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# Phronesis and psychopathy: the moral frame problem

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# Phronesis and psychopathy: the moral frame problem

## **Abstract**

One important aspect of moral internalism, as Lei Zhong (2013) makes clear, turns on the issue of the role of affect in motivating moral judgment. This is a complicated issue, not only because there are important differences among types of psychopathy with regard to affect, but also because there are important distinctions and connections to be made between affect, cognition, moral judgment, and moral action.

## **Keywords**

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## Phronesis and Psychopathy: The Moral Frame Problem

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# PHRONESIS AND PSYCHOPATHY: *THE* MORAL FRAME PROBLEM

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SHAUN GALLAGHER



KEYWORDS: Emotionism, moral internalism, moral action, phronesis, psychopathy

ONE IMPORTANT ASPECT of moral internalism, as Lei Zhong (2013) makes clear, turns on the issue of the role of affect in motivating moral judgment. This is a complicated issue, not only because there are important differences among types of psychopathy with regard to affect, but also because there are important distinctions and connections to be made between affect, cognition, moral judgment, and moral action.

## PRIMARY AND SECONDARY PSYCHOPATHY

Zhong considers the difference between developmental psychopathy and acquired psychopathy. As he notes, he defines psychopathy in a broad way to include both of these types. Importantly, however, he ignores the distinction between primary, low-anxious psychopathy and secondary, high-anxious psychopathy. Koenigs et al. (2011), whom Zhong cites, defines the difference in the following way:

[I]n some cases psychopathy may reflect an innate affective and inhibitory deficit (the low-anxious or ‘primary’ subtype), whereas in other cases psychopathy may arise as an indirect consequence of other temperament-related

traits, most commonly involving excessive emotionality or neurotic anxiety (the high-anxious or ‘secondary’ subtype). (2011, 709)

This is an important difference because, as we will see, it undermines Zhong’s argument against the emotionist response. The emotionist response contends that psychopaths fail to make genuine moral judgments because they lack moral emotions (Blair 1995; Nichols 2004; Prinz 2008). Zhong lists sympathy, guilt, and indignation as moral emotions, but his argument against emotionism (in contrast with the emotionism itself) places no emphasis on these specific emotions. Rather, his argument operates not only on a broad definition of psychopathy, but also a broad definition of emotion. His claim is that “emotion [unspecified] is not causally responsible for even normal people’s moral judgment (although emotion may titrate the severity of moral judgment)” (Zhong 2013, 330). Specifically, he appeals to emotion deficits in general and to considerations of emotionally salient features in situations of moral dilemmas—the sidetrack (impersonal) and the footbridge (personal) versions of the trolley problem.

In the footbridge case, the idea of pushing a person off the bridge onto the tracks to stop an oncoming trolley that would otherwise kill five other people generates negative emotions because the action involved would be up-close and personal compared with flipping a switch

to divert the trolley to a different track where it would kill only one other person (the sidetrack case). Utilitarian calculation should treat these two cases as equivalent, except that the up-close and personal nature of pushing the other person makes it emotionally repugnant. It is not entirely clear that the emotionality involved in the up-close and personal action is strictly moral in nature. The nature of the emotions that would be experienced in such cases is not usually specified in terms of guilt or sympathy, and Zhong does not specify what emotions might be involved. It could equally be a matter of emotions that pertain to the messy nature of the up-close and personal aspects of the action—actually pushing the person (and possibly receiving resistance and protest), having to listen to the other person’s scream which you just caused by your push, having to witness or at least think about the person’s decent and impact, not to mention the effects of the trolley—all because of your immediate action. Fear, disgust, and possibly empathy could be anticipated and could modulate your moral judgment. It is debatable whether fear, disgust, and empathy are necessarily or intrinsically moral emotions.

