it, do in some cases seem capable of compensating for this deficit and becoming conscientious, though often clumsy, moral agents.

IV. AUTISM AND EMPATHY

Autism is a condition in which there is primary impairment of social communication. The spectrum of autistic disorders ranges from the very severe, with co-morbid mental retardation or other psychiatric disorders, to mild forms of impairment which may escape diagnosis. In my discussion of autism I shall be focusing on persons who exhibit the central features of the condition and whose impairment is significant enough to attract diagnosis, but within this group I shall focus on the highest-functioning autistic individuals, and individuals with Asperger’s syndrome. This is in part because I do not wish to engage in debates over the place of ‘theory of mind’ versus simulation theory in explaining autism. The individuals I am interested in would all be capable of passing even quite sophisticated false-belief tests: they all have some theory of mind, though it may be hard won and much more laborious and explicit than the theory you and I use. What seems clear is that autistic and Asperger’s adults still find simulation of the mental states, and in particular the moods and intentions of others, very difficult or
unreliable. Such individuals are often highly intelligent and have some capacity for introspection about their condition. Listening to them gives a very clear picture of the minefield that social interaction and interpretation can be for autistic people, and of the strategies that they may use to compensate for these defects. Concentrating on this group therefore appears to offer the best prospect for figuring out the role of empathy in moral agency.

The triad of deficits

*DSM*₃ lists the following triad of impairments critical to a diagnosis of autism, and also present in individuals with Asperger’s syndrome:

(i) Specific abnormalities of social behaviour, affecting in particular reciprocal relating and empathy

(ii) Communication difficulties affecting non-verbal communicatory conversational skills (pragmatics) and prosody

(iii) Lack of creativity and imagination, as evident in, for example, a paucity of pretend-play and an inability to role-play, this lack of creativity being accompanied by a characteristic rigidity and repetitiveness of behaviour.

*DSM*₄ gives a more detailed set of criteria for autism in the three areas above, and focuses on social impairment for Asperger’s. However, I am going to take the impairments as listed above, for reasons of simplicity and because much of the literature is premised on these. I think the conclusions with regard to empathy are unaffected by the elaboration of the criteria.

All three impairments seem relevant to the capacity described by Hume to receive and respond to the sentiments of others, which he took to be the foundation of moral distinctions and moral motivation. Autistic children and adults have a deficient understanding of the ways in which language is modified according to social context, of metaphor and irony, and of the ways in which language needs to be understood ‘according to the psychological perspectives and communicative intents of the speakers’ (Hobson, ‘Understanding Persons’, p. 205). The language abnormalities mentioned in (ii) also reflect the social incomprehension in (i). Autistic understanding of what is said is extremely literal. Further, the lack of imagination and ability to role-play in (iii) will directly impair the autistic individual’s ability to take on and understand the different perspectives and interests of others. It seems reasonable to agree with Uta Frith when she claims that

The most general description of social impairment in autism is lack of empathy. Autistic people are noted for their indifference to other people’s distress, their inability to offer comfort, even to receive comfort themselves. What empathy requires is the
ability to know what the other person thinks or feels despite the fact that it is different from one’s own mental state at the time. In empathy one shares emotional reactions to the other person’s different state of mind. Empathy presupposes, amongst other things, a recognition of different mental states. It also presupposes that one goes beyond the recognition of difference to adopt the other person’s frame of mind with all the consequences of emotional reactions. Even able autistic people seem to have great difficulty in achieving empathy in this sense.13

Autistic ‘aloneness’ and lack of interest in affective contact with others appears very early in life, and it appears that autistic persons’ biologically based impairments in social-affective relatedness may underlie what Hobson (p. 204) calls ‘their limited intellectual (cognitive) grasp of other persons as persons with their own mental life’. The shared or joint attention behaviour outlined above is reported to be missing in the development of even quite able autistic children.14 Autistic people find it difficult to make direct eye contact with others, to hold another’s gaze. This can improve with age, but requires conscious effort and training. Autistic children have difficulties with reciprocal social play. Their play is object-orientated, and they are often felt to treat people as furniture. One mother writes of her autistic child ‘There was no “connection” with other human beings. I seemed no more important to him than a chair. He used my hand to pull open the refrigerator door for juice, as though the rest of me was just an unimportant accessory to the hand.’15

