

Psychopathy: Evil or Disease?

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In the book, 'Snakes in Suits: when psychopaths go to work', Robert Hare makes an interesting link between psychopathy and the concept of evil. He suggests that psychopathy is a measure for evil. According to Hare, *'psychopaths are social predators who charm, manipulate and ruthlessly plow their way through life, leaving a broad trail of broken hearts and shattered expectations without the slightest sense of guilt or regret'*. (Hare, 1993: preface page xi)

Psychopathy as a scientific concept was first described by Hervey Cleckley in his book *'The Mask of Insanity'* (Cleckley, 1941). Later in this paper I look at a much earlier description of psychopathy by St Paul in the books of *Timothy and Titus* in the New Testament of the Bible.

While Cleckley offered suggestions about the features of a psychopath, the diagnosis was operationalized by Robert Hare in the Psychopathy Checklist (Hare, 2003). According to the screening version of the Psychopathy Checklist, the features of psychopathy can be divided into four domains, namely, interpersonal, affective, lifestyle, and anti-social. Psychopaths in their interpersonal relationships can be superficial, grandiose and deceitful. The affective component of psychopathy includes a lack of remorse, a lack of responsibility and a failure to accept responsibility for one's actions. Lifestyle factors include being impulsive, lacking goals, and being irresponsible. Anti-social factors include poor impulse control, with a history of adolescent and adult anti-social behaviour. While psychopathy is generally considered to be a personality disorder, it is not included in either the ICD-10 or the DSM-IV. It shows features primarily of a dissocial or anti-social personality disorder, overlapping with narcissistic and histrionic personality disorders (described in the DSM-IV).

Within clinical settings, the Psychopathy Checklist – Revised (PCL-R) is used to determine psychopathy. The PCL-R has 20 items, against each of which an individual scores '0', '1' or '2'. Most people score a total of less than '5'. The average score for female criminals is 19 and for male criminals is 22. The cut-off score for psychopathy in the UK is 25 and 30 in North America. It is important to note that not all criminals, including the perpetrators of violent and sexual crimes, are psychopaths. The PCL-R is a useful risk assessment tool, as higher scores suggest an increased risk of re-offending. Psychopaths commit a greater number and variety of crimes than other criminals. They are responsible for more than half of the persistent, violent crimes committed in North America.

However, not all psychopaths are criminals. Hare writes: *'We often think of psychopaths as the disturbed criminals who capture headlines and crowd the nation's prisons. But not all psychopaths are killers. They are more likely to be men and women you know who move through life with supreme self-confidence - but without a conscience'* (Hare, 1993; pages 5-6).

About 1% of general population meets the cut-off score for psychopathy. Interestingly, according to one study there are at least 3 times as many psychopaths amongst the senior management of corporate organisations than in the general population. St Paul in the Bible refers to possible psychopaths amongst the church leadership. However, within the criminal population the prevalence (as expected) increases considerably to 15% of male and 10% of female offenders.

Research suggests that genetic factors play an important role in the development of psychopathy. Other evidence suggests that psychopaths respond differently to emotion on people's (victims') faces than other people.

Having now glimpsed at a few key features of psychopathy, it is important to emphasise that much of the above is the subject of debate and by no means set in stone. We now look at whether psychopathy meets the medical definition of disease or the biblical definition of evil.

What is disease?

A disease is any disturbance or anomaly in the normal functioning of the body that probably has a specific cause and identifiable symptoms. As mentioned earlier psychopathy has a likely genetic cause. It has a clear set of symptoms. The results of brain imaging studies suggest that it is an anomaly of empathy and emotion which are in turn functions of the brain. It would therefore appear to meet the definition of disease – with one caveat.

Scully (2004; page 650) points out that *'if we want to ensure that limited healthcare resources are appropriately distributed... we must have a reasonably clear idea, first what a disease is, and second, which diseases are most worth the investment of time and money'*. If psychopathy is considered to be a disease, psychopaths will have to be offered treatment, most likely within forensic psychiatric units. Forensic healthcare is highly expensive. Given the lack of evidence to support the benefits of treatment, and some evidence to suggest that therapy can paradoxically make psychopaths more dangerous, the ethics of offering treatment within publicly-funded hospitals is debatable. We move on from this uncomfortable position about this disconcerting disorder to consider whether the condition is evil.