On the one hand, the lack of specification in regard to emotion in Zhong’s argument does not necessarily undermine his criticism of the emotionist account; however, the specifics of the case he considers and the possible emotions that this case may generate are relevant to my later considerations, so I will return to this point again. On the other hand, Zhong’s lack of specification with regard to type of psychopathy does undermine his argument. His argument against the emotionist view is based on an appeal to empirical evidence found in several recent studies. Because emotionists contend that emotions play a causal role in the making of moral judgments, the emotionist prediction is that psychopaths, because of their emotional deficits, will make different moral judgments than non-psychopaths. But this prediction is proved wrong in recent experiments. Psychopaths, Zhong contends, citing these experiments, make the same moral judgments as non-psychopaths; specifically, they regard killing in personal moral dilemmas, such as the footbridge case, as *less* permissible than killing in impersonal moral di-

lemmas, such as the sidetrack case. Zhong points to the experiments by Koenigs et al. (2011) as evidence. The study by Koenigs et al., however, entirely undermines Zhong’s argument against the emotionists. Koenigs et al. distinguish between low-anxious and high-anxious psychopathy and show that only high-anxious psychopaths make the same moral judgments as non-psychopaths in the personal moral dilemma cases. Recall that high-anxious or secondary psychopaths are not emotion-deficient, but commonly manifest “excessive emotionality” (Koenigs et al. 2011, 709). In contrast, low-anxious or primary psychopaths do have emotion deficits, and significantly they make different judgments than non-psychopaths in personal moral dilemma cases.

The low-anxious psychopaths endorsed a significantly greater proportion of the personal moral actions (M 1/4 0.58, s.d. 1/4 0.16) than did the non-psychopaths (M 1/4 0.46, s.d. 1/4 0.15) ( $t_{1/42.3}$ ,  $P_{1/40.03}$ ), whereas the high-anxious psychopaths (M 1/4 0.49, s.d. 1/4 0.21) did not significantly differ from non-psychopaths in their personal moral judgment ( $t_{1/4} 0.5$ ,  $P_{1/4} 0.60$ ; Koenigs et al. 2011, 710). In effect, this study suggests that low-anxious psychopaths would have little trouble pushing another person off a footbridge to prevent a trolley from killing five others. Their emotional deficit apparently changes their moral judgment. Accordingly, the empirical evidence provided by the Koenigs et al. study supports the emotionist argument, in contrast with what Zhong claims.<sup>1</sup>

## PHRONESIS AND THE MORAL FRAME PROBLEM

Zhong’s argument motivates some concern about larger issues. Indeed, by suggesting that Zhong’s argument fails against emotionist accounts, I do not mean to endorse emotionist or any other moral internalist accounts. Such accounts tend to ignore the significance of situated action and to focus on cognitive and emotional aspects considered as internal, mental processes. The ‘real action,’ for internalists, is *in the head* rather than *in the world*. In such approaches, the majority of discussion is focused on the making of the moral

judgment, accompanied by the significant assumption that once the moral judgment is made the action follows. Subjects in the cited experiments are, of course, not on a footbridge standing next to a large person; they are in a lab, or in the case of the psychopaths, in a prison answering questions about an abstract situation. The experiments do not tell us much about how they would act in the real circumstance.

The emotionist discussion, as Zhong presents it, is about the causal influence or non-influence of emotion on moral judgment rather than moral action. Yet there are some equally important questions about the influence of emotion on action.<sup>2</sup> In a particular situation, I may be motivated to save five people tied to the tracks and, if my emotions are in good order, I may easily form my moral judgment about flipping the switch that will lead to the death of one person, but as I actually move to flip the switch some other emotions may enter into play and I may fail to act in accord with my judgment. This may seem more or less unlikely in the cold case of flipping the switch, but in many other cases of moral dilemma the action that is called for may involve a higher degree of emotional heat. If, because of psychopathic or utilitarian tendencies, my moral judgment is to push the other person off the footbridge, when push actually comes to shove that might not be an action I could perform precisely because of the up-close and personal interaction that is at stake, or the fear, disgust, or empathy that my action anticipates.

Noting these kinds of issues, I want to move the focus away from the internalist–cognitivist concern about forming or identifying the correct principle or rule, to a focus on the action situation and how the psychopath might perceive it. To shift the focus in this way is not to leave behind the question of how one comes to a moral judgment; rather, it suggests a different approach to the same set of issues. It is a difference of where one starts—in *the world* rather than in the head—and it makes a difference in understanding the psychopath's situation.