High-functioning adults with Asperger’s syndrome and autism often report a sense of alienation and aloneness, as well as a greatly reduced need for human contact. Temple Grandin describes herself as like an anthropologist on Mars in her attempts to understand other people: an Asperger’s syndrome couple say ‘they beamed us down from the transporter together’.16 Another autistic man, Jim Sinclair, writes ‘In some ways I am terribly ill equipped to survive in this world, like an extra-terrestrial stranded without an orientation manual’.17

Sinclair (p. 302) goes on to say this:

I can go for days or weeks without any personal contact with other human beings, and I may get bored but I don’t get lonely. I don’t need social contact. And because I don’t need it, I have no compelling reason to go out of my way to get it. Even when someone does attract my interest, when I do become emotionally attached and desire

a relationship with that person, I don’t become dependent on that relationship or that person. I don’t need them.

Sinclair is capable of desiring friendship, but deep attachment, which most of us might think of as involving some degree of emotional dependence on and vulnerability to the other, seems beyond him. Many autistic people are puzzled as to the nature of friendship and romantic love, finding baffling the complex highly nuanced social interactions involved. Oliver Sacks says of Temple Grandin that she ‘cannot actually imagine how it might be to feel passion for another person’ (p. 272). Another autistic adult has this to say:

I really didn’t know there were other people until I was seven years old. I then suddenly realized that there were people. But not like you do. I still have to remind myself that there are people. I could never have a friend. I really don’t know what to do with other people, really.\textsuperscript{18}

Able autistic people are perfectly aware that there are forms of social communication which are closed to them and this reinforces their own sense of their outsider status. One says ‘People give each other messages with their eyes, but I do not know what they are saying’.\textsuperscript{19} Sacks reports (pp. 270–1) that some autistic people attempt to compensate for this deficit by keeping dogs to aid their social perception. They use the dogs to ‘read’ the minds and intentions of visitors. He remarks that they may regard their dogs as having ‘telepathic abilities, but of course the abilities of their dogs are merely normal canine ones, and indeed normal human ones, which they themselves lack’.

V. COMMON GROUND

I shall survey what the psychopath and the autistic individual appear to have in common. Both psychopaths and autistic people experience outsider status, and deficiencies in social understanding and in social responsiveness. The central character of Camus’ \textit{L’Etranger}, who figures as an example in the literature on psychopathy, is quite radically disconnected from others. He is puzzled, as an autistic person might be, at their strong emotional reactions to what he does. The psychopath Milt, made famous by Cleckley,\textsuperscript{20} cannot see what all the fuss is about when he leaves his sick mother stranded in a


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car while he checks football scores, and calls on a casual acquaintance instead of bringing back a new fuse. Likewise, autistic people may be bemused by others’ condemnation. One autistic man, fired for attacking the cloakroom attendant who gave him the wrong coat, continues to feel bewildered by his sacking and to be unable to comprehend why what he did was wrong. Both sets of literature speak of a tendency to treat other people as tools or instruments, a lack of strong emotional connectedness to others and impaired capacity for friendship, and they link these impairments to failures of empathy. Indeed, in some of these respects those with autism are significantly worse off than psychopaths, who are usually perfectly competent at casual social interactions, and often possess a facile easy charm. Psychopaths are also usually well able to read the intentions and predict the behaviour of others (see Deigh).

If empathy is crucial to the development and exercise of moral agency, then why is the autistic person not worse off, morally speaking, than the psychopath? Jeffrie Murphy goes so far as to argue that psychopathy is moral death, which is to be about as badly off as one can be. He doubts (on Kantian grounds) that psychopaths are persons, and suggests that our moral responses and responsibilities where they are concerned can only be on a par with our responsibilities to animals. If this is true of psychopaths, it is certainly not generally true of autistic people. Many autistic people display moral concerns, moral feeling and a sense of duty or conscience. They are persons in the sense in which Murphy thinks psychopaths are not. Yet according to all standard descriptions of autism these concerns cannot be based on empathetic identification with the concerns and feelings of others.

VI. AUTISM, MORAL CONCERN AND MORAL AGENCY

How do autistic people differ morally from psychopaths? What is the basis of their moral concerns and judgements? A crucial initial point of difference is that as a consequence of their inability to read the motivations of others, autistic people are incompetent both at detecting deception and engaging in it. The social handicap that closes off the kinds of interpersonal relationships that for many of us constitute a chief source of value in our lives also protects them from many forms of moral corruption and wrongdoing. The meaner human dispositions, for example, jealousy, lying, cheating, vengefulness and Schadenfreude, are not part of the autistic personality. But this kind of attractive moral innocence is not yet moral character or moral agency.

