

The narrative approach to the moral landscape of individuals with antisocial personalities: some conceptual issues

Psychopathy is a personality condition characterized by specific emotional traits and an antisocial lifestyle that has stimulated neuroethical investigations and debates. According to an established view, psychopaths lack or have a defective moral understanding due to certain emotional impairments. These shortcomings are taken to afflict their empathic or control responses and to correlate with neuropsychological peculiarities (Blair et al., 2005). This view has suggested philosophical conclusions on the nature of moral understanding and on the legal and moral culpability of psychopathic offenders (Malatesti & McMillan, 2010).

More recently, however, it has been argued that neuropsychological research leaves undecided the issue of the moral understanding of psychopaths (Jurjako & Malatesti, 2018; Schaich Borg & Sinnott-Armstrong, 2013). Key experiments that offered evidence for the conclusion that psychopaths lack or have severely impaired moral understanding have not been replicated. Moreover, the validity of the experimental paradigms used in these studies as measures of moral understanding has been questioned. Finally, some argue that current diagnoses of psychopathy, being based on behaviours and inferred personality traits, individuate too heterogeneous classes of individuals to support firm conclusions on their capacities. They, thus, recommend the recategorization of individuals with antisocial personalities by means of bio-cognitive data (Brazil et al., 2018; Jurjako et al., 2020).

We investigate, from a conceptual point of view, whether the methods of forensic narrative psychiatry (Adshead, 2014; Youngs & Canter, 2012) can be integrated with bio-cognitive data to individuate a class of individuals with antisocial conditions with significant impairments in their moral understanding.

The central aim of our presentation is to tackle two general preliminary issues: (i) those relating to epistemic and referential status of narrative generally and psychiatric-forensic narratives in particular; (ii) those relating to role that narrative can have in scholarly engagements with mental disorders.

References

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