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24.120 Moral Psychology  
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## XXIV Autism and Sociopathy

### ONE LINE

The sociopaths and those with autism are the same on their understanding of morality, the difference is in their motivation.

Why do they differ in their motivation? Perhaps: they have internalized various Kantian rules.

### ANOTHER LINE

Sociopaths and those with autism are the same on their empathetic responses, but they differ in their understanding of morality, because the former lack, and the latter have, an understanding of the difference between conventional and non-conventional obligation. (Blair, Nichols?)

Further thesis: Perhaps one couldn't make this distinction if one weren't moved by the pull of the moral. On such a thesis, the understanding and the motivation would be tied up together (would there still be some kind of conceptual priority?).

There is some empirical reason to suppose that the sociopaths lack of understanding stems from their lack of emotional response to the distress of others.

### FURTHER CONSIDERATION, THAT SEEMS IN TENSION WITH THIS

Sociopaths seem to lack self-control in general. So maybe their moral attitudes are just a manifestation of this. But isn't self-control the ability to restrain one's emotional responses in the light of one's judgments about what is best. So doesn't this suggest that the failure is rational and not emotional?

### SOME FURTHER (HIGHLY) TENTATIVE HYPOTHESES THAT MIGHT HELP

*If* acquired sociopathy is the same as congenital sociopathy; and  
*if* Damasio is right that acquired sociopathy results from a particular lack of emotional input (i.e. into frontal processing)  
*then* maybe we can see the sociopath's failing as, at bottom, emotionally based.

### CONCILIATORY CONCLUSION

Perhaps the right thing to say is that both morality and self-control require *both* an emotional input and some rational processing. And maybe there are deficiencies on both sides for both sociopaths and those with autism.

Sociopaths lack one ability to empathetically engage (to respond to distress), a deficiency that is both emotional and rational; and (presumably as a result) they lack the ability to understand morality properly (to make the conventional/moral distinction), and they lack the motivation to be moral.

Those with autism lack an ability to empathetically engage in a rather different way (they cannot put themselves into the place of others); this gives rise to both an emotional and a rational deficiency. As a result they cannot understand much of morality (social rules etc); and their motivation is eccentric (strongly rule governed).