Uta Frith has explored representations of autism in myth and history, and suggests that autism ‘has played a role in shaping models of religious and political conduct’ (Autism: Explaining the Enigma, p. 38). The tales of Brother Juniper, based on a follower of St Francis, reveal an individual who, while displaying the typically autistic lack of awareness that other people might have thoughts and beliefs which differ from his own, as well as inability to gauge the effects of his actions on others, was nevertheless motivated by a concern to do good. Frith writes (p. 42):

Brother Juniper gave away anything to anyone who asked for it, including, frequently, his own clothes. Once he even cut the bells from the altar cloth to give to a poor woman. This he did in a literal interpretation of the Franciscan virtues of poverty and charity. His literal interpretation led to embarrassing excess. The brethren had to keep a constant watch on him, and he was strictly forbidden to give away his own clothes. Nevertheless, he was recognized to be a pure example of the true Franciscan spirit and for this he was held in high esteem.

Frith (p. 44) sees Sherlock Holmes as a fictional demonstration of a different kind of autistic trait, ‘the social usefulness of the brilliant but socially detached mind’. Holmes is representative of the phenomenon of autism combined with high intellectual ability. His ‘clear powers of observation and deduction [are] unclouded by the everyday emotions of ordinary people’, standing in stark contrast to the archetypal average person represented by Dr Watson, so often led astray by his emotions (p. 43). Indeed, Holmes may be thought to approach that state of freedom from inclination which Kant suggested must be the wish of all rational creatures. These cases, and others presented by Frith, suggest that deficits in empathy, so typical of autism, may make possible a kind of moral purity not available to the rest of us.

I have not yet been able to find any direct research on the path of moral development and moral thinking in autistic individuals, with the exception of Oliver Sacks’ account of his time with Temple Grandin, which does focus on her moral life and moral concerns. What follows is largely based on material on techniques of social education for people with autism, parental anecdotes, and autobiographical writings. It is therefore somewhat speculative, and I do not mean to suggest that autistic people are a completely homogeneous group. Nevertheless I think there is some evidence to suggest that capable individuals with autism and Asperger’s syndrome are likely to take a rather Kantian approach to moral thinking. The development and application of rules of conduct, whether by teachers and parents or later by themselves, play a prominent role in assisting them to negotiate the otherwise confusing social landscape. Autistic people have a passion for order (and indeed are often quite inflexible about rules and routines). My
guess is that ideals of order and consistency and something like the golden
rule play a prominent role in their moral lives; in this respect they differ very
strikingly from the psychopath. A closer examination of the case of the
autistic man mentioned earlier, who felt aggrieved over being sacked,
reveals a concern for justice that seems perfectly universalizable. This man
was not, as the psychopath would be, making a special exception for himself.
He thought his sacking was most unjust, since it was the cloakroom attendant
who was not doing his job properly. He simply could not conceive of
someone failing to pay the same attention to detail as he himself did, and
making a mistake which he could never have made. His judgement was
clearly deficient in that it completely failed to assign appropriate weights to
the respective offences, but it is highly likely that he would make the same
judgement regardless of the identities of the parties involved. Similarly an
autistic teenager with a passion for the piano and perfect pitch suggested a
constitutional amendment ‘to require that every home have a piano with 88
keys, and to require that the piano be kept in tune’. His mother explains
that ‘when Jack realized that many homes did not have pianos, and many
pianos were painfully out of tune, he assumed that other people would feel
as bad about this situation as he did. Though he outgrew the notion that this
could be corrected by a constitutional amendment, he still takes his work [as
a piano tuner] as seriously as a doctor who is dedicated to making sick
people healthy.’

In the case of many, perhaps most, autistic people, rules of conduct are
not self-developed, or are somewhat naïve, like the one just mentioned, so
that though these people may be well-meaning, and wish like Brother Juni-
per to do the right thing, they are not morally autonomous. Autistic people
are further handicapped by the literal nature of their thinking in recognizing
when and how the rules apply in novel situations. Able autistic people may
attempt to run simulations of other people’s mental states in developing the
rules, or in applying them in particular cases; but like Jack they run into
problems, since they do not have the capacity to imagine responses which
differ from their own. Simulation is not a reliable way for autistic people to
get the information they need to arrive at a judgement.

