

## Interview:

# Heidi L. Maibom

Dr. Heidi L. Maibom is a professor in the Department of Philosophy at the University of Cincinnati, with research interests in interpersonal understanding, empathy, shame, responsibility, and psychopathy. Her publications include the books *The Space Between* and *Empathy*, as well as the edited volumes *The Routledge Handbook of Philosophy of Empathy* and *Empathy and Morality*.

### **How did you start studying moral psychology, especially psychopathy and empathy? What was your drive?**

I began thinking about moral psychology in graduate school, but I only started doing research on psychopathy and affective empathy when I did my postdoc at Washington University in St. Louis. I was teaching Jesse Prinz's course on moral psychology—he was away on a fellowship at Stanford—and I used many of the readings from his old syllabus. Among those was a paper by Shaun Nichols, who argued that psychopathy provided evidence in favor of moral sentimentalism. But the more I read about psychopathy, the more I thought there were clear signs of dysfunctional practical reasoning in psychopaths. That gave rise to my first paper "Moral Unreason," where I connected neo-Kantian accounts of moral judgments with psychopathy and argued that the disorder equally supported rationalism and sentimentalism in ethics.

### **How does psychopathy challenge our traditional understanding of morality and ethical behavior?**

People tend to assume that everybody has a moral sense, although that may be more or less exercised. What has fascinated philosophers, and psychologists, is that you have this group of people who appear to have no moral sense at all. Their only reason for action is narrow self-interest, they don't internalize moral norms, and they experience little, or no, empathy, shame, guilt, or regret. The fact that these things go together makes one suspect that there is a close connection between morality, empathy, shame, guilt, and internalization, although the latter is less often considered. Mostly, people assume that the lack of guilt is caused by lack of empathy, which also causes lack of a moral sense. I

think these factors are all important and am considering them now in a new book I'm working on, tentatively entitled "The Instrumentalist: Psychopathy in Everyday Life."

**What are the implications of psychopathy for our concepts of moral responsibility and blame? Can psychopaths be held morally accountable for their actions?**

This is a much discussed issue. It hinges on what you think you need to be responsible in the first place. Most legal systems specify that a person must understand the difference between right and wrong. Psychopaths pass that test if you consider that they can classify actions into the two types and are capable of acknowledging verbally that what they have done is wrong in society's eyes. But some people argue that knowing right from wrong involves more than the ability to be able to classify action in this way. Instead, they argue, you must understand why something is right or wrong (that it violates the Categorical Imperative, for instance) or, at the very least, experience some kind of affective reaction in response to "wrongness." In the absence of this, psychopaths do not really understand the difference and, therefore, cannot be held responsible for their actions. Often empathy has been referenced as being necessary for having such a deeper understanding of right and wrong. Therefore, if psychopaths lack empathy, then they also lack this deeper understanding, in which case we cannot hold them responsible. I disagree with this assessment for a variety of reasons. First, it is simply not clear to me that without the ability to empathize you do not have sufficient understanding of right and wrong to be held responsible for stealing, cheating, or harming others (many people, in fact, claim that it is hard to see how empathy can form the basis of all moral wrongs). Second, responsibility may not be an all or nothing issue. So, you may not be able to hold a psychopath accountable for being a bit of an asshole, but perfectly able to hold them accountable for serious harm to a person or nonhuman animal. Third, psychopaths do seem to have the capacity for empathizing under certain circumstances. And fourth, a spate of recent autobiographies of self-proclaimed psychopaths show that these people have learnt not to engage in certain behaviors that are regarded as morally wrong. In short, I believe that psychopaths can be held responsible or accountable for most of the crimes that we are interested in holding them responsible for.

## **What are the future directions for philosophical research on psychopathy?**

I think philosophers have been caught up in the reductionistic thinking of forensic psychology. For instance, much work has been done on showing that psychopaths do not respond with distress to pictures of people being harmed or in need. This is then taken as evidence of lack of empathy, which is taken to be the factor behind most, or all, of their immorality. The trouble is that we have other evidence suggesting that psychopaths can empathize with their counterfactual selves, for instance. There is also evidence that the brain areas in which you see extinguishing of the empathic response are under conscious control. This suggests that a reductionistic understanding of psychopathic immorality (or amorality) fails to explain the data. Why? Because of contextual factors, such as the psychopathic worldview. I think we need to move on to considering how psychopaths see the world; i.e. move to thinking about psychopathy as a person-level impairment. This will give us a better understanding of the impairment (or, plausibly, neurodivergence) and will inform our moral psychology.

