

Psychopathy and the Space of Possibilities

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Overview

The Phenomenological Stance and its Applicability

The Space of Possibilities

Temporality and its Relation to the Space of Possibilities

Conclusion

The Phenomenological Stance

Understanding the “form and structure of the patient’s experience”
(Fuchs, 2012)

Conditions such as depression as different ways of relating to or being
in the “world” (Ratcliffe, 2014)

Thus offers a level of description, which allows for a different
perspective on conditions (not primarily seen as illnesses)

Can this be applied to Psychopathy?

Important role of first-personal accounts (memoirs, interviews)

General issues:

- (a) Post-hoc analysis may not reflect actual experience
- (b) Active reflection may change experience

Additional issues concerning psychopathy:

- (a) Psychopaths not trustworthy as interlocutors
- (b) Psychopathy as permanent condition (no comparison)
- (c) Psychopaths may not be good at reflecting their experiences

The Space of Possibilities

- Potential actions as something we do not need to infer, but rather something that shapes our experiences¹
- Potential actions seen as “significant possibilities” (Ratcliffe, 2014)
- Different forms of significance are of importance here – the space of possibilities should thus be understood as structured

¹ To my knowledge, Kerrin Jacobs (2014) is the first to apply the concept of a space of possibilities to psychopathy. The paper presented owes much to her analysis, but focuses more strongly on prudential and less strongly on moral differences between psychopathic and non-psychopathic individuals.

Temporality and the Space of Possibilities (I)

- Depression as encompassing changes in temporality (Fuchs, 2012)
 - Past dominates present and future, future is not experienced as open
 - Marked slow-down of lived time
- Non-depressed and non-psychopathic individuals:
 - Present and future are experienced as shaped by past, without being determined by it
 - Past events (e.g. relationships, acquired capabilities, commitments) shape and structure space of possibilities

Temporality and the Space of Possibilities (II)

- Psychopaths:
 - Indications that psychopaths may tend to overestimate time intervals, this is prima facie a similarity to depressed individuals¹
 - Slow-down of lived time does not lead to apathy, but rather to thrill seeking
 - Possible explanation: Future is always experienced as fully open, not shaped by past
 - Psychopaths thus face an unstructured space of possibilities
 - Actions out of sheer whim thus seem much more understandable

¹ This claim is based mainly on studies of boredom prone individuals (see e.g. Danckert & Allman, 2005).

Conclusion

- Phenomenological account of psychopathy although speculative in nature can nevertheless still be informative
- Temporal experience of psychopaths differ from non psychopathic individuals
- Psychopathy can thus be understood as a mode of being, characterized by a relatively unstructured space of possibilities

Bibliography

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