However, high-functioning autistic adults and those with Asperger’s syn-
drome can achieve moral autonomy by other means. It appears that they
can develop or discover moral rules and principles of conduct for themselves
by reasoning, as they would in other matters, on the basis of patient explicit
enquiry, reliance on testimony and inference from past situations. Temple
Grandin describes having a library of experiences in her head, ‘videos’,

which she would replay again and again to learn how people behave. 'She would learn by degrees to correlate what she saw, so that she could then predict how people in similar circumstances might act.' She describes it as a 'strictly logical process' (Sacks, p. 260). Grandin uses what Robert Gordon (p. 732) would call a 'cold methodology', a method that 'chiefly engages our intellect and makes no essential use of our own capacities for emotion [and] motivation', in contrast with the 'hot methodology' that involves simulation of the other’s mental states. 'I had to learn to be suspicious', Grandin says of a case where a laboratory worker was sabotaging her equipment. 'I had to learn it cognitively. I could put two and two together but I couldn’t see the jealous look on his face' (Sacks, p. 260). The same process may be applied by the autistic individual in practical reasoning.

Jim Sinclair (p. 300) says:

I have to develop a separate translation code for every person I meet.... does it indicate an unco-operative attitude if someone doesn’t understand information conveyed in a foreign language? Even if I can tell what the cues mean, I may not know what to do about them. The first time I ever realized someone needed to be touched was during an encounter with a grief-stricken, hysterically sobbing person who was in no condition to respond to my questions about what I should do to help. I could certainly tell he was upset. I could even figure out that there was something I could do that would be better than nothing. But I didn’t know what that something was.

Sinclair’s realization that he should do something – that the other’s distress provided a reason for action – and his eventual conclusion that touching might be appropriate, is clearly not here dependent on the operation of empathy, but rather on the application of a more explicit practical concern to do the right thing, whatever that should turn out to be, together with his hard-won realization that other people have needs and feelings different from his own. He has, it seems, a generalized moral concern, what we might call a sense of duty, or a conscience. His moral feelings are of a Kantian, rather than a Humean, cast.

Sinclair’s account may be compared with this well known passage from Kant on the motive of duty:

If nature had implanted little sympathy in this or that man’s heart; if (being in other respects an honest fellow) he were cold in temperament and indifferent to the sufferings of others – if such a man (who in truth would not be the worst product of nature) were not exactly fashioned by her to be a philanthropist, would he not still find in himself a source from which he might draw a worth far higher than any a good-natured temperament can have? ... For love out of inclination cannot be commanded; but kindness done from duty – although no inclination impels us – is practical not pathological love, residing in the will and not in the propensions of feeling,
in principles of action and not of melting compassion; and it is this practical love alone which can be the object of command.\(^{23}\)

Clearly, for Kant, moral feeling has little or nothing to do with emotional connectedness to others or empathy in the Humean sense. Yet it is of supreme importance: ‘No man is entirely without moral feeling, for if he were completely lacking in capacity for it he would be morally dead’.\(^{24}\) Coldness of temperament or emotional detachment is not the same therefore as the absence of moral feeling.

VII. KANTIAN MORAL FEELING, REASON AND MORAL AGENCY

How should we understand moral feeling in Kantian terms? Kant speaks of these feelings, in which he includes conscience, love of one’s neighbour and respect for oneself, as ‘subjective conditions of receptiveness to the concept of duty ... natural predispositions of the mind for being affected by concepts of duty, antecedent predispositions on the side of feeling. To have these predispositions cannot be considered a duty; rather every man has them, and it is by virtue of them that he can be put under an obligation. Consciousness of them is not of empirical origin; it can, instead only follow from consciousness of a moral law, as the effect this has on the mind’ (‘The Doctrine of Virtue’, 399). For Kant, as for Hume, moral motivation is a matter of feeling; unlike Hume, Kant sees this motivation as consequent on the agent’s perception of a principle or reason which includes him in its scope.