## **Are there any emerging areas of study that you find particularly promising?**

I find the recent autobiographies by psychopaths very helpful in trying to understand how psychopaths see themselves and the world around them, and it helps give us a fuller picture of the disorder. I also think that evidence coming from psychopaths who are not imprisoned is going to help a lot. Lastly, I am personally fascinated by preliminary evidence that psychopaths do not automatically consider the perspectives of other people.

## **How do you define empathy, and why do you think it is such a crucial component of moral psychology?**

In the past, I have defined empathy as an affective response to another's emotion or situation that is consonant with that emotion or situation (emotion-matching) and where there is a clear understanding that the other is the primary target of that emotion (self-other distinction). But my recent research has led me to think that defining the various reactions to other people's distress or need

obscures the fact that we usually experience several emotions during an empathic episode, namely distress, sympathy, sadness, and, often, tenderness. There is no reason to think that only one is the “right” empathy. I am leaning towards thinking that it is the fuller orchestrated response that is empathy. I suspect that three major systems play a role, namely the love/attachment system, the fear/defensive system, and loss/sadness system. Looked at this way, we see that (A) the sense of being connected to others, where the wellbeing of others matter to you is crucial for morality, (B) being responsive to what they are responsive to is crucial to understanding them, but also to feel the wrongness of what they are going through, and (C) sadness is an indicator of loss of something valued, are all important elements of an empathic response. Together these three systems give rise to what we typically think of empathy. But this tripartite subdivision also help us spy on what may be the essence of morality in action. I am working on a paper on this issue right now.

**Can you elaborate on some of the challenges or misconceptions about empathy you’ve encountered in your research?**

The most serious problem is that there is now a cottage industry pointing out all the problems with empathy, which leads more and more people to think it is a problematic capacity and that it should play little, to no, role in an ethical life or, perhaps even, in life in general. Permit me to point to the group of people most known as lacking empathy, namely psychopaths. I don’t think we are better off by having more psychopathic individuals. Empathy critics are busy throwing out the baby with the bathwater (1) Empathy is biased, we are told. Well, empathizing with someone makes you less biased than if you did not. Why? Because then you’d only think of things from your own point of view (2) Empathy is innumerate. Perhaps, but who cares, nobody claimed that because empathy is central to morality you can’t use other things too in order to make moral choices, such as mathematics. I could go on, but that would be tedious. Allow me to make just two more points. First, you can train yourself to become more empathetic and to empathize with more people, something that most empathy skeptics ignore. Second, and I cannot stress this enough, empathy is NOT a relatively blind process uninfluenced by cognitive evaluation. Moreover, even if we think empathy is essential to much of morality, we are not thereby denying that we can reason about things as well, override an empathic response if required, or balance empathies with different parties against one another.

**How do you see the relationship between empirical research  
in psychology and traditional philosophical inquiry?**

I think these are somewhat arbitrary disciplinary boundaries. I have been accused of not being a philosopher but a theoretical psychologist. I think it was meant as an insult. As I recall, the accusation was that I wasn't sufficiently attached to conceptual analysis and was relying too much on empirical research. But honestly, I don't care. As long as I am making a contribution to our understanding I don't care whether you call it philosophy or psychology. I think psychological and philosophical research are often complimentary. Psychologists are trained to do experiments with real people, philosophers are not. On the other hand, philosophers are trained to think carefully through what might provide evidence for something else, definitional issues, and so on. Together they form a crack team, but unfortunately it seems mostly philosophers who pay attention to research in psychology, and not vice versa.

**Do you believe psychopathy provides a clear example of  
'natural evil,' and how should we philosophically interpret  
this condition?**

It all depends on what you mean by "natural evil." One thing that has struck me is that when you read what psychopaths say, they invariably identify themselves as "predators" and tend to identify with perpetrators. Insofar as we are their favorite prey, you could make the argument that from our point of view, they are our natural enemy and therefore evil to us. –Having said that, one should consider the great number of people, very often wealthy and powerful individuals, who engage in heinous activity on an everyday basis but who do not seem to lack the capacities that psychopaths do, such as destruction of habitat leading to environmental degradation whose costs are borne by others; pharmaceutical companies pushing addictive drugs on doctors and patients; the Koch brothers delaying sensible climate action to where we are already looking at a catastrophe; hiding enormous assets offshore to avoid paying taxes therefore leading to an increased taxburden on those who can less afford it; the "lobbying" we see in American politics, which appear to be nothing other than legalized corruption; etc.. Wouldn't it make more sense to think that those people are more evil than are psychopaths (of course some of these people may

be psychopaths, but it is unlikely that they all are)? Because they knowingly destroy the livelihood of other people and bring of future of humanity to the brink for pure self-interest, exactly what we are accusing psycopaths of. And, yet, they know what they are doing, but are doing it anyway.