

Does moral action depend on reasoning?



Jonah Lehrer

Not so much.

Psychopaths can teach us a lot about the nature of morality. At first glance, they seem to have perfectly functioning minds. Their working memory isn't impaired, they have excellent language skills, and they don't have reduced attention spans. In

fact, a few studies have found that psychopaths have above-average IQs and reasoning abilities; their logic is impeccable. But the disorder is associated with a severe moral deficit.

So what's gone wrong? Why are psychopaths so much more likely to use violence to achieve their goals? Why are they so overrepresented in our prisons? The answer turns us to the anatomy of morality in the mind. That's because the intact intelligence of psychopaths conceals a devastating problem: The emotional parts of their brains are damaged, and this is what makes them dangerous.

When normal people are shown staged videos of strangers being subjected to a powerful electrical shock or other painful stimulus, they automatically generate a visceral emotional reaction. Their hands start to sweat, and their blood pressure surges. But psychopaths feel nothing. It's as if they were watching a blank screen. Most people react differently to emotionally charged verbs like *kill* or *rape* than to neutral words like *sit* or *walk*, but not psychopaths. The words all seem equivalent. When criminologists looked at the most violent wife batterers, they discovered that, as the men became more and more aggressive, their blood pressure and pulse actually *dropped*. The acts of violence had a calming effect.

When you peer inside the psychopathic brain, you can literally see this absence of emotion. After being exposed to fearful facial expressions, the emotional parts of the normal human brain show increased levels of activation. So do the cortical areas responsible for recognizing faces. As a result, a frightened face becomes a frightening sight; we naturally internalize the feelings of others. The brains of psychopaths, however, respond to these fearful faces with utter disinterest. Their emotional areas are unperturbed, and

their facial recognition system is even *less* interested in fearful faces than in perfectly blank stares. Their brains are bored by expressions of terror.

Neuroscientists are beginning to identify the specific deficits that define the psychopathic brain. The main problem seems to be a broken amygdala, a brain area responsible for secreting aversive emotions, like fear and anxiety. As a result, psychopaths never feel bad when they make other people feel bad. Aggression doesn't make them nervous. Terror isn't terrifying. (Brain imaging studies have demonstrated that the amygdala is activated when most people even *think* about committing a "moral transgression.")

This emotional void means that psychopaths never learn from their adverse experiences: They are four times as likely as other prisoners to commit another crime after being released. For a psychopath on parole, there is nothing inherently wrong with violence. Hurting someone else is just another way of getting what they want, a perfectly reasonable way to satisfy their desires. In other words, it is the absence of emotion — and not a lack of rationality — that makes the most basic moral concepts incomprehensible to them.

Immanuel Kant wouldn't be too pleased with this research. He famously believed that our morality was based on objective, universal values; moral judgments described moral facts. "The oftener and more steadily we reflect" on our moral decisions, Kant suggested, the more moral those decisions become. The modern legal system still subscribes to these assumptions and pardons anybody who demonstrates a "defect in rationality" (such people are declared "legally insane"), since the rational brain is supposedly responsible for distinguishing between right and wrong. If you can't reason, then you shouldn't be punished.

But the data on psychopaths demonstrate that our moral decisions often depend on a strong emotional response. Because we can contemplate the pain of others, we're less likely to inflict pain. Consider the behavior of soldiers during war. On the battlefield, men are explicitly encouraged to kill each other; the crime of murder is turned into an act of heroism. And yet, even in such violent situations, soldiers often struggle to get past their moral instincts.

During World War II, U.S. Army Brigadier General S.L.A. Marshall undertook a survey of thousands of American troops right after they'd been in combat. His shocking (and still controversial) conclusion was that less than 20 percent of soldiers actually shot at the enemy, even when under attack. "It is fear of killing," Marshall wrote, "rather than fear of being killed, that is the most common cause of battle failure in the individual." When soldiers were forced to confront the possibility of directly harming another human being, they were literally incapacitated by their emotions. "At the most vital point of battle," Marshall wrote, "the soldier becomes a conscientious objector."

Though stories of Darwinian evolution often stress the amorality of natural selection—we are all supposedly Hobbesian brutes, driven to survive by selfish genes—our psychological reality is much less bleak. We aren't fallen angels, but we also aren't depraved hominids. We can't explain or defend these moral emotions—they are beyond the reach of reason—but they often guide our behavior, so that we do unto others as we would have them do unto us. G.K. Chesterton was right: "The madman is not the man who has lost his reason. The madman is the man who has lost everything except his reason."

Jonah Lehrer is the author of How We Decide and Proust Was a Neuroscientist. A contributing editor at Wired, he has also written for the New Yorker, Nature, Seed, the Washington Post, and the Boston Globe.

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