Why think such a perception could motivate? What can we say in support of what appears to be an empirical claim about our nature? David Velleman argues that certain dispositions, rational dispositions, are fundamental to agency. Key among these is the disposition to autonomy. He characterizes this disposition as the inclination towards conscious control, towards behaving ‘in, and out of, a knowledge of what you’re doing’.\(^{25}\) But in order to understand what you are doing, it is essential that you do that thing for reasons. Elsewhere Velleman interprets Kant’s view of conscience thus:

by informing us of the absence of reasons for doing things, conscience rules out the possibility of our doing them for reasons, and with it the possibility of our doing them


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autonomously, since we are truly the agents of the things we do only when we do them for reasons.26

If Kant and Velleman are right about the existence of rational predispositions, or predispositions on the side of feeling to act in accordance with reason, then the perceived absence of reasons for what we do, or the acknowledged existence of a better reason for doing something else, ought at least to cause us some discomfort. Evidence from psychology on cognitive dissonance suggests that this is indeed the case: Leon Festinger argues that dissonance, as non-fitting relations between one’s cognitions or between one’s evaluative judgements and desires, is ‘a motivating factor in its own right’, which gives rise to action designed to reduce dissonance.27 Though dissonance may lead to rationalization of one’s actions just as well as to action in accordance with duty, the discomfort described seems relevantly similar to the felt constraint of reason in the face of contrary inclinations, pointed to by Kant.

This takes us, I think, to the heart of the difference between autistic individuals, like Sinclair or Grandin, and psychopathic individuals. Where there is otherwise normal intellectual functioning, autism can leave intact the receptiveness to reason’s constraints just described. The stories of able autistic individuals suggest that Velleman and Kant are right, and that a concern for reason is as basic to us as a concern for connection. Autistic people, though lacking empathy, do seem capable of deep moral concerns. They are capable, as psychopaths are not, of the subjective realization that other people’s interests are reason-giving in the same way as one’s own, though they may have great difficulty in discerning what those interests are. It is not the psychopath’s lack of empathy, which (on its own, at any rate) explains his moral indifference. It is more specifically his lack of concern, or more likely lack of capacity to understand what he is doing, to consider the reasons available to him and to act in accordance with them. This lack is amply demonstrated by the impulsive, disorganized and self-destructive nature of his actions, as Carl Elliott points out (‘Diagnosing Blame’, p. 210):

It is not just his affect which is impaired, he also shows remarkable defects in his powers of judgement, both moral and prudential, and consequently in his behaviour.

Philosophical analyses of the psychopath often focus on his moral defects without paying attention to his prudential judgement, which is often extraordinarily bad. For while the psychopath seems pathologically egocentric, he is nothing like an enlightened egoist. His life is frequently distinguished by failed opportunities, wasted chances and behaviour which is astonishingly self-destructive. This poor judgement

seems to stem not so much from the psychopath’s inadequate conception of how to reach his ends, but from an inadequate conception of what his ends are.

The evidence of a global impulsivity of behaviour and shallowness of purpose suggests that the psychopath’s failure to exhibit any deep engagement with other people is but one facet of his amoralism, and perhaps not the most important. Since the psychopath fails to form any extended and coherent conception of his own or others’ ends, and therefore of the ways in which those ends generate and sustain reasons over time, reason has only a tenuous grip on him. His actions are intentional, and perhaps short-term instrumentally rational, but that is all. Unsurprisingly, then, he is not troubled by cognitive dissonance when he makes inconsistent judgements about what he may do and what others may do, or when he changes his goals and activities without justification, since he is not concerned about, or does not understand, the point of rational justification in the first place. His indifference to reasons is the key to his behaviour, not (or not solely) his lack of empathy. Those who lack empathy may miss finding out about things which constitute reasons for action, but they need not thereby exhibit indifference to reason. The sometimes heroic efforts made by autistic individuals such as Grandin and Sinclair to make sense of the social world and their place in it are testimony to that. I do not mean to suggest that all or most autistic people have any sophisticated conception of moral or prudential reasons. Like psychopaths, they may fail to form a clear or appropriate conception of their goals. But some do seem capable of reflection and introspection about their condition and what it means for the kind of life they can lead. They do try to take account of the differences between themselves and others, so far as they understand them, and they do have a basic conception of justification and of interests as reason-giving.