Is psychopathy evil?

With all the advances in science and technology of the last century, we have not found a cure for an age-old problem, namely evil. Indeed we continue to debate its cause. What is regarded as evil depends on whether you look at it from a religious or philosophical perspective. What is considered evil in one culture may be considered an alternative lifestyle in another. Different religions have different perspectives of what constitutes evil. However most of these descriptions offer a dimensional model of good and evil; with the notorious evildoers (e.g. Hitler) at one extreme, followed by people such as mass murderers (e.g. the Moors murderers, Ian Brady and Myra Hindley) with the best of humanity (the Buddha, Gandhi, Mother Teresa) at the other extreme. The rest of us would come somewhere in the middle of this scale. Indeed it would seem our very purpose in defining evil, and having conscious or unconscious

scales for it like the PCL-R is to justify our own bad behaviour. While we may not consider ourselves as saintly as Mother Teresa, neither would we put ourselves on the same immoral footing as Myra Hindley.

Here I will briefly look at the biblical definition of evil, while pointing out that different denominational and theological standpoints within Christianity have differing views about what constitutes evil.

In the New Testament, Jesus is quoted as saying, *'If you, then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good gifts to those who ask him!'* (Matthew 7:11, NIV). This was a general statement made to a broad audience composed of religious people, laymen, and 'notorious sinners' (NLT). The Christian perspective of evil is that all men (and women) are evil as opposed to God who is good. Jesus emphasised this in his statement, *'No one is good - except God alone'* (Mark 10:18, NIV). The Biblical perspective of evil, as set out by Jesus is not on a dimensional scale, but a categorical one with only two categories; God and the rest of humanity. According to the Christian church, justification for mankind's sin or wrongdoing can only be found in the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus Christ and God's free offer of salvation to all people.

Based on the Biblical perspective of evil, psychopathy would almost certainly meet the definition of evil. Yet people with a score of '0' would also have to be considered evil; as evil as people with a very high score on the PCL-R. This is not to deny that human beings are capable of exemplary acts of goodness but to highlight the much greater goodness of God, who according to the Bible is completely just, unconditional in his love, entirely true, perfect in his righteousness, and yet full of mercy and compassion toward even the notorious sinner. In fact Jesus is referred to in the gospels as the 'friend of the notorious sinner'.

Psychopathy in the Bible

At the start of this paper I considered the current psychological/psychiatric description of psychopathy. We now look at a possible Biblical description of the condition, which is 2000 years old. In the New Testament, St Paul in two letters to young church leaders cautions them about individuals whom he describes in these terms *'hypocritical liars, whose consciences have been seared as with a hot iron'* (1 Timothy 4:2, NIV); and again, people whose *'minds and consciences are corrupted. They claim to know God, but by their actions they deny him'* (Titus 1:15-16, NIV). The core characteristics of these individuals are their defective or deficient conscience, their duplicity, their callousness and, importantly, their potential to cause great harm to congregations. Hence, St Paul introduces a category of psychopathy, namely that of the religious psychopath.

In summary, while psychopathy as a scientific concept is a very modern one, its origins are ancient, and as old as the concept of evil. Evil is a religious, cultural and philosophical entity. Consequent to the scientific development of psychopathy, 'evil' has now become a clinical entity. Our current understanding of psychopathy would suggest that it is a disease (of the mind) like any other personality disorder. Psychopathy would also meet the 'lay' definition of evil, and as such is used in day-to-day conversations to be synonymous with it. In relation to Christianity, while the

Biblical definition of evil would almost certainly include psychopathy, it does not exclude non-psychopaths. Psychopaths are no more and no less evil in the eyes of the God of the Bible. Importantly, neither are they excluded from God's unconditional love or the offer of salvation and redemption to all humanity.

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