The internalist begins by asking what internal processes (cognitive or affective) cause a person to make a moral judgment. Once that important work of judging is complete, taking action is

straightforward, with perhaps a slight complication introduced in terms of the will. Looking for the origins of a particular moral judgment, one might consider questions such as the following: “How do people acquire, in the first place, the principle that personally harming another individual that will lead to a greater good is less permissible and more serious than impersonally harming another individual for a greater good?” (Zhong 2013, 334). This pushes the internalist question back quite a bit, but it nicely supports the internalist view if the answer involves an innate origin, as Zhong prefers. Alternatively, one can take a developmentalist perspective and suggest that children learn such principles through experience in social contexts. I doubt very much that either the nativist or the developmentalist approach is a good answer to this question, however, because I doubt that we do acquire these sorts of principles. Surely, any moral principles that we do acquire are much less complex than the one stated. A philosopher or psychologist might want to make the personal–impersonal distinction, but a moral agent is less likely to find this distinction in any principle he learns or inherits, although he could run into it in a particular situation. This is just the problem; whatever principles or rules we might have for moral conduct remain general, whereas each situation that we encounter is always particular.

This is, of course, the Aristotelian problem of *phronesis* or practical wisdom. Faced with a particular situation, we come to realize that our principles are not specific enough, or we come to realize that we do not have a principle that covers this particular context. Then we have to judge, not from a rule or principle, but from the situation. Our decision in such cases, although possibly still rational and affectively attuned, may in some sense be unprincipled. Such may be the case, in the case of an unusual moral dilemma, when our general principles fail us. Then we have to judge case by case rather than by principle. In such cases the person with *phronesis* is said to be able to recognize, or even intuit, what ought to be done.

If Aristotle (*Nicomachean Ethics* Book VI) is right, a person acquires *phronesis*, and this ability to judge, only by hanging around with the right

kind of people. Specifically, he suggests that we acquire *phronesis* only with the right upbringing and formation, surrounded by people who do the right thing, and by practicing such actions ourselves. *Phronesis*, Aristotle goes on to show, is not equivalent to cleverness—our cognitive abilities may be perfectly attuned to making intelligent and clever decisions, but, as he puts it, a very clever criminal does not have *phronesis* because *phronesis* also depends on practicing the good. On this view, a clever person without *phronesis* would be able to make a moral judgment, to solve a moral puzzle, or to give the correct utilitarian response in an experiment—without following through with moral action. It is also possible that a person without *phronesis* would have a difficult time in making the right moral judgment in either the personal or impersonal case even if he knew the correct moral principle. *Phronesis* allows someone to recognize that this particular case is one that calls for the application of a particular principle. One may know the principle but without *phronesis* may not be able to recognize that this is a situation in which to apply that principle. In artificial intelligence, this is referred to as the frame problem. Here we might call it the moral frame problem.

Such considerations suggest a different possible account of the psychopath's amoral behavior. Even if the psychopath has memorized an appropriate moral principle, and if his cognitive faculties can lead him to make a moral judgment in some kind of abstract case (a trolley problem, for example), and even if such faculties are informed to some degree by affective processes, as in secondary psychopathy—even if all such internal processes are intact—in the heat of a real particular situation, the psychopath may fail to recognize what is morally salient and thus fail to recognize it as a situation where that principle or judgment applies. That is, the psychopath may suffer from the moral frame problem. The psychopath may be clever but lack *phronesis*, because of his upbringing and formation, or because some brain injury interferes with the way he perceives the particulars of a situation. This does not rule out complications of a

cognitive or emotional nature, but it also does not reduce psychopathy to a mere internal (cognitive or affective) deficit.

## NOTES

1. Zhong also cites Glenn et al. (2009) to support his anti-emotionist argument. Glenn et al., however, unlike Koenigs et al., do not differentiate between primary and secondary psychopathy in their study. In a third study cited by Zhong, Cima, Tonnaer, and Hauser (2010) studied a group of psychopaths, all of whom showed flat emotional responses, but showed a similar pattern of judgments on moral dilemma tests as non-psychopaths. This study did not differentiate between primary and secondary psychopathy, however, and the authors also offered the following qualification: although psychopaths show emotional deficits, “other aspects of their emotions [e.g., recognition of basic emotions] may be relatively preserved, and these may be the most important with respect to moral understanding. At present, however, this literature is unclear” (p. 65). Cima et al. (2010) also cite a large body of experimental literature that supports the emotionist interpretation.

2. Glenn et al. (2009) make a similar point.

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