A clear advantage of a Kantian account of moral reasoning and moral motivation is that it grants full moral agency to morally conscientious autistic people like Jim Sinclair and Temple Grandin – people who by their own admission lack the capacity for empathy. It is not immediately clear that a Humean account of moral agency can do the same. Perhaps it would be too much to credit Kant with showing a democratic recognition of different styles of moral personality; his detractors might rather be tempted to the view that he would be committed to thinking of a morally conscientious autistic person, free of the inclinations which lead the rest of us astray, as the ideal moral agent. I think it is clear that Kant’s point in stripping away sympathy as a motive in his examples in the *Groundwork* is to reveal the essence of moral agency, the concern to act in accordance with reason which animates agency and which we cannot do without. This reverence for reason is the core moral motive, the motive of duty. While many moral
agents may not think explicitly in terms of duty when deciding what to do, they must be disposed to act in accordance with their judgements about what they ought to do, even when supporting motives such as sympathy are not available. Otherwise their right actions must be seen as accidental and without moral worth. Milt rightly offers to drive his sick mother to town, but the ease with which he is distracted reveals the shallowness both of his sympathy and of his conception of the situation as constraining him to act in certain ways. He has no disposition to duty, or even a conception of duty, to fall back on. Kantians do not have to deny the value of sympathy and empathy in moral life. They simply say that the capacity to act in accordance with reason or duty cannot be hostage to the operation of sympathy.

VIII. REASON, EMPATHY AND THE SELF

Though it appears that failures of empathy cannot play a stand-alone or primary role in explaining amoralism, perhaps we should not move too fast to embrace the Kantian rationalist view of moral autonomy and moral agency on the evidence from autism. The developmental literature I have surveyed is, after all, very strongly suggestive of the importance of empathy, not just for that insight into other selves which is so epistemically useful in our daily lives, but in the development of one’s own sense of self. Without the early operation of empathy, development of the self takes place largely in isolation and is likely to be delayed. Children’s own feelings will have the status of happenings which they cannot name or explain; they will not readily learn the language of introspection; and as a result they may fail to develop any deep or extended conception of self.

In so far as a deep self, unified over time, and capable of introspection and reflection on its ends, is needed to ground and sustain skilled moral agency, and deep selves are developed in significant part through relations with others, then empathy arguably does have a foundational role in creating moral agents – though perhaps a less direct and proximate role than is commonly assigned to it in debates over the role of empathy in moral judgement and motivation. There needs to be a self to whom (Kantian) reasons can speak. (Something like this seems to be Adshead’s point.) Certainly lack of such a deep sense of self explains the psychopath’s moral and prudential failings very well, though we know too little about the developmental path of psychopaths to be entirely sure of the causes of this lack.

What about autistic people? It is not altogether clear that where autistic people do fail to develop a strong sense of self, the explanation will lie solely in failure of empathy, rather than in something more general which
underlies this failure. If, as Simon Baron-Cohen has suggested, there is a global deficit of consciousness of the mental world in autism, then autistic people will lack ‘hot’ access to their own mental states, as well as to those of others. These too will have to be taught and learnt by a cold methodology. In any event the visual, literal and world-focused nature of the autistic person’s thinking does not lend itself well to introspection or to the kind of abstraction required for seeing oneself as a being existing over time. Severely and moderately autistic people may thus be condemned to live largely in the moment, creating connections to their past and future through routines and rituals rather than through projects and relationships. What is apparent from autobiographical writings, however, is that this is not true of many able autistic individuals, who show a strong, clear, sense of self and of their autistic distinctness. Temple Grandin says ‘If I could snap my fingers and be non-autistic, I would not, because then I wouldn’t be me. Autism is part of who I am’ (Sacks, p. 278). And Sinclair says (p. 302) ‘my personhood is intact. My selfhood is undamaged. I find great value and meaning in my life and I have no wish to be cured of being myself.... Grant me the dignity of meeting me on my own terms – recognize that we are equally alien to each other, that my ways of being are not merely damaged versions of yours.’ It is hard to imagine a psychopath making reflections of this kind.

Given the near-universal role of empathy in the development of autonomous, responsive, moral agency in human beings, and the often catastrophic effects of its absence, Humeans are right to emphasize its practical moral significance. But the story of how we normally get to be moral agents and the story of what is required for moral agency are not the same. The case of autism shows that both selves and moral agents can be created in the absence of empathy, but further, the comparison with psychopathy shows something essential to the nature of such agency, and here, I have claimed, Kant’s emphasis on reason is right. Only individuals who are capable of being moved directly by the thought that some consideration constitutes a reason for action can be conscientious moral